

Applications Assessment Mechanism of the Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee

Purpose

At the meetings of the Environment and Conservation Fund (ECF) Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee (RPVSC) held on 27 September 2013 and 7 January 2014, Members agreed on the future applications assessment mechanism, implementation as well as budgetary management arrangements for the Environmental Research, Technology Demonstration and Conference Projects (RTDC) funding scheme (RPVSC Papers 16/2013-14 and 48/2013-14). This paper further seeks Members' views on the proposed revisions to the assessment and budgetary arrangements for funding applications of conference projects.

Background

2. With the adoption of a new budgetary management approach for the ECF after the capital injection of \$5,000 million in June 2013, the ECF Committee agreed on 4 September 2013 that there was a need to revise the current mode of handling funding applications. It was decided that in future, invitations for applications for each funding scheme should be called at scheduled intervals, so that the received applications could be considered on a competition basis on account of the merits of individual applications. Based on the broad principles and key parameters agreed by the ECF Committee, RPVSC met on 27 September 2013 and 7 January 2014 to work out the details of the revised assessment mechanism for the Environmental Research, Technology Demonstration and Conference (RTDC) Funding Scheme. It was decided that one round of invitation for RTDC projects would be issued each year, and that funding applications for RTDC projects would be considered in one go. The finalized assessment and funding arrangements for RTDC projects as agreed by Members are at Annex for ease of reference.

3. On 5 March 2014, the ECF Committee discussed the budget for individual funding schemes in 2014-15, and decided that an amount of \$20 million should be earmarked for RTDC projects. To follow up, the Secretariat issued an invitation for applications on 26 March 2014, with the closing date falling on 26 June 2014 at 6 pm.

Recent development

4. The Secretariat has recently received requests for enhancing the vetting arrangements for conference projects from relevant stakeholders, mainly due to the fact that most important international conferences would have to commence well in advance of the conference date in order to secure the venue, confirm topics to be

covered, invite the speakers, and arrange the air-tickets and accommodation for speakers and participants, so as to ensure the conferences are properly organized. Early confirmation of funding availability or sponsorship for such projects would therefore be essential. As conferences are rather different in nature from other research and/or technology demonstration projects, the vetting criteria and procedures for conference projects are quite different, which enables the vetting of conference projects to be completed in a much shorter timeframe. It is therefore suggested that RPVSC may consider reserving a certain amount, out of the annual budget allocated for RTDC projects, for conference projects, and to speed up the vetting of these applications.

Recommendations

5. Since funding for conference projects is currently capped at \$500,000 or 70% of the total actual expenditure, whichever is the less, there is no need for such applications to go through the external assessment process prescribed for applications seeking funding support of over \$500,000 under the RTDC Funding Scheme. With a designated budget, conference projects could then be taken out and assessed separately from other research and/or technology demonstration projects, which may help speed up the processing of funding applications for conferences. Based on the above, it is recommended that:

- (a). A relatively small designated budget at, say, 10% of the annual budget for RTDC projects, would be set with a higher priority for conference projects each year. For instance, out of the total budget of \$20 million for RTDC projects in 2014-15, an amount of \$2 million could be reserved for conferences.
- (b). Funding applications for RTDC projects will continue to be invited in one go, with a single application deadline. However, funding applications for conference projects would be considered by RPVSC first under a competition basis.

Under such arrangements, we expect that the initial processing of funding applications for conference projects could be completed by August / September, so that assessment by RPVSC could be conducted around September, and the results would be made available to applicants in September / October 2014.

- (c). Any unused budget for conference projects could be pooled together with the remaining \$18 million budget for funding the research and/or technology demonstration projects in the year. Any conference projects that cannot be supported due to the limited initial 10% budget may also be

considered at the same time with the other research and/or technology demonstration projects in order to make the best use of funding. Any unused fund at the end of the financial year will be returned to the ECF.

- (d). The above arrangements would be adopted from the 2014-15 cycle onwards. With this arrangement, the vetting of conference projects would be speeded up by at least 3 – 4 months.

Advice sought

6. Members' views are invited on the recommendations set out in paragraph 5 above. Subject to Members' views and agreement, the Secretariat would revise the assessment and funding arrangements for RTDC projects (Annex) accordingly, and announce the revised arrangements through the ECF website.

Secretariat, ECF Research Projects Vetting Subcommittee
May 2014