

Request for trainee proposals, spring 2026

UW-Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences

The Dairy Innovation Hub, which launched in 2019, is a \$7.8 million per year investment by the State of Wisconsin to build a world-class talent pool and enable bold discoveries to ensure that Wisconsin's dairy community is at the global forefront in producing nutritious dairy products in an economically, environmentally, and socially sustainable manner.

This RFP seeks proposals that will fund a trainee to work on innovative and impactful dairy-related research that fits within one of the four priority areas of the Hub (visit the [Hub website](#) for more information):

1. Stewarding Land and Water Resources
2. Enriching Human Health and Nutrition
3. Ensuring Animal health and Welfare
4. Growing Farm Businesses and Communities

The Hub enhances scholarship and advancement of innovation in the above priority areas needed to ensure the future success and resiliency of dairy-related research in Wisconsin. A central goal is to bring top prospective trainees to UW-Madison, thus increasing training capacity to fund novel research projects that benefit the Wisconsin dairy community.

Recruiting, developing, and retaining top talent remains a major focus for the Hub. Since its inception, the Hub has attracted the best and brightest prospective trainees and will continue to increase training capacity at UW-Madison.

Key characteristics of DIH trainee RFP

Unique aspects of the Dairy Innovation trainee model include:

- PIs may choose which trainee model would be best applicable for a two-year project. The type of candidate (graduate research assistant or postdoctoral research associate) **MUST** be indicated within the application
- Priority will be given to projects that include applied research with clear plans for deliverables by the completion of the two-year project
- Applications will be submitted using Qualtrics
- PIs may use this [checklist](#) to ensure a complete application

A. RFP overview, submission, and funding

- Depending upon trainee type, project budget cannot exceed **\$65,963** (FY28) & **\$67,318** (FY29) for graduate student research assistants and **\$80,000** for postdoctoral research associates
- All aspects of the application should highlight and describe outreach efforts and the link between the research and end-users (farmers, consultants, processors etc.)

Proposals MUST be submitted via [Qualtrics](#) by 5:00 p.m. (CST) on Friday, June 5, 2026. Proposals should be submitted as a single merged PDF document. Requests for time extensions will not be granted. Proposals received after the deadline will not be accepted.

To be considered for funding, approvals (chairperson, department administrator, and co-PIs) must be determined at the time of application, as indicated in Qualtrics form.

A confirmation email will be sent upon submission of proposal to Qualtrics. *If you do not receive an email, please follow up with [Elisabeth Berndt](#).*

Funding decisions will be announced by September 2026. ***If awarded, funds will be available for projects in FY28. The award will start on Sept. 1, 2027, and end June 30, 2029.***

B. Eligibility requirements

- Primary PI **MUST** be a tenure-track faculty with permanent PI status within CALS, UW-Madison
- Co-PIs or collaborators outside CALS may be included in the proposal, but they cannot serve as the primary PI
- Faculty may only be principal investigator on one trainee grant application through this mechanism; faculty startup package graduate student research assistants (Hatch or Hub) do not preclude a PI from applying for Hub trainee grants
- Primary PIs may only mentor one DIH trainee grant (i.e. graduate student research assistant or postdoctoral research associate) at a time. PIs may apply for an open trainee RFP in the last year of current trainee funding
- PIs remain eligible for STHI and capital equipment funding with active trainee grants

Two-year proposals with proper budget justifications and complete applications will be considered. The Dairy Innovation Hub has a pre-determined funding rate for this competitive call.



C. Proposal format

Please upload application materials via Qualtrics as a **single PDF file** containing the nine (9) required components in order as they appear below. Omission of section(s) OR multiple PDF documents outside section guidelines, may result in refusal of proposal.

PRO TIP! *The burden to convey the novelty/importance of the proposed project, the value of project impact on the Wisconsin dairy community and fit to priority area(s) within the Dairy Innovation Hub is the responsibility of the primary PI.*

1. **Title page** (1-page limit) with the following elements **MUST** be included:

- Full descriptive title for the project proposal
- Names of project participants: primary PI, co-PIs, faculty, staff, etc.
- Maximum of two Dairy Innovation Hub [priority areas](#) for which the project addresses
- A 250-word **non-technical summary** of the proposed research that describes the meaning and value of the project. The following areas must be addressed clearly for non-subject matter experts and external stakeholders.
 - Importance of the project
 - Major objectives of the project
 - Basic methods used to collect and produce data
 - Ultimate goals, impacts, and tangible outcomes the project hopes to achieve

2. **Project narrative** (5-page maximum, single spaced, size 12-point font with standard 1-inch margins) prepared with the following elements:

- **Background** and justification that identifies and provides
 - Sufficient literature review that explains proposed research and describes the significance to the project
 - Implications to social, economic, and/or environmental sustainability of the dairy community
 - Specification of two (2) DIH priority areas that are most relevant to the project. Define how the outcomes of this project will contribute to progress within Wisconsin, relative to the selected priority area(s)

INSIDE SCOOP! *Failure to clearly address and describe specific links to priority area(s) is the most common feedback returned to non-funded proposals.*



- **Advancement** of scientific knowledge and public welfare
- **Goals** demonstrated how outcomes will be produced; defined as a measurable change of state in knowledge, action, or condition
- **Hypotheses** comprised of clear, complete, and logically organized statements with specific objectives to be pursued or tested
- **Location** of work and the facilities/equipment required to perform research
- **Experimental** designs and approaches that describe working plans that pursue each stated objective
- **Methods** to avoid obvious pitfalls
- **Distribution of outcomes** to target audiences such as other scholars, extension staff, and farmers. Explain the strategic delivery of outcomes to external audiences
- **Statistical analysis** for the data to be collected

IMPORTANT! Please communicate the above-mentioned points in clear written language designed for a scientifically literate review whose expertise is other than the proposed work and understandable to stakeholders with a broad range of knowledge.

3. **Previous results and fit to program** (1-page limit per primary PI and co-PI) **MUST** be provided with the following details:

- The unique contribution of respective co-PI(s) must be described within the proposal beyond indicating collaborators within the application
- If the primary PI has received previous DIH funding, please indicate the following:
 - Evidence of prior productivity and results should be listed
 - Provide a table that includes:
 - Hub funding type
 - Project timeline
 - Projects status (*completed, in progress, not yet started*)
 - How funding relates to current proposal (within table or narrative)

NOTE: Stating that a project is in progress or is completed is NOT sufficient. Evidence of research productivity and outcomes should be explicitly stated, in the supporting narrative, including the impact on the scientific community and/or end users.

- If the proposed project leverages a DIH funded capital equipment purchase, specify the use of equipment and/or if the project complements or leverages current funding outside DIH, include synergies and novel aspects of this proposal relative to other funding
- If the project overlaps with past funding or could be viewed as an extension, describe how continued Hub support in this area is needed as compared to other sources, federal funding, etc.



New Hub PIs may omit this section. A new Hub PI is defined as a primary PI who has not yet received previous Hub funding.

4. **Budget justification** that shall not exceed the following budgets with a **narrative** (1-page limit) that describes components specific to either trainee type, but not both.

In addition to the proposal narrative, completion of a budget table is required in the online application form.



TRAINEE TYPE MUST BE INDICATED AS EITHER **GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCH ASSISTANT** OR **POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATE**

Graduate student research assistant budget cannot exceed: \$65,963 (FY28) & \$67,318 (FY29)

- **Fixed salary*** rate for student research assistantships should be based on the standard, annual UW–Madison [rate](#) which is currently \$39,288 (FY28) & \$40,074 (FY29)
- **Fringe** expenses within budget, calculated at 21.50% (FY28) & 22.50% (FY29) contributed by PI; paid directly by DIH at cost of approximately \$8,447 (FY28) & \$9,017 (FY29)
- **Tuition** remission of \$10,728
- **Supply & services expenses** set at \$7,500 per year. If costs exceed \$7,500, an explanation regarding the source of complementary funding **MUST** be included. Please accommodate for the following incidentals:
 - **Page charges** for open access publishing fees (*if already known and/or anticipated*)
 - **Travel** expenses for anticipated research costs

**Should UW–Madison adjust minimum salary rates for graduate students beyond the posted rates (as of Jan. 2025), DIH will cover stipend increases per fiscal year of funding at no penalty to the PI. Tuition remission and supply budgets will remain at \$10,728 and \$7,500. Visit [Student Assistantships](#) for more information specific to CALS, UW–Madison.*

Postdoctoral research associate budget cannot exceed: \$80,000 cap. for both FY28 & FY29

- **Flexible salary*** for research associates is the suggested [NIH](#) published rate.
- **Fringe** expenses within budget, calculated at 21.90% (FY28) & 22.90% (FY29) contributed by PI; paid directly by DIH at cost approximate to salary
- **Travel** expenses for anticipated research costs
- **Supply & services expenses** with remaining funds after salary and fringe
- If total project costs exceed \$80,000, please explain the source of **complementary funding**

**If the proposed salary exceeds the NIH salary rate, please provide the published departmental or programmatic rate. The funds remaining after salary should be used to cover travel and supply expenses.*



5. **Research timeline** (*1-page limit*) which includes anticipated progress milestones for major activities of the project. Timeline can be described in text and/or visual (table, chart, ect.) and should include anticipated start and end dates.
6. **Future research goals** (*1-page limit*) that clearly describe the following:
 - Expected publications, related products, planned/submitted extramural proposals, and benefits to the trainee
 - Availability of supplemental or matching funds to support the proposal
 - Project's forecast for positive impact on the Wisconsin dairy community
7. **Recruiting, mentoring and management plan** (*1-page limit*) should include, but is not limited to the following:
 - Approach for productive, interactive mentoring with regular evaluations
 - Appropriate, impactful training, and career development activities
 - Description of how the trainee will reach career goals
8. **Curriculum Vitae(s)** (*2-page limit per investigator*) **MUST** focus on the following:
 - Employment history
 - Professional training
 - Honors, awards, key publications
 - Contact information (address/email/phone)
 - If a prospective candidate has been identified, a CV should be included

IMPORTANT! An identified candidate is not required to be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. Inclusion of an already identified candidate is not required but may strengthen the proposal. Priority will be given to applications that include an identified candidate who is an alumnus of UW-Madison, UW-Platteville, UW-River Falls and/or who has ties to Wisconsin.
9. **References** **MUST** (*no page limit*) be provided for each citation in the proposal.
10. **Letter(s) of Support** (*optional, no page limit*) may be included as relevant and appropriate.



D. Proposal review process

Proposals will be reviewed by a group comprised of Hub steering committee members, CALS faculty, and campus leaders. Additionally, DIH advisory council members will review the [title page](#) that includes the 250-word summary to provide input on potential research impact for the greater Wisconsin dairy community.

Proposals should be written for reviewers with multiple scientific backgrounds (biological and social) to comprehend the science and the project. Applications will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

1. Scientific merit: [justification](#), approach, novelty and innovation of research aims **(50%)**
2. [Applied research](#) with clear plans for delivery **(20%)**
3. Justification for fit to Dairy Innovation Hub [priority area](#) and [future research goals](#) **(10%)**
4. Clearly defined evidence of direct outcomes and [deliverables](#) to the [end-user](#) **(5%)**
5. [Recruiting, mentoring, and mentoring plan](#) is appropriate for the type of trainee project **(5%)**
6. PI is an assistant professor and/or qualifies as a ["New Hub PI"](#) **(5%)**
7. [Identified candidate](#) is an alumnus from UW-Madison, UW-Platteville, or UW-River Falls or has connections to Wisconsin **(5%)**

All PIs will receive synthesized feedback and comments with award decision letters. Neither scores nor ranks will be returned.

NOTE: Receipt of Hub funding obligates a PI to review for future Hub RFPs that do not have a conflict-of-interest with the primary or co-PI of a future project submission.

E. Frequently asked questions

Q: What expenses are included in the budget?

A: The annual supply and expense budget may be used for lab/field/farm supplies or consumables, undergraduate hourly expenses, travel to farm or research station, travel to conferences where research will be presented, publication fees, technology, and computing hardware/software needs specific to the project. All expenses should be clarified within the budget justification.

Q: How will the funds be dispersed?

A: A project account will be set up with funds for the PI to manage salary and supply expenses. Money will be allocated fiscally for two years. Project PIs should spend according to the budget submitted in the proposal. Fringe amount should be included in the budget justification but will not be dispersed into the WISER child account (the Hub incurs this expense at the beginning of each fiscal year).



Q: Are there expectations that come with this funding?

A: As with all funding, there are reporting expectations. The Hub reports financial and research outcomes on a fiscal year basis. Researchers will be asked to complete an online submission once per year. Project investigators and collaborators are encouraged to participate in [Dairy Summit](#) and [Dairy Symposium](#) to present research findings. Additionally, Hub funded PIs will be expected to peer-review proposals submitted to future DIH RFPs to guide Hub decision-making processes.

Q: Does a candidate need to be identified prior to submitting this proposal?

A: No, a specific candidate does not need to be identified. Once funding decisions are awarded, PIs may recruit a qualified candidate for the project. However, additional consideration will be given to proposals who identify an alumnus from UW-Madison, UW-Platteville, UW-River Falls, or a candidate with a Wisconsin connection. If a qualified candidate has already been identified, please include with proposal.

Q: Can a PI submit more than one trainee proposal?

A: No, a PI should only submit one proposal to the RFP as the primary PI. However, the PI may serve as a co-PI on other proposals. Proposals from similar collaborative teams and overlapping or similar proposals to previously funded projects are discouraged.

Still have questions? Contact the Hub directly...

For inquiries concerning the scope of research, acceptability, or appropriateness of a proposed project, please email **faculty director, Matthew Ruark** (mdruark@wisc.edu).

For more information about overall DIH program operations and reporting expectations related to funding, please email **program manager, Maria Woldt** (maria.woldt@wisc.edu).

For further guidance regarding the application, general RFP proposal process, budget, and allowable expenses, please email **administrative specialist, Elisabeth Berndt** (elisabeth.berndt@wisc.edu).

