Highlights of GAO-22-105407, a report to congressional requesters

### Why GAO Did This Study

Interior awarded over \$4 billion in competitive grants in fiscal years 2019 through 2021 across nine grant-making bureaus. Recipients of competitive grants include state agencies, nonprofits, and universities, among others. Recipients use the grants for various activities, such as assisting with the recovery of endangered species and creating conservation opportunities for youth.

GAO was asked to review Interior's grant award process. This report (1) describes Interior's process for announcing grant opportunities, reviewing applications, and making award decisions; and (2) evaluates the extent to which Interior's award process is consistent with relevant federal grant regulations.

To do this work, GAO reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and Interior guidance and interviewed Interior officials. GAO also reviewed award documents for a sample of 18 competitive grant programs across Interior's bureaus and compared the process that Interior uses to award grants with relevant regulations. GAO also analyzed agency data from fiscal years 2019 through 2021.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO is making two recommendations: (1) the Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service should issue a memorandum reinforcing the need for grant programs to include criteria and weights in funding announcements and evaluate applications using those standards and (2) Interior should develop a policy to ensure that officials document the rationale for grant award decisions. Interior concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View GAO-22-105407. For more information, contact Cardell Johnson at (202) 512-3841 or johnsoncd1@gao.gov.

#### August 2022

## **GRANTS MANAGEMENT**

# **Interior Should Improve the Award Process for Some Competitive Grant Programs**

#### What GAO Found

The Department of the Interior's competitive grant award process involves announcing funding opportunities, evaluating grant applications, and obtaining management approval to issue award decisions (see fig.). Interior's nine grant-making bureaus make all funding announcements publicly available, and a panel, which may include bureau staff and experts outside the agency, reviews and scores grant applications based on criteria outlined in the funding announcement. Following the scoring process, the panel develops a recommended list of applicants for management review and a final award decision.

#### Overview of the Department of the Interior's Competitive Grant Award Process

#### **Funding announcement**

#### Panel review

## Management award decision

- Bureau officials prepare and post an announcement about funding opportunities on www.Grants.gov, generally for a minimum of 60 calendar days.
- The funding announcement includes the criteria and the process that will be used to evaluate grant applications.
- Members of a review panel score the submitted applications according to the criteria outlined in the funding announcement.
- The review panels evaluate the technical merits of each application and generate a recommended list of projects for management review.
- Management officials review the recommended list of projects for funding and select grant-award recipients, who are then notified of their award status
- Management reviews may involve multiple levels within Interior, depending on various factors, such as total dollars awarded.

Source: GAO analysis of information from the Department of the Interior. | GAO-22-105407

GAO found that Interior's grant programs that GAO reviewed follow an award process that is generally consistent with relevant federal grant regulations. However, two of three U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service grant programs that GAO reviewed did not clearly identify criteria and weights in funding announcements and did not use criteria to evaluate applications. Without this information, applicants might not submit applications meeting all the criteria, and panel members might not uniformly evaluate applications, potentially leading to inconsistencies in the review process.

GAO also found that grant programs across the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and U.S. Geological Survey lacked documentation to support certain award decisions. For example, National Park Service leadership made an award to a lower-ranked applicant instead of to a recommended applicant, without written support. Interior's internal policy for competitive grants does not explicitly call for officials to provide documentation of award decisions. Without documenting its rationale for award decisions, Interior lacks assurance that its award decisions follow relevant federal grant regulations.

United States Government Accountability Office