

**SANCTUARY  
COMMUNITY FUND**



National  
Marine  
Sanctuary  
Foundation

# Sanctuary Community Fund Request for Proposals

## FUNDING OPPORTUNITY OVERVIEW

The [National Marine Sanctuary Foundation](https://marinesanctuary.org), in cooperation with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), is excited to offer continued funding in support of communities in the stewardship of national marine sanctuaries and protection of the ocean and Great Lakes.

### Funding Availability and Eligibility

Awards between \$10,000 - \$100,000

The objective of the Sanctuary Community Fund is to invest directly in sanctuary gateway communities to support the discovery, testing, piloting, nurturing, capacity, and spread of the best ideas to protect our shared waters. Awards made as part of this application round will focus on communities participating in the development of public community resources for recently designated national marine sanctuaries, specifically, [Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary](#), [Lake Ontario National Marine Sanctuary](#), and [Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Sanctuary](#).

### Implementation Period

March 1, 2026 – January 31, 2027

Projects should span 6-11 months

**Projects may end prior to January 31, 2027 but cannot be extended beyond that date**

### Application Package Due

~~Friday, December 19, 2025~~ **EXTENDED: Friday, January 9, 2026**

11:59 PM Eastern Standard Time

Please see <https://marinesanctuary.org/sanctuary-community-fund/> for more information. Frequently Asked Questions are available on the website and at the bottom of this document. Please refer often to this information and consult before submitting a final application.

## BACKGROUND

National marine sanctuaries play a critical role in protecting wildlife and habitats, increasing access to nature, and building a more resilient future for our ocean, Great Lakes, and the communities that depend on them. The National Marine Sanctuary System connects people and communities through recreation, education, U.S. history, science, and stewardship and inspires community-based solutions that help people understand and conserve the spectacular underwater wildlife, archaeological resources, and cultural seascapes of the United States. Recognizing that Indigenous governments, organizations, and communities are caretakers of these waters, the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation invests in and partners with them to uplift their approaches and solutions for our shared commitments toward the healthy lands and waters that make up the National Marine Sanctuary System. The conservation and sustainable use of marine ecosystems is vital to maintaining clean waters, supporting healthy communities and livelihoods, ensuring coastal resiliency, and sustaining productive coastal economies.

## OVERVIEW OF FUNDING OPPORTUNITY

To increase public support, long-term protection, and sustainable use of national marine sanctuaries, the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation created the Sanctuary Community Fund to invest directly in community partner engagement so that the heart of sanctuaries— the peoples, places, customs, and cultures—can help advance science and ways of knowing, stewardship, and outreach within the sanctuary community. Through the Sanctuary Community Fund, the Foundation will deliver funding to local communities working hand-in-hand with sanctuary managers to promote conservation, stewardship, restoration, visitation, recreation, preservation of history, and celebration of cultures. This round of grants will support community partners supporting the national marine sanctuaries that were recently designated by NOAA after June 1, 2024. This includes:

- [Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary;](#)
- [Lake Ontario National Marine Sanctuary;](#)
- [Papahānaumokuākea National Marine Sanctuary](#)

APPLICATION DEADLINE	NOTIFICATION DATE	FOR PROJECTS STARTING
Friday, January 9, 2026	Est. Friday, February 20, 2026	March 1, 2026

This is the second round of the Sanctuary Community Fund. The current total available funding is \$1 million and will be awarded in support of projects that best meet the criteria for funding in that cycle. The Foundation will publicly announce awards early in the project lifecycle. All applicants will be notified of funding decisions prior to public announcements. Past engagement roles and actions in the Sanctuary Designation Process will not impact any organization's eligibility for a grant award.

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of the Sanctuary Community Fund is to support communities in the stewardship of national marine sanctuaries and to strengthen the National Marine Sanctuary System.

The Sanctuary Community Fund was established to achieve these specific outcomes:

- Add leadership capacity to individuals and groups who advance conservation efforts in our ocean and Great Lakes,
- Increase awareness of the value of national marine sanctuaries,
- Create opportunities across sectors of the community to be ambassadors for the national marine sanctuaries they care about,
- Increase access to nature through national marine sanctuaries, and
- Build trust and familiarity between national marine sanctuaries and the communities who are impacted the most by them.

## PRIORITIES

Proposals must include project work that addresses one or more of the priorities noted below. Projects that meet more than one of these priorities will typically rise higher in the proposal evaluation process.

- Projects that engage community groups and individuals to build engagement in recently designated sites.
- Projects led by Indigenous serving organizations that interpret and teach the broader community about Indigenous peoples' guardianship and legacy with ocean and Great Lakes waters.
- Projects that develop opportunities for people to volunteer, explore science, or access and experience our sanctuaries.
- Projects that ensure that all Americans are aware of the value of individual sanctuaries as well as the entire network of special places across U.S. waters that is our National Marine Sanctuary System.

## ELIGIBILITY

The Foundation is interested in creating a broad scope of eligibility for organizations to build the capacity of community grantees and expand the reach of grant program priorities and objectives. Applications will be accepted from groups or entities that meet the following criteria:

- The applicant is a non-profit organization, Indigenous or Indigenous-serving organization, formal or informal education institution, and/or a non-federal government entity (Tribal Nation, state, or local government).
- The applicant does not have a paid staff member serving on the Foundation's [Board of Trustees](#).
- The applicant is not a federal government agency, a foreign entity, or an individual.
  - Individuals are not eligible, but organizations applying may include individuals acting as independent contractors in their budgets.
- Project work is conducted in the United States.

If you are not sure if your organization is eligible, or have any questions about the eligibility

description, please reach out to Gina Digiantonio, Program Operations Manager, at [support@marinesanctuary.org](mailto:support@marinesanctuary.org).

Competitive awards will directly benefit or support communities in need and involve community members in all aspects of the project, from planning to execution.

## HOW TO APPLY

Application packages should be submitted by 11:59 PM Eastern Standard Time on Friday, January 9, 2026. Please submit your application package to the Foundation through C-STAAR – the Foundation’s Collaborative System for Tracking Activities, Awards, and Reporting - using the following link: <https://marinesanctuary.smartsimple.com/>.

The C-STAAR platform will ask individual questions related to your project, answered through separate form fields, and will have some questions that allow for uploading additional materials or providing links to those materials. If your proposal is selected for funding, your agreement and future reporting will be managed through the C-STAAR platform.

Please direct all questions regarding the submission of applications to the C-STAAR platform to [support@marinesanctuary.org](mailto:support@marinesanctuary.org) with the email subject line: RFP QUESTION Sanctuary Community Fund: [Name of Organization].

A completed application package should include:

- A detailed description of project goals and deliverables and how they will be accomplished;
- A full budget and budget narrative—a written description of how the budget will be used;
- A project timeline including start and end dates and key milestones;
- Letters of commitment from partner organizations are required if they have a role in completing the proposed project;
- Letters of support from people or groups who advocate on behalf of your organization but do not have a role in completing the proposed project are optional

All required fields of the application in C-STAAR must be completed before submission. Applications can be saved as a draft to return to and submit when completed. Any additional contributors to work on the proposal per organization must be invited and accepted into C-STAAR. Multiple users cannot work on the proposal simultaneously.

Applicants will be notified around February 20, 2026.

## PROJECT TIMELINE

The timeline of project activities and milestones should be clearly addressed in the applicant’s proposal. Project proposals that do not address whether work can be completed within the noted timeline will not be rated as highly in the review process. **Project work cannot extend beyond January 31, 2027, due to the source funds supporting this grant program.**

## OPTIONAL LINKS/ATTACHMENTS

You may include additional/supplemental materials that demonstrate the unique strengths of your organization to promote community engagement with the sanctuary process such as impact materials, testimonials, videos, printed materials, or other multimedia. Video submissions via link are preferred.

## INFORMATION SESSION

The Foundation will record a webinar to review the RFP in full and address specific qualifications and needs. The webinar recording will be posted by December 2, 2025 and can be accessed via the Foundation's website.

## REVIEW PROCESS

Proposals will be submitted using the Foundation's online application portal, C-STAAR. The person submitting the application will receive an automated email confirming that the Foundation has received your proposal.

Proposals will be reviewed by the Foundation, with support from selected reviewers. Selected reviewers will remain anonymous. Projects will be evaluated based on how well they align with the program priorities of the Foundation and how well the project fulfills the criteria on the pages below:

Evaluation Criteria	Sub-Questions	Score	Scoring for this criterion will be assessed on how well proposals:
<p><b>IMPORTANCE, RELEVANCE, APPLICABILITY OF PROPOSAL TO THE PROGRAM GOALS</b></p>	<p>Does the project guide the engagement of sanctuary community groups and members?</p> <p>If applicable, is the project led by Indigenous serving organizations that interpret and teach the broader community about Indigenous peoples' guardianship and legacy with ocean and Great Lakes waters?</p> <p>Does the project develop opportunities for people to volunteer, explore science, or access and experience our sanctuaries?</p>	<p>35</p>	<p>Explain the project activities and how they align with the competition objective.</p> <p>Clearly state the purpose of the project and the specific PROJECT OBJECTIVE issue being addressed; summarize planned activities and benefits to the environment and local economy; and indicate the project scope.</p>

	Does the project ensure that all Americans are aware of the value of individual sanctuaries as well as the entire network of special places across U.S. waters that is our National Marine Sanctuary System?		
<b>TECHNICAL SKILLS AND PROJECT FEASIBILITY</b>	<p>Does the proposal clearly identify achievable goals and objectives?</p> <p>Is the proposal feasible in the performance timeframe period?</p> <p>Is a descriptive timeline included?</p> <p>Do the applicant and any project partners have the ability and expertise (or the potential) to conduct the scope and scale of the proposed work?</p> <p>Has the applicant successfully conducted work with the sanctuary community in the past?</p>	25	<p>Demonstrate a thorough level of planning that will allow the applicant to begin the project promptly and complete the project within the period of the performance timeline.</p> <p>Considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are milestones identified in the project timeline aligned with project goals and objectives?</li> <li>• Are project partners and roles clearly identified?</li> <li>• Do activities take place during the implementation period?</li> <li>• Has the applicant demonstrated past success engaging with the community?</li> </ul>
<b>QUALIFICATIONS OF APPLICANT</b>	<p>Is the applicant based near or serve those living in close proximity to one of the locations listed in the RFP?</p> <p>Does the applicant propose to collaborate with at least one national marine sanctuary community?</p> <p>If applicable, does the applicant represent, serve, or engage in meaningful dialogue with Indigenous groups or organizations?</p> <p>Does the applicant have a commitment to, or experience with, reaching the proposed audience?</p>	15	<p>Demonstrate stakeholder engagement through partnership and collaboration with communities affected by the changing environment of sanctuary regions. Considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are letters of commitment from participating partners included?</li> <li>• Does the applicant demonstrate experience implementing outreach/education programs?</li> <li>• Are letters of support from national marine sanctuary partner sites included?</li> <li>• Show a commitment to engaging with communities.</li> </ul> <p>Does the applicant represent, serve, or engage in meaningful</p>

	<p>Does the applicant have the capacity to promote the grant funding and project with public relations strategies and give specific details regarding the publicity plan?</p> <p>Does the project require permits or special permissions to conduct activities, and does the applicant and/or its partners already hold those permits and/or permissions?</p>		<p>dialogue with community groups or organizations, including indigenous groups if applicable?</p> <p>Is outreach and/or engagement with communities reducing barriers or providing access to sanctuary resources?</p> <p>Demonstrate organizational capacity to acquire any additional resources and technical requirements necessary to complete the project.</p>
<b>PROJECT EVALUATION PLAN</b>	<p>Does the applicant list specific project metrics, indicators, and outcomes?</p> <p>Does the project clearly indicate how progress will be evaluated and success determined?</p> <p>Does the applicant plan to collect and report specific information pertinent to program success, including program outputs and outcomes?</p>	10	<p>Specific project metrics, indicators, and outcomes are included that align with project activities.</p> <p>Explain how these outcomes (quantitative and qualitative) will demonstrate the project's success.</p>
<b>PROJECT COSTS</b>	<p>Is the budget realistic?</p> <p>Does the applicant adequately justify the proposed budget request? Is there sufficient detail to verify that the budget request is reasonable for the number of participants and/or target audience to be reached?</p> <p>Does the budget description sufficiently explain how each item in the budget table supports project activities?</p> <p>Is a significant percentage of the budget directly related to project activities and fostering positive outcomes/results?</p>	10	<p>Provide a detailed list of specific items, tools, materials, etc., and associated costs for each expense category.</p> <p>Considerations include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are explanations provided for how each item in the budget table supports project activities?</li> <li>• Are budgeted items prioritized that directly support projects and/or workforce development and capacity-building opportunities (program staff salary, fringe, and indirect budget</li> </ul>

			requests are relatively small fractions of the total budget)
<b>SCALABILITY AND LONGEVITY POTENTIAL</b>	<p>What is the long-term scalability and longevity of the proposed activities?</p> <p>Can the project continue to benefit the community and/or support outcomes after the project's completion?</p>	5	<p>Describe project scalability.</p> <p>Demonstrate the potential for the project activities and/or project outcomes to continue beyond the funding period.</p>
<b>Total Points</b>	<b>100</b>		

## NOTIFICATION

All applicants will be notified if their project was selected for funding by approximately February 20, 2026. The Foundation may negotiate final budgets and project details with applicants recommended for awards and may request that final awardees modify aspects of their application prior to final agreement and award of funds.

Applicants will be notified by email. Following notification, applicants can see their proposal's status in C-STAAR. Public notification of awards will be made in spring 2026. For organizations who are declined for funding, the Foundation may provide a limited amount of anonymous feedback from reviewers, if selected reviewers agree for their comments to be shared.

There are three possible outcomes from submission of a proposal:

1. Award with no changes to project scope or budget
2. Award with modifications requested to project scope or budget
3. Decline to fund

## POST-AWARD EXPECTATIONS

If your project is selected for funding,

- **Agreement Documentation**—Will be sent digitally through the platform Docusign. You don't have to register for a Docusign account in order to sign. If you would like to sign a paper document, we can make arrangements for that upon request.
- **Payment**—May be made in full up front or in some cases awarded as phases of the project are completed. Please ensure that any financial documentation submitted is up-to-date and accurate.
- **Monitoring**—The Foundation will monitor your progress by way of reports and both formal and informal check-ins on specific intervals throughout the project period and

upon closeout. Formal written reports are required two times each year. Informal check-ins may involve phone calls, meetings, or in-person site visits. You must inform Foundation staff of any changes to your project, budget, or anticipated outcomes.

- **Storytelling** – Participation in Foundation communications about the project is an important way to celebrate the work being done by your organization and helps provide the Foundation with tools to continue to support projects and programs in the future. You will be asked to provide photos, videos, or printed materials that help tell the story of your work. The Foundation will provide photo credits on any material used.

## APPLICATION TIMELINE

- November 19, 2025 – RFP released
- December 2, 2025 – Informational webinar is posted on Foundation website
- January 9, 2026 – Applications due
- February 20, 2026 – Notification of awards to applicants
- March 1, 2026 – Grant terms begin
- January 31, 2027 – All grantee project work must be completed

## WHO TO CONTACT FOR HELP

Please direct all questions regarding this RFP to Gina Digiantonio, Program Operations Manager at [support@marinesanctuary.org](mailto:support@marinesanctuary.org) with the email subject line: Sanctuary Community Fund: [Name of Organization].

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Q: Are there particular funding areas?

A: Grants in this round of the Sanctuary Community Fund will support community partner engagement serving sanctuaries designated by NOAA after June 1, 2024. Support will include grants to regionally and locally based organizations to advance science, stewardship, and outreach within the community. Scientific research projects will not be considered under this funding opportunity but interpreting science for the public benefit and building support with the use of tools such as surveys, polls, interviews and focus groups is allowed.

### Q: What are the application deadlines?

A: Applications will be accepted on a rolling basis. The deadline for community engagement grants for this cycle of the SCF will be January 9, 2026.

### Q: Who is eligible to apply?

A: Eligible applicants include formal or informal education institutions, non-profits, Indigenous or Indigenous-serving organizations, and/or a non-federal government entity (tribal, state, or local government). The applicant does not have a paid staff member serving on the Foundation's [Board of Trustees](#). The applicant is not a federal government agency, a foreign entity/organization, or an individual. Individuals are not eligible, but organizations applying may include individuals acting as independent contractors in their budgets. Project work must be

conducted in the United States.

**Q: What kinds of expenses are allowed? Are there any types of expenses that are not allowed?**

A: The National Marine Sanctuary Foundation will consider a broad range of expenses under this funding opportunity.

- Capital expenses for equipment are allowed, but a strong justification for the need should be included in the 'Budget Description' area of the application, along with the reason that the item should be purchased and not leased. (Lease of equipment is preferred.)
  - Capital expenses should be limited to the proportion required for the proposed project. Please note that any funded requests for equipment will require a longer period of monitoring, typically beyond initial project completion.
- Projects that propose profit for the applying organization are not allowed.
  - For example, the Foundation cannot fund ticketed events, unless the ticket cost offsets the cost of the event, and the request to the Foundation covers a gap in expected revenue.
  - For programs, the Foundation cannot support costs that are otherwise covered by program fees but can cover additional materials that program fees do not cover.
- Entertainment expenses are not allowed, including alcohol purchases or service.
- The Foundation cannot support budget requests that benefit an individual, like scholarships.
- Salary and fringe benefits are allowed, but only for the time attributable to the proposed project.
- Independent contractor costs and consultant costs are allowed.
- Indirect costs are allowed. If you are using an indirect cost rate or administrative fee, please upload in optional materials on the application, your organization's policy on administrative costs, if your organization has documented that process.
- Supplies are an allowable expense. Please be as specific as possible about supplies needed to complete the project as proposed.
- Travel is an allowable expense. Please be prepared to identify in the 'Budget Description' area of the application how many people the travel budget is intended to cover, and what type of travel is estimated, and why travel costs are needed.
  - For mileage, please use the 2025 IRS business rate of 70 cents per mile. If your organization has its own mileage reimbursement rate, please use that calculation.
  - Rental cars, lodging, and per diem are allowable expenses. You can use GSA per diem rates as an estimate, found at [this website](#).
  - Travel beyond regular economy rates is not allowed.
  - Include group travel needs, such as bus transportation, in the travel budget line. Please distinguish between employee travel needs and participant travel needs in your budget.
- Rental costs for program or event venues, or storage are allowed, but

- cannot extend beyond the end date of the project.
- Software costs are allowable and should be included in the Supplies budget line. Software costs may be included proportional to their use for the proposed project.

If you are unsure if an expense is allowable as part of your budget, please reach out to Gina Digiantonio, Program Operations Manager at [support@marinesanctuary.org](mailto:support@marinesanctuary.org) with the email subject line: Sanctuary Community Fund: [Name of Organization].

**Q: Can new applicants apply for this funding from the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation?**

A: Organizations that have never been a recipient of National Marine Sanctuary Foundation grants are strongly encouraged to apply if they meet the eligibility criteria.

**Q: Can a federal employee or federal agency apply for the grant?**

A: No, federal employees or federal agencies cannot be the primary applicant or recipient but can and should be a partner in a proposal.

**Q: What is the typical duration of grants? Are multi-year grants available?**

A: The typical duration of grants is for a project period of 9 months. The project work must conclude by January 31, 2027.

**Q: Do I need letters of commitment and/or support from partners?**

A: Letters of support that demonstrate project capacity are encouraged and will help reviewers understand your ability to complete the project successfully and on time.

Letters of commitment from project partners are **required**. An example of a letter of commitment would be if your proposed project involves a school, then a letter of commitment should be provided from the school indicating the acknowledgement of their participation and enthusiasm for the project.

**Q: Can I submit additional attachments?**

A: There is a supplemental attachments section in the online application that will allow you to upload any additional documents, videos, photos, etc. that help you to illustrate your proposal.

**Q: Where can I find more information?**

A: More information about the Sanctuary Community Fund and the National Marine Sanctuary Foundation can be found on the Foundation [website](#).

**Q: Where can I find more information about the National Marine Sanctuary System?**

A: The official web site for the National Marine Sanctuary System, including links to individual sites, can be found at <https://sanctuaries.noaa.gov/>

## ABOUT US

The [National Marine Sanctuary Foundation](#) is the official non-profit partner of NOAA's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, working to advance its network of 18 marine environments, from Massachusetts to American Samoa and the Great Lakes to the Florida Keys. We work to protect our country's shared waters, care for marine wildlife and habitats, honor our nation's maritime history and cultural traditions, and promote the enjoyment of public waters by all Americans. We accomplish this through funding community stewardship and engagement programs; on-the-water conservation, restoration, and preservation projects; public education and outreach programs in visitor centers and sanctuary gateway communities; and cutting-edge scientific innovations and exploration, through a combination of private fundraising and federal support.

In a quarter of a century, we've expanded and deepened people's connections and access to our ocean, coasts, and Great Lakes, shared history and maritime culture and heritage, and built partnerships with coastal communities and businesses connected to the over 629,000 square miles of public waters that belong to all Americans.

The Sanctuary Community Fund was created in cooperation with NOAA and the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. In this application round, all awarded projects will come from federally sourced funds under award NA24NOSX429C0001. Note that all awarded grants are federally funded but are not subawards.

## TERMS & CONDITIONS

This is a Request for Proposals (RFP) only. Issuance of this RFP does not in any way obligate the Foundation to make an award or pay for costs incurred by potential offerors in the preparation and submission of an offer. In addition:

- (a) The Foundation may cancel RFP and not award;
- (b) The Foundation may reject any or all responses received;
- (c) Issuance of RFP does not constitute award commitment by The Foundation;
- (d) The Foundation reserves the right to disqualify any offer based on offeror failure to follow RFP instructions;
- (e) The Foundation will not compensate offerors for a response to RFP;
- (f) The Foundation reserves the right to issue an award based on an initial evaluation of offers without further discussion;
- (g) The Foundation may negotiate with short-listed offerors for their best and final offer;
- (h) The Foundation reserves the right to order additional quantities or units with the selected offer or;
- (i) The Foundation may reissue the solicitation or issue formal amendments revising the original RFP specifications and evaluation criteria before or after receipt of proposals;
- (j) The Foundation may modify the specifications without issuing a formal notice to all

offerors when the revisions are immaterial to the scope of the RFP;

(k) The Foundation may choose to award only part of the activities in the RFP or issue multiple awards based on multiple RFP activities; and

(l) The Foundation reserves the right to waive minor proposal deficiencies that can be corrected prior to award determination to promote competition.

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