For the June 2014 RFP, 68 USDN members participated in at least one of the 21 Letters of Intent submitted to the Fund’s Steering Committee — the highest participation rate achieved in the Fund’s five-year history. The remarkable response was no accident. The Steering Committee had redesigned the RFP process with the goal of increasing participation in and quality of proposals.

It piloted four changes:

• **More outreach to members.** In addition to general distribution of the RFP, the Fund Managers and USDN Managing Director contacted the co-chairs of USDN user groups and the leads on previous Innovation Fund projects (who might have a “next phase” idea), held three informational conference calls, and sent an e-mail targeted to newer USDN members who might not know about the Innovation Fund and how it works.

• **More time to develop ideas, find collaborators, and get feedback.** The Steering Committee issued the RFP in June — a month earlier than the previous year — to provide members with more time before submitting an initial Letter of Interest (LOI). The Committee also provided written feedback to all LOI leads before the USDN Annual Meeting, so they could share it with other members at the meeting.

• **More technical assistance support for development of proposals.** The RFP offered the assistance of Fund Managers in developing proposal ideas and finding potential collaborators, and — for the first time — it offered as much as $6,000 in technical assistance (consultants, research, etc.) that could be spent to develop proposals. More than half of the Letters of Intent tapped the Fund Managers for assistance and more than half requested funding for TA to develop a full-scale proposal.

• **An opportunity after the USDN Annual Meeting to submit a proposal.** In previous years, final LOIs had to be submitted before the Annual Meeting. But that ruled out the possibility that some members would get good ideas for proposals during the meeting. The 2014 RFP allowed new proposals to emerge from the annual meeting if they were submitted within three weeks. Two new proposals met that deadline.

The Steering Committee remains committed to continuous improvement of its processes, and will take additional lessons learned in the 2014 RFP and apply them to its future work.