

The Department of the Interior (DOI) Listening Sessions on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community
October 20, 2021, 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET¹

Background

[Executive Order 13985: Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government \(EO 13985\)](#) directs agencies to conduct equity assessments of select programs to determine whether underserved communities face systemic barriers in accessing benefits and opportunities. Per EO 13985, underserved communities are defined as, “populations sharing a particular characteristic, as well as geographic communities, that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life...such as Black, Latino, and Indigenous and Native American persons, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and other persons of color; members of religious minorities; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) persons; persons with disabilities; persons who live in rural areas; and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.” As part of implementing [EO 13985](#), the Department of the Interior (DOI) is assessing the equity of its programs related to three initial focus areas that support the agency’s mission and have high potential for equity impact: (1) contracting, (2) recreational visitation, and (3) tribal discretionary grants. DOI contracted with Kearns and West to conduct 15 virtual listening sessions where the public were invited to provide comments and feedback on the barriers that limit access, diversity, and equity as well as recommendations of actions the Department should take to reduce barriers.

On behalf of DOI, Kearns and West facilitated a listening session on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community on October 20, 2021, from 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET.

Participant Data

Ahead of the virtual session, registration totaled 34 registrants. The listening session saw a maximum number of participants in the session with totals around 14 participants.

Participants were invited to voluntarily use Poll Everywhere to understand who was participating and as a tool for building community in a virtual space. Participants were asked whether they identified with or represented any of the categories of underserved communities as defined by Executive Order 13985. Information was also collected to better understand the size of their business, their previous experience in applying for federal contracts, and whether their business had been awarded a contract.

Polling data demonstrated that 17% of participants identified with the LGBTQ community, 17% identified a person impacted by persistent poverty or income inequality, 16% identified as a person currently living with a disability, and 50% identified as a person representative of a racial or ethnic minority group. Most participants represent small businesses where over 75% of participating businesses employ 0-5 people, and 25% employ 26-50 people.

In terms of applying for federal contracting opportunities, about 50% of participants had applied and 50% had not applied for contracting opportunities with the Department. Out of those who had applied, about 67% of participants were rewarded a contracting opportunity, and about 33% were not awarded a contract. Participants reported that they typically find out about contracting opportunities through the

¹ This meeting summary was prepared for the U.S. Department of the Interior by Kearns & West, Inc. (K&W) pursuant to an existing IDIQ contract.

following sources: SAM.gov (18%), Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTACs) (18%), word of mouth (18%), associated small business groups (9%), industry groups (9%), and other (28%). When asked about the frequency of their use of the Department of the Interior's Forecast of Contracting Opportunities through the GSA Acquisition Gateway website, participants responses were never (50%) and sometimes (50%).

Geographically, participants joined from the following states: Alabama, California, Michigan, North Dakota, Texas, Virginia, and Washington, D.C.

Agenda Overview

The purpose of this listening session was to understand and address the barriers that exist in the Department's procurement process, with an emphasis on improving engagement with underserved communities. Keeping the purpose of the sessions at the forefront, Kearns & West, an independent, third-party neutral consulting firm, and DOI designed a two-hour facilitation plan to learn more about how to engage with businesses with characteristics that align with the EO 13985 definition of underserved community.

Miro, an interactive, collaborative virtual whiteboard was used to capture participants' responses to developed facilitation questions. Prior to the session, participants were sent a session reminder email with instructions on how to use Miro, which included a PDF of Miro Tips and a YouTube video tutorial. Sara Omar, Kearns & West, provided an additional demonstration of the Miro board, with instructions for those uncomfortable with the technology to express their ideas verbally or using the chat function. Miro provided participants the space to reflect and respond to the following guiding questions:

- Have you applied for or accessed procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI in the past? If so, please describe what you liked and did not like about the process. If not, why not?
- What would have made it easier for you to apply or access procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI?
- What are the barriers to applying for procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI? How can DOI remove or reduce barriers (e.g., update policies, practices, or programs)?
- How can DOI establish and maintain connections to a wider and more diverse set of stakeholders representing underserved communities? How can DOI better share information with underserved stakeholders about procurement and contracting opportunities?

Utilizing these questions, Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, led participants through a series of discussions. Each segment corresponded to a dedicated conversation through the Miro board, the chat function, or participants' verbal remarks. Each section began with an introduction to the topic matter and a preview of the questions featured on the Miro board. Each discussion segment concluded with a summarization of themes, and its relationship to the larger goals of hosting a series of listening sessions.

In addition to a guided facilitation of virtual activities and open reflection, the listening session opened with words from Andrea Brandon, the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Budget, Finance, Grants, and Acquisition. Deputy Assistant Secretary Brandon thanked participants for joining the conversation and noted that DOI can only improve its programs with input from the public.

The session closed with remarks from Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, who reiterated that the listening sessions are providing a foundation for future conversations around how DOI can engage with businesses with characteristics that align with the definition of underserved communities. He also reiterated his

appreciation for all who participated in these conversations and encouraged participants to continue to have conversations with the Department.

Themes and Concepts

Four thematic conversations were held during the listening session: (1) perceptions, (2) what is working now and what could be working, (3) communication, and (4) recommendations. A summary of each conversation is included below.

Perceptions

This section looked for participants to begin the conversation by answering the following questions:

- What types of opportunities do you know exist?
- Do you feel that your business is competitive for DOI contracts? Why or why not?
- Anything else we should know?

Participants were encouraged to describe their experiences when accessing federal contracting opportunities and to elaborate on whether they felt their business was competitive within the DOI procurement process. Participants' words, reflections, experiences, and recommendations on this segment were recorded on the Miro board, which is included as *Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Themes that arose during the Miro board included that it is hard to be competitive as a small firm, it is hard for businesses to navigate the structures and relationships to access procurement opportunities, and some expressed a need for a tutorial to better understand the process.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, opened additional space for participants to reflect on their comments or to add additional reflections or perceptions on the procurement process. Participants continued to express the challenges of being competitive as a small firm. Participants raised the concern that each request for proposals takes time to understand, and this is time many small firms without business development offices do not have. Participants raised additional concerns around the difficulty with finding an up to date forecast of opportunities.

What is working now? What could be working?

This section moved participants to begin thinking more about their experiences with DOI's procurement and contracting processes by answering the following questions:

- What has been your experience submitting proposals for procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI? What has been helpful? What was challenging?
- If you have not submitted a proposal, why haven't you?
- What are the barriers to submitting proposals for procurement and contracting opportunities with DOI?
- Anything else we should know?

Participants were encouraged to move from their perceptions of the federal contracting system to describing their experience with the system. Additionally, this section provided space for participants to discuss the challenges of working within the federal contracting system. Participants recorded their experiences, reflections, and challenges on the virtual Miro board, which can be seen in *Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **The main themes that arose from this activity included: it takes a lot of time to be competitive, and some have had helpful**

communication with points of contact (POCs), but others have had experiences where POCs were not helpful.

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, built upon the Miro board theme to ask participants to describe why it is hard to work with DOI, and to provide examples of challenging experiences. Participants expressed frustration that many requests for proposals (RFPs) are almost 50 pages long, but businesses can only respond in 10 pages without repeating information. This makes it difficult to explain technical expertise, therefore making it difficult to put forth a competitive RFP. Other participants raised challenges on the time frame it takes to become a competitive firm and the obstacles of acronyms and “alphabet soup” that is federal contracting. Additional concerns were raised that proposals have been submitted for contracts that then do not get awarded, causing confusion as to why these RFPs are being posted if there is no budget to fund them. Lastly, participants raised the challenge of trying to compete with incumbent firms, and the difficulties of bidding wars and making themselves competitive against larger more established firms.

Communication

This section asked participants to move from describing the barriers and challenges of the process to begin recommending ways that DOI could engage with businesses to better share information by answering the following questions:

- How can DOI establish and maintain connections to a wider and more diverse set of businesses?
- How can DOI better share information with underserved businesses about procurement and contracting opportunities?
- What are the best ways to notify and engage underserved businesses about new opportunities?
- Anything else we should know?

Communication emerged as a persistent theme early in the conversation, which allowed this segment of the discussion to focus in on ways that communication and outreach could be improved between the Department and businesses. Participants recorded their recommendations and experiences around communicating with the Department on the virtual Miro board, which can be seen in *Figure 3: Communication Miro Board Screenshot in Appendix A*. **Participants reiterated the need for the formation of intentional relationships between the Department and businesses, and between businesses. Recommendations included taking actions to convene stakeholder groups, build out diversity networks, and build networks and community partnerships at the local levels.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, opened the space for participants to elaborate on anything written on the Miro board, or any additional reflections or proposed recommendations to improve communication. A participant also raised their own role as liaison between federal funding opportunities and businesses to provide process assistance for businesses with characteristics that align with the definition of underserved communities. Participants expanded on these ideas to recommend developing outreach strategies that meet businesses where their current needs are through open houses, stakeholder conversations, and open conversations between the Department and businesses.

Recommendations

This section empowered participants to recommend ways to improve the procurement and contracting process through the following questions:

- How can DOI reduce barriers that underserved and/or small and disadvantaged businesses face when they participate or attempt to participate in procurement and contracting opportunities?

- What could immediately help your business (or those you represent) to be more competitive and “procurement ready” for federal contract awards?
- Anything else we should know?

Participants in previous topics had begun naming recommendations to the Department, and this space gave them the opportunity to expand on previous mentioned examples, and the space to suggest additional recommendations. Participants then used the virtual Miro board to record their recommendations and concluding thoughts, which can be seen in *Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot* in Appendix A. **Themes that emerged during this discussion included guidance on how information is shared between businesses and the Department, relationships and capacity building through mentorship, and recommendations around how to create more manageable contracts for smaller businesses.**

Ben Duncan, Kearns & West, then opened space for participants to discuss additional recommendations or to provide any additional reflections on what was discussed or recorded on the Miro boards. Participants raised additional recommendations around using partnerships with PTACs and additional established relationships to provide process tutorials and workshops. Additional recommendations were brought up around how opportunities are communicated to businesses, especially those without business development officers or employees. Participants recommends that the Department do more intentional outreach about opportunities at the local level through partnerships with stakeholder groups, local chambers of commerce, and business associations.

Overarching Recommendations

Participants throughout the session, and not solely during the recommendations’ discussion, provided input and feedback to inform the Department. Many of these recommendations touched upon the obstacles and challenges those small businesses with characteristics that align with underserved communities face when trying to be competitive for DOI contracts. Participants raised additional considerations on how the Department could create resources and tutorials that help simplify the process for businesses. The key recommendations the Kearns and West facilitation team heard and would like to emphasize included:

- Developing intentional outreach to businesses that meet businesses’ needs throughout the procurement process. Participants recommended that this could be done through localized engagement, stakeholder groups, and partnerships to help assist and/or mentor businesses through the federal procurement process.
- Finding ways to connect businesses to other businesses to build partnership for future contracts.
- Providing businesses with a current list of contacts and providing Department contact information for communication throughout the procurement process.

Appendix A: Miro Board Screenshots

This Appendix features participant responses to a DOI Listening Session on Contracts for Businesses with Characteristics that Align with the Definition of Underserved Community on October 20, 2021, from 5:00 pm- 7:00 pm ET. The sticky notes included on the boards reflect participants' own words, experiences, reflections, and recommendations.

WHAT TYPES OF OPPORTUNITIES DO YOU KNOW EXIST?

DO YOU FEEL THAT YOUR BUSINESS IS COMPETITIVE FOR DOI CONTRACTS? WHY OR WHY NOT?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?

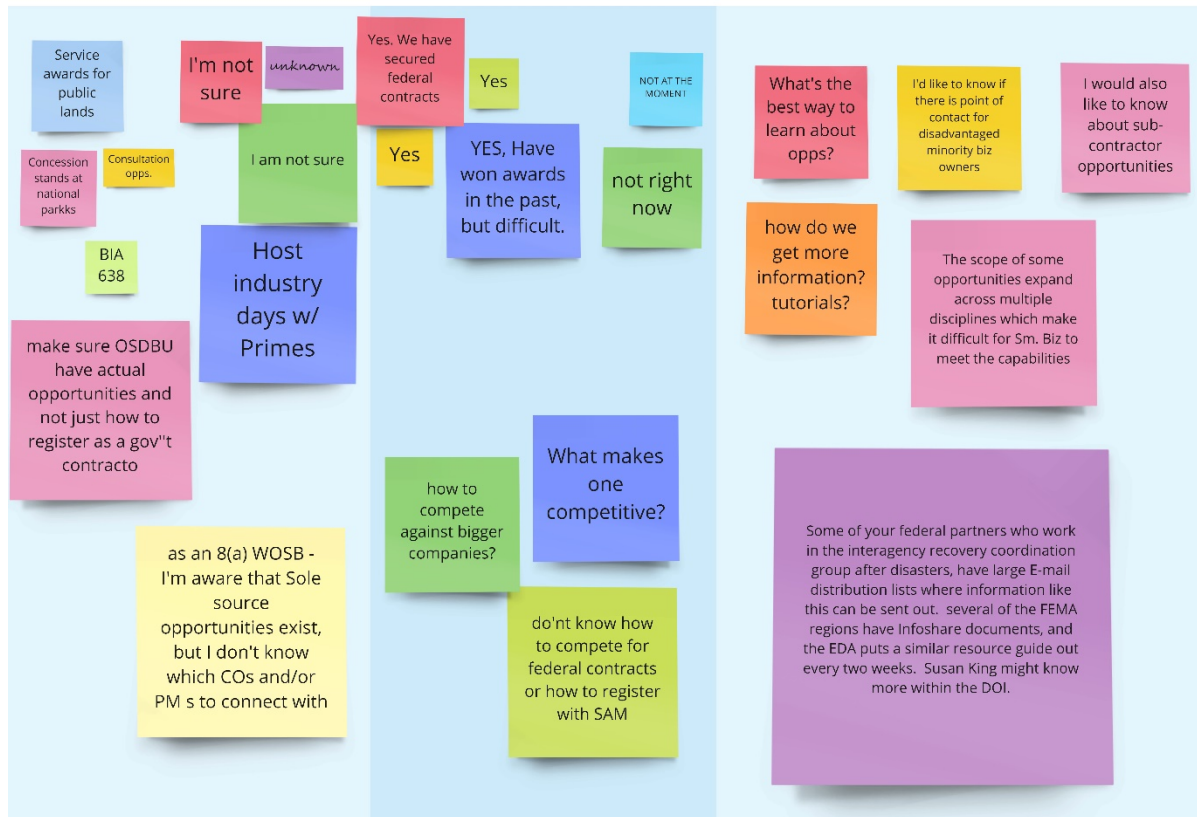


Figure 1: Perceptions Miro Board Screenshot

WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCE SUBMITTING PROPOSALS FOR PROCUREMENT AND CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES WITH DOI?

IF YOU HAVE NOT SUBMITTED A PROPOSAL, WHY HAVEN'T YOU?

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO SUBMITTING PROPOSALS FOR PROCUREMENT AND CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES WITH DOI?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?

WHAT WAS HELPFUL?

My contracts have been program based through contacts

WHAT WAS CHALLENGING?

not enough funding BOR

Very time consuming process

The bidding process is complex and difficult for small businesses to handle properly.

difficult to do if you don't know what you're doing

I don't know if I've met the GSA requirements to bid on sole-source contracts

Not having fulfilled the GSA requirements

I am a start up

the funds for the opportunity are not allocated... so RFP is cancelled after the proposal is submitted --- it's more like detailed market research



not enough lead time

Not sure where to find opps?

For others: Their lack of knowledge and expertise in conservation and/or public lands

Need more MPP Opportunities

Seems like some contracts are pre-determined

the gov't procurement process is complex for smalls that don't have a dedicated biz dev. team



don't lead small biz into believing they can "grow" in the fed space - the agency is looking for experienced contractors

Figure 2: What is working now? What could be working? Miro Board Screenshot

HOW CAN DOI ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN CONNECTIONS TO A WIDER AND MORE DIVERSE SET OF BUSINESSES?

HOW CAN DOI BETTER SHARE INFORMATION WITH UNDERSERVED BUSINESSES ABOUT PROCUREMENT AND CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES?

WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO NOTIFY AND ENGAGE UNDERSERVED BUSINESSES ABOUT NEW OPPORTUNITIES?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?

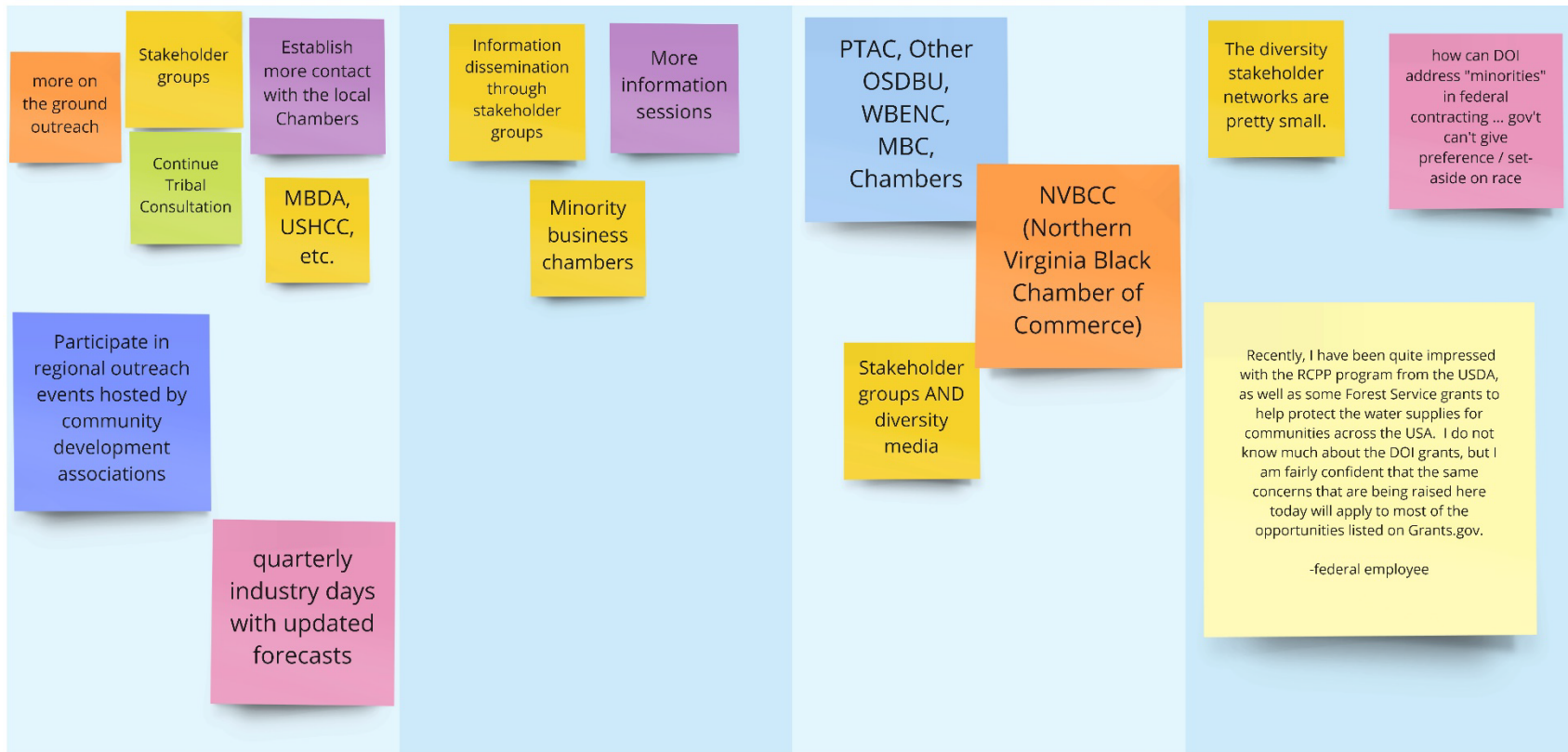


Figure 3: Communication Miro Board Screenshot

HOW CAN DOI REDUCE BARRIERS THAT UNDERSERVED AND/OR SMALL AND DISADVANTAGED BUSINESSES FACE WHEN THEY PARTICIPATE OR ATTEMPT TO PARTICIPATE IN PROCUREMENT AND CONTRACTING OPPORTUNITIES?

WHAT COULD IMMEDIATELY HELP YOUR BUSINESS (OR THOSE YOU REPRESENT) TO BE MORE COMPETITIVE AND "PROCUREMENT READY" FOR FEDERAL CONTRACT AWARDS?

ANYTHING ELSE WE SHOULD KNOW?



Figure 4: Recommendations Miro Board Screenshot