STEP Idaho District Export Council (IDEC) 2027 World Trade Connect Accelerator Program Guidelines and Application Instructions

Introduction

The U.S. Small Business Administration's (SBA) Office of Manufacturing and Trade (OMT) has awarded a State Trade Expansion Program (STEP) grant to the Idaho Department of Commerce (IDC). The STEP program provides competitive export training workshop places to Idaho small businesses for the purposes of international export marketing initiatives. These initiatives are aimed at achieving three primary goals:

1) increase the number of small businesses that export
2) increase the value of exports
3) increase the number of small businesses exploring significant new trade opportunities.

IDC is pleased to announce a competitive solicitation process for the Idaho District Export Council (IDEC) **2026 World Trade Connect Accelerator Program**. Eligible companies may apply for a place in the training program.

Project Period
All project activities must be completed on or before **September 29, 2027**.

Upon selection, eligible businesses must be fully prepared to remit the $750 program participation fee to secure their spot.

Note: If an applicant has limited English proficiency and needs access to resources for assistance, the IDC/ISDA maintains service standards to help.

Eligible Activity

- IDEC's 2026 World Trade Connect Accelerator Program.
    - Participation in export training workshops. Training workshops and education courses that are offered to recipients of STEP funds must have a direct benefit to, and assist, ESBCs with gaining credible knowledge of export policies, regulations, and/or best practices.

Note: The SBA expects that companies will eventually graduate from the STEP program. Therefore, IDC/ISDA may choose not to fund the same project more than a total of three (3) times, consecutive years or otherwise, per company.

- For example: If STEP funds have been awarded for the company to attend Mobile World Congress in 2013, 2016 and 2017, a FAA may not be awarded to attend the show a 4th time.

Eligible Applicants

The Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act of 2015, which authorized the State Trade Expansion Program, limits provision of services to 'eligible small business concerns'.

For purposes of implementing the STEP Program, the SBA operationally defines the term 'eligible small business concern' as an entity that meets the specifications below and completes the subsequent certification.

- Is organized or incorporated in the United States;
- Is operating in the United States;
- Meets
    - The applicable industry-based small business size standard established under section 3 of the Small Business Act; or
    - The alternate size standard applicable to the program under section 7(a) of the Small Business Act and the loan programs under title V of the Small Business Investment Act of 1958 (15 U.S.C. 695 et seq.);
    - The U.S. Small Business Administration (SBA) size standards are found at 13 C.F.R. Part 121. Use the following sba.gov link for information on size standards for your business - (https://www.sba.gov/federal-contracting/contracting-guide/size-standards. Click HERE to link directly to the complete list of SBA size standards used to define small business concerns based on NAICS codes.
        - **Affiliates:** You must include the employees or receipts of all affiliates when determining the size of a business. Affiliation with another business is based on the power to control, whether exercised or not. The power to control exists when an external party has 50 percent or more ownership. It may also exist with considerably less than 50 percent ownership by contractual arrangement or when one or more parties own a large share compared to other parties. Check the SBA's compliance guide for size affiliation for more detailed information.
        - **Annual receipts:** This is the "total income" (or "gross income") plus the "cost of goods sold." These numbers can normally be found on the business's IRS tax return forms. Receipts are averaged over a business's latest three complete fiscal years or (except in the Business Loan and Disaster Loan Programs) five complete fiscal years to determine the average annual receipts. If a business hasn't been in business for five years, multiply its average weekly revenue by 52 to determine its average annual receipts. The SBA calculates annual receipts in accordance with 13 CFR 121.104.
        - **Employee calculation:** This is the average number of people employed for each pay period over the business's latest 12 calendar months. Any person on the payroll must be included as one employee regardless of hours worked or temporary status. The number of employees of a concern in business less than 12 months is the average for each pay period that it has been in business. The SBA calculates number of employees in accordance with 13 CFR 121.106.
- Has been in business for not less than 1 year, as of the date on which assistance using a grant under this subsection commences; and
- Has access to sufficient resources to bear the costs associated with trade, including the costs of packing, shipping, freight forwarding, and customs brokers.
- Is an export ready U.S. company seeking to export goods or services of U.S. origin or have at least 51% content, click HERE for information.

Eligible small business must meet the following additional criteria to be considered for this program:

- Operates a business in Idaho to process, assemble, and/or distribute a product or provide an exportable service. The company does not need to be headquartered in Idaho but must have operations located within the state to qualify.
- Must not be debarred, suspended, proposed for disbarment, declared ineligible, or voluntarily excluded from participation in this transaction by any Federal department or agency.
- Company is for-profit.
- Recipients must adhere to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, click HERE for information.
- A company producing products derived from legal hemp, to include CBD when it meets the definition in section 297A of the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 and state of Idaho legislation under House Bill 126. Must comply with FDA Regulations for Dietary Supplement & Conventional Food Products, review here.
- Certifies that the company does not operate any programs promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) or diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) that violate any applicable Federal anti-discrimination laws. For additional guidance, see Ending Illegal Discrimination And Restoring Merit-Based Opportunity – The White House (Executive Order 14173); or provide taxpayer funded assistance to illegal aliens.

The following small businesses are not eligible for STEP funding:

- Consulting agencies
- Companies, organizations or individuals recruiting foreign direct investment.
- Companies engaged in any activity that is illegal under Federal or state law.
- Companies that develop and produce products from marijuana.
- Companies that sell products or services to a marijuana business may not be eligible. Consult Project Director to verify.
- Derives more than one-third of its gross annual revenue from legal gambling activities.
- Distributors representing clients.
- Educational institutions or for-profit schools recruiting students.
- Foreign based companies or more than 49% foreign owned.
- Hospitality or tourism operators.
- Law Firms
- Multi-level marketing (MLM), direct sales or network marketing companies
- Non-Profit organizations, unless a significant portion of activities are to assist entrepreneurs.
- Presents live performances of a sexual nature or derives more than a minor amount of revenue from the sale of products or services of a sexual nature.
- Real estate developers
- Retail businesses
- The IDC/ISDA reserves the right to limit or exclude previous recipients of STEP funds that have been assessed risk rating.

Ineligible Expenses

Expense categories **ineligible** for reimbursement include, but are not limited to:

- First Class or Business Class airline tickets
    - If you fly First/Business Class, you will only be reimbursed up to the Economy rate. To receive reimbursement for the value of an Economy ticket when you fly First/Business class, you **MUST** provide a screen shot model of what the economy fare would have been at the time you booked your First/Business class ticket. Ensure you or your travel agent secures this documentation; without it we cannot reimburse you.
- Airline Point Redemption

    - The value of Airline Point Redemption is not a reimbursable expense. You may use points to upgrade to business or First/Business Class, however, the Economy airfare must be clearly shown on receipts.
- Travel expenses for importers/distributors, excludes in-market company employees.
- Wages, salaries, benefits, bonuses or other employee incentives
- Meals and beverages other than travel per diem. Per diem only allowed when event is more than 50 miles from traveler's home base.
- Tips of any kind
- Passport costs
- Immunizations (including COVID)
- Travel expenses related to quarantine requirements.
- Capital goods.
- Conference fees unless part of a trade show exhibition.
- Expenses incurred outside of the STEP grant period (see exceptions in section D.)
- Federal regulations set by the U.S. Department of the Treasury prohibit funding of activities in/with sanctioned and/or embargoed countries. Click HERE for the current list.
- Expenses for the purpose of attracting foreign direct investment.
- Entertainment expenses related to entertaining current or prospective clients or government officials.
- New product development or alteration of existing products
- Cell phone rentals and cell phone roaming or long-distance charges
- Television and radio production
- Efforts to create or augment marketing and advertising campaigns to draw international visitors to a State.
- Costs associated with CE mark.
- Costs for enhancement and/or development of a company's existing product

Application Process

Submission Procedures

All applications are accepted online at Idaho Commerce's Grant Portal. To register for a portal account and apply for a STEP Financial Assistance Award, contact Jeremy Collier at 208-780-5145 or by email: jeremy.collier@commerce.idaho.gov. Logins must be requested at least 48 hours prior to application due date. Access can only be granted Monday – Friday, 8:00 a.m. – 4:00 p.m. MST. Once registered you will receive instructions via email for using the portal. Only one login is given per company.

There may be multiple rounds for applications based upon availability of funds. Application submission is an "all-call" process where applications for projects falling within the project period of July 1, 2026 - September 29, 2027, are **due by January 8th, 2027**, at 3:00 p.m. MDT and will be reviewed and evaluated concurrently. Applications will be awarded approximately two working weeks later.

- A company is only allowed to submit one application per round.
- The maximum award per application is $15,000.
- A company may receive a maximum of 3 Financial Assistance Awards during the period of performance of July 1, 2026 – September 29, 2027 (dependent upon availability of funds)

Selection and Scoring Criteria

Applications will be scored by a team of subject matter experts and will be considered in the final funding determination. Applications for funding will be evaluated on applicant's export capabilities, product/service potential, commitment and resources, proposal completeness, and potential impact on the Idaho company and the greater state economy.

Subject to the demand for program funds, IDC will determine a competitive range for applications and set a threshold score. An application that falls below the threshold may not be funded.

SBA requires states to set a maximum threshold for funding and we (Idaho Commerce) are required to provide a goal to SBA indicating the number of companies we intend to award when we apply for funds. Typically, we receive more applications than we have funds to award. Depending on the size of the applicant pool and scores for each applicant, we can't always fully fund each application. We give the max we can based upon scores and funds available, in order to reach the estimated goal of number of companies awarded that we set with the SBA at our application. Please note, there is room to receive additional funding if funds become available, and we will be giving funding priority to awarded companies.

Scoring Financial Assistance Award					
	What we will measure	Application Question	Scoring Criteria for FAA	Scoring Levels	Weight
a.	Applicant Overview and Information	Application Title	How clear is the purpose of the activity?	Very Poor = 1, Poor = 2, Fair = 3, Good = 4,	5%
		Entire Applicant Information Section	How complete/accurate is the company overview info?		
b.	Product & Export Activity	Provide a description of your company and the products and or services offered.	Clear description of company's products?	Very Poor = 1, Poor = 2, Fair = 3, Good = 4, Very Good = 5	40%
		Describe current overall trade and export activity and how it has impacted your company to choose the project specific market.	Clear description of export activities that have led to this project choice and/or market?		
		Describe the current obstacles and other continuing difficulties relating to the company's international business and how will this project address them.	How well does the project address identified obstacles and challenges with international business?		
		If you are new to export summarize your current domestic activities and distribution. If you are not new to export, indicate "market expansion" in the answer field.	Describes domestic activity if NTE?		

Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Applicants

Up to 10 points will be given to companies that are socially and economically disadvantaged per the SBA guidelines: Veteran or Service-Disabled Veteran Owned; Rural Classification; Located in an Opportunity Zone and/or New to STEP. See chart below for definitions of eligibility.

Bonus Criteria			
What we will measure: Small Business Communities		Definitions: For the Purpose of the STEP program	Weight - up to 14 Bonus Points (Cumulative)
a.	Owned and Controlled by Veterans or Service-Connected Disabled Veterans	A person who served in the active military, naval, or air service and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable, which is demonstrated on the DD Form 214 and who is not less than 51% unconditionally and directly owned and controlled by one or more veterans who are U.S. citizens.	2 Bonus Points
b.	Rural Classification	Located in a rural area, as defined at 26 USC 1393(2), Rural area. This includes any area that is outside of a metropolitan statistical area (MSA). MSAs have at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more population, plus adjacent territory that has a high degree of social and economic integration as measured by commuting ties. See OMB Bulletin No. 15-01 for a complete list of MSAs.	2 Bonus Points
c.	Located in an Opportunity Zone	An opportunity zone is an economically-distressed community where new investments, under certain conditions, may be eligible for preferential tax treatment. Localities qualify as opportunity zones if they have been nominated for that designation by the state and that nomination has been certified by the Secretary of the U.S. Treasury via his delegation of authority to the Internal Revenue Service. Use this link for a list of designated Qualified Opportunity Zones at http://www.statsamerica.org/opportunity/map.aspx. Be sure to zoom down to the street level to officially determine if located in the zone.	2 Bonus Points
d.	New to STEP	"New" defined as any of the following: - Never been awarded a STEP International Market Access Grant or STEP Financial Assistance Award to conduct your own project. - Never participated in a STEP funded trade show organized by Idaho Department of Commerce and/or Idaho State Department of Agriculture. - Never participated in a STEP funded trade mission organized by Idaho Department of Commerce and/or Idaho State Department of Agriculture	4 Bonus Points

Risk Assessment

A Risk Assessment Rating of up to negative fifteen (-15) points may apply to previous award recipients that have not performed adequately per the award guidelines.

III. Risk Rating - Only for previous award recipients evaluated on a per-award basis					
What we will measure		Rating Criteria	Rating Levels	Rating	Weight - 15 Points Deducted (Cumulative) Meets Standards (in good standing): -0 Slightly under Standards: -1 to -5 Significantly under Standards: -6 to -10 Severely under Standards: -11 to -15
a.	REQUEST FOR FUNDS	Post Project Fiscal Request for Reimbursement	Late and/or incomplete submittal:	-1	Up to 5 Points Deducted
			Insufficient proof/documentation:	-1	
			Inadequate communication (max):	-3	
b.	REPORTING	Progress Performance Reporting	Late submittal (per reporting period):	-1	Up to 5 Points Deducted
			Incomplete submittal:	-1	
c.	RETURNED FUNDS	Award Agreement Never Executed at Notice of Award	If execution or coorespondence is not received in alloted time period, award will be deemed void and funds returned to the program:	-5	Up to 5 Points Deducted
		Project Cancellation	Project is cancelled after executing the award agreement:	-5	
		Project Executed, but awardee returned unspent funds to the program, sliding scale starting at return of more than 10% of award	11-20% unspent:	-1	
			21-30% unspent:	-2	
			31-40% unspent:	-3	
			41-50% unspent:	-4	
			51-100% unspent:	-5	

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