

INNOvation Fund Application

Submission Date	2014-03-03 17:14:46
Organization Name	Food & Environment Reporting Network
Tax-exempt status	501(c)(3) organization
EIN of organization (or of fiscal sponsor's organization)	
Website address	http://thefern.org
Phone Number	
Applicant's name	Tom Laskawy
Title:	Executive Director
Contact email	
Proposed Start Date	05-01-2014
Proposed End Date	11-14-2014
Total estimated project budget	60000
Request amount:	35000
In two or three sentences, describe your organization's purpose and audience.	<p>The Food & Environment Reporting Network (FERN) is the first and only independent, non-profit news organization that produces in-depth and investigative journalism in the critically underreported areas of food, agriculture, and environmental health in partnership with local and national mainstream media outlets. Through impartial, unbiased, fact-based reporting from experienced journalists, we seek to reveal corruption, abuse of power, and exploitation and to expose activities and subjects that are hidden or often ignored. FERN uncovers news critical to the public's right to know about food, agriculture, and environmental health. Through careful selection of publication partners, FERN targets its stories at specific audiences, ranging from broad and national to narrow, such as the tech community, farmers, business insiders, moms, food activists, and food industry representatives.</p>
Describe in detail the project for which you are requesting funds. How does it fit with your sustainability plans? Explain the need for this project, and how you expect it to increase revenue and/or audience engagement.	<p>We would use the grant from the INNOvation Fund to mount an event called "FERN Talks & Eats." The event will feature up to three of our reporters live on stage, sharing and presenting dramatic episodes about food and food issues. We will work with a stage director to craft a dynamic, engaging, and entertaining experience that draws a wide audience that draws a wide audience and enhances our journalistic mission.</p> <p>Providing the "twist" to our content-focused event will be the participation of a high-profile chef who will interpret the foods at the center of each story, producing various dishes</p>

for participants to eat. The chef will provide the equivalent to a light meal served buffet-style at individual stations, which will also give presenters, the chef, and the audience a chance to mingle while reflecting on the talks and the food. We will also provide wine and beer tastings, offering local and donated products whenever possible.

Based on our catalog of past and in-progress stories, the kinds of stories/foods we imagine presenting are:

Michelle Nijhuis on Caviar Smuggling [in progress]. Caviar has been a delicacy for more than two centuries, and humans have traveled the world in search of the most exotic and tastiest roe. But our hunger for caviar has driven many species of sturgeon nearly to extinction. The illegal caviar trade has now ended up in the Ozarks, the home of rare paddlefish, where an 18-month investigation uncovered a smuggling ring that was passing off the humble fish's roe as Sevruga, the most prized variety of Russian caviar. The smugglers' journey from the shores of the Caspian Sea to the middle of Missouri is a curious tale, and at the heart of it is our species' continuing fascination with an ancient family of fish on the verge of disappearing. NB: We would serve accurately identified, "legal" paddlefish roe from the Ozarks rather than authentic Sevruga caviar.

Tracie McMillan on Garlic and Onions: Drawing on her reporting for her James Beard Award-winning book "The American Way of Eating," Tracie will tell the story of how some of our most common produce—onions and garlic—make their way from farm to plate. Weaving in culinary and agricultural history, she'll explore the economics of how the crop is grown, her own experience in the fields, how harvesters are routinely cheated, and what it takes to bring these alliums to your plate.

Maryn McKenna on Reinventing Chicken: With factory farm pollution and the risk of foodborne illness making headlines, Maryn asks: What will it take to produce a healthier, more sustainable chicken? It won't be easy, because consumers will need to become familiar with a bird that was common before large-scale farming came into place. Many people don't like the taste of heritage birds, and many chefs don't know how to cook them because they are chewier, gamier, and more muscular, and with stronger bones and sometimes darker flesh. Turning them into food is crucial to building up a market, but how? She'll explore what it means to make--and eat--a new kind of chicken.

Sam Fromartz on the Gluten-Free Frenzy: Fear of gluten has reached epic proportions, with the number of gluten-free products among the fastest growing in the supermarket. But what's behind the shift? Is it real, something imagined, or a bit of both? To understand what's at work, Sam will discuss the "Swedish epidemic," where infant celiac disease spiked nationally in the 1980s and then abruptly receded a decade later. Though little known, the epidemic offers insights into what we may be experiencing today.

We would present our first FERN Talks & Eats in New York City in late 2014. For the purposes of this grant, we would hold a single event and make investments in planning, branding, coordinating, production, and audience tracking infrastructure that can be leveraged to establish a series if

the event proves profitable.

Because this will be a food (and wine and beer) event, we intend to set ticket prices, at minimum, at \$60 per person and accommodate up to 250 guests. Additional revenue will come from corporate sponsors, although we have set a low revenue target for launch sponsors. There is always the possibility that we will exceed this target, but our expectation is that this first event will demonstrate an ability to draw an audience attractive to sponsors and thus allow us to expand corporate sponsorship for future events.

FERN Talks & Eats will not be our first experience mounting public events. In New York City in October 2013, we produced an event that could be seen as a prototype to FERN Talks & Eats. The event featured New York Times investigative reporter Michael Moss, whose reporting on food won a Pulitzer prize in 2009, in conversation with bestselling author and former editor-in-chief of Gourmet magazine, Ruth Reichl. The event drew 100 people to Haven's Kitchen, an event venue and cooking school in Manhattan. The event was a success and provided helpful data as we pursue this project.

We learned that we do have a strong sense about what will draw a crowd. Many people at the event were excited to mingle with Michael and Ruth before and after the talk. We want to include access to reporters and chefs as part of the draw. In addition, food is an important reason why people attend and we received explicit feedback regarding what attendees considered satisfactory amounts and kinds of food.

We approached the Michael-and-Ruth event as a fundraiser, i.e., donations were tax-deductible and we requested a \$250 minimum. However, we have determined that such events could be a meaningful revenue source in the long term if they are non-deductible, ticketed events with a lower price point. Profitability would arrive through corporate sponsorships rather than a focus on attendees themselves.

In addition, while we made a video recording of the event last fall, it was tangential to the event itself. We now see the creation, presentation, and archiving of content as an essential component of our audience engagement strategy.

This funding would thus allow us to stage a much more ambitious event than we've previously attempted and has the strong potential to result in an on-going, scalable revenue stream. The INNovation grant will provide both startup funds for the project as well as "replacement" funds for projected corporate sponsorship revenue. This grant will be essential to proving the viability of this model and attracting such sponsors.

The concept is scalable in many ways. From a revenue perspective, it can become a "touring show" as it's expanded to different cities, and can be operated as a standalone events business requiring minimal involvement of existing staff. In addition, the size of the venue can vary based on demand--it can be an intimate experience or it can attract a large audience in a large venue. In some cities, this venue might be an amphitheater, where presentations will be

on a stage and food served in a pavilion area afterward. As another set up, in San Francisco, for example, the event could be staged at a location such as the Ferry Plaza building, which houses an indoor market with various food purveyors. In this case, presentations would be in different locations inside the market, with each food item being served nearby.

The initial event is also a crucial part of our strategy for the cultivation of major donors. FERN's major donor program is already a source of revenue; we have sixty donors at the \$500 level or above, many of whom have given repeatedly at that level, and representing up to 30% of our budget. FERN Talks & Eats thus becomes a platform for a significant expansion of this program: Potential major donors in each event locale can be targeted and invited, allowing them to experience a vivid example of our work and giving FERN staff a chance to cultivate a relationship and ultimately their support. If presented as a series, FERN Talks & Eats could become a major component of a future tiered membership program. Higher membership levels will include admission to FERN Talks & Eats.

We will also engage directly with attendees, soliciting donations, gathering demographic information and approaching some as survey participants in order to gain further perspective. In addition, and crucially, the talks themselves will also become a source of content, which can be shared and distributed online. A video of each writer's presentation will be available on our Web site and shared post-event through social media (along with the menu, of course). Over time, this will create a library of food-themed content that can be repurposed in various ways.

Through the development of this post-event content, we will be able to generate additional coverage for FERN in mainstream media, from local television and newspapers to national television and blogs, increasing our audience and brand recognition. The content itself will be shareable via social media but also via blogs and other news sites, thereby significantly extending the reach of our brand and the content itself.

In a period when many news organizations will embark on events series, we believe FERN Talks & Eats offers a unique and compelling experience that is grounded in our content and our writers' expertise. While many events will offer great information or discussion, FERN Talks & Eats will combine storytelling and performance with an appealing dining experience that connects food directly to the issues.

Is this a new project?

New project. We have not done this before.

Who will help carry out the project? Describe the key staff and capabilities. If you plan to use outside partners, consultants, or vendors, tell us why you chose them (or how you will select them). Will you need to hire additional fulltime or part-time help to complete your proposed project?

As we seek to create FERN Talks and Eats as a stand-alone business, we will employ a team to oversee and manage it with oversight from core staff.

The Food & Environment Reporting Network team consists of an Executive Director, a project coordinator, the Editor-in-chief, an Executive Editor, and a communications consultant. Our project coordinator will be the main staff coordinator of FERN Talks & Eats. Our Executive Director will begin the process of engaging corporate sponsors with the hope of

getting at least one for this first event. We will also engage our communications consultant in building partnerships with media and executing a marketing and promotion plan for the event. We will seek a broadcast/media partner for the event to provide in-kind marketing and promotion. Media partnerships are an essential component of our marketing plan.

We will hire an event-planner to provide a turnkey solution for all logistical aspects of the event -- venue selection, ticket sales, coordinating vendors, and providing on-site management up to and during the event itself. We are in discussion with Kennedy Events, based in San Francisco but responsible for events in New York City and elsewhere, who have produced similar events to FERN Talks & Eats. In addition we will bring on a creative director to conceive and stage the program, including working with writers to develop the content of their performances, retaining technical and creative talent (lighting, sound, musicians), developing additional content, and creating a cohesive program.

How will you measure progress? Please be specific and concrete about the metrics you will use and how and when you will provide them to us for validation.

We will track our progress through a broad range of metrics. All the milestones of the planning phase represent success metrics, including venue selection (size, prominence), creative talent selection (prominence), chef (prominence), and corporate and media sponsors/partners. Ticket sales will represent an obvious metric, as will donations (which will be solicited at the event), total revenue and potential profit margin.

Infrastructure metrics include additions to and expansion of our audience database (personal and demographic information), newsletter subscriptions, and major donor leads. We also intend to survey attendees after the event through an online survey to get more detailed demographic information and feedback concerning the event (including suggestions for future events).

After the event, we will track media coverage and gauge interest in other cities, and use that information to determine scalability. Finally, when the video is posted, we will measure traffic to the page on our site with the content, video views, social media response, and whether the content drives donations and newsletter subscriptions.

We can provide metrics 30 to 60 days after the event and then quarterly with respect to the website data.

What do you hope to learn from this project, and how do you hope to apply what you've learned over the long term?

Necessarily, this project will inform us as to the financial, staff, and infrastructure requirements for an events business. In addition, the project will allow us to launch a corporate sponsor program to support this and future events. We will also further strengthen our major donor program as we use the event to develop and expand our database of potential major donors.

By inviting attendees of the event to donate and join our email list, we will also create an ongoing relationship with this new audience which, among other things, we intend to survey after the event to learn what worked, what didn't, and what they might suggest for future events.

The project will further add to our content library--videos of

the writer presentations will be posted to our website. We will analyze audience metrics from the videos which will help us determine the potential online audience for FERN Talks & Eats archived content.

Our main goal, however, is to determine the potential profitability of FERN Talks & Eats as an event series taking place in cities across the U.S. If this project is successful, we believe we can use it as the basis for a new business line, directly addressing issues of revenue diversification and sustainability. At the same time, in creating a live event that is engaging and informative, and tying it to chefs preparing delicious food and drink, we hope to extend the concept of audience engagement in ways that other news organizations may be able to replicate.

Why are you the right organization and team to do this project?

The Food & Environment Reporting Network team brings to the table decades of media and reporting experience in the areas of food, agriculture, and environmental health. Since our launch in November 2011, we have consistently proven that there is a deep interest in these issues and that we have what it takes to deliver timely reporting to a wide audience. Our stories on food, agriculture, and environmental health have reached tens of millions of people. We also maintain ties to the gastronomical community of chefs, artisans, and thinkers, whom we will be able to tap in order to create and promote these events in cities across the country.

Over the past several years, we have put on several successful and well-regarded events with notable chefs in New York City and San Francisco, which have taught us important lessons for this larger concept. In addition, members of our team have worked on major, high profile events such as the New Yorker Festival and Slow Food conferences along with other live events and entertainment programming. We thus possess the ability to build what could become a dedicated team to scout, ticket, program, and publicize an event like FERN Talks & Eats. We will also look to our advisers, such as the creators of the popular Pop-Up Magazine events in San Francisco and producers of the popular NPR program Radio Lab's live events, with whom we maintain a close relationship.

Why is this project timely? Why is now a good time to undertake this project?

FERN Talks & Eats is timely because the conversation around our food continues to gain traction in traditional and social media. While people are reading about the issues facing our food system, they are also interested in stories by those intimately familiar with these issues. By presenting compelling stories in a live format and inviting chefs to interpret these stories with dishes, we will prompt the audience to think and engage with these issues in new ways. These events will appeal to those who are interested in food network cooking shows such as Iron Chef, as well as those who might use the term "foodie" to label themselves, yet it will also appeal to a wider audience of those interested in compelling storytelling in a live format, reminiscent of the NPR programs Radio Lab or This American Life.

Upload your project budget

[FERN INNOVATION-FUND-PROJECT-BUDGET.XLSX](#)

Optional: if you wish, you may

[KENNEDY EVENTS SCOPE FOR WORK FOR FERN - DRAFT.PDF](#)

provide additional material about your project, including screenshots, plans, marketing material, or estimates from vendors who will help you carry out your project. If you have more than one file, please package them as a single .ZIP file before uploading.