



Big Sky Film Grant Program Application Guidelines

**Montana Department of Commerce
Film Office**

Montana Department of Commerce

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About the Film Office

The Montana Department of Commerce Film Office was established in 1974 as a central information source for on-location filmmakers and is committed to serving the production industry and the citizens of Montana. The primary role of the Film Office is to promote the State of Montana as a media production location, including for film, television and print industries. The Film Office's goals are to:

- Invite productions into Montana for the overall economic benefit of the state
- Help producers find locations that fit their script and act as their liaison through every phase of production
- Nurture and support the development of Montana's resident crew base and resident filmmakers

The Film Office is a program within Commerce and is funded by an allocation of the Lodging Facility Use Tax, commonly known as the bed tax. In 2023, [Senate Bill 540](#) revised the laws related to state-funded tourism promotion to require a specific allocation of lodging facility use tax for Montana-based film grants.

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Big Sky Film Grant Program Summary

The Big Sky Film Grant is a competitive grant program intended to attract and support filmmakers and production companies operating in Montana and, by doing so, to stimulate economic activity, community enhancement and statewide tourism through increased investment, job creation or retention, business expansion and local tax base growth. To be considered for grant funding in the current calendar year, eligible applicants must submit their applications by midnight MST on the close date.

The BSFG program applications, guidelines, project administration and other relevant information and resources are available on the Film Office website at commerce.mt.gov. Contact Film Office staff at montanafilm@mt.gov, 406-841-2876 or 800-553-4563.

The application guidelines explain grant categories, eligibility, how to apply for BSFG funding and evaluation criteria and provide reference to the administrative requirements of the program. Examples of the application form for each category are included in the appendices.

Definitions

Grantee: The recipient of the Big Sky Film Grant; the grantee is the contracting party with Commerce.

Montana-based: A production filming 50% or more of the principal photography days at a location(s) within Montana.

Montana-centric: The state of Montana is central to the theme, storyline, etc.

Montana resident: Natural persons domiciled in the state of Montana and any other person who maintains a permanent place of abode within the state even though temporarily absent from the state and who has not established a residence elsewhere as defined in Section 15-30-201, MCA.

Montana-spend: An expenditure incurred in Montana that is directly used for a qualified production activity. This may include:

- A purchase from a Montana vendor or compensation paid to Montana residents
- Set construction and operation
- Wardrobes, makeup, accessories and related services
- Photography and sound, lighting or related services and materials
- Editing and related services
- Rental of facilities and equipment
- Leasing of vehicles, equipment or materials
- Lodging costs
- Per diem and living allowance paid to staff, cast and crew members
- Digital, film or tape editing, film processing, transfers of film to tape or digital format, sound mixing, computer graphics services, special effects services, visual effects services and animation services
- Airfare, only if purchased through a Montana travel agency or travel company
- Insurance costs and bonding, only if purchased through a Montana insurance agency
- Other direct costs of producing the project in accordance with generally accepted entertainment industry practices and generally accepted accounting principles

Grant funds cannot be used to purchase alcohol or tobacco; receipts for either will be deducted from eligible Montana-spend.

Obscenity: The definition for obscenity is incorporated by referencing the definition contained in [Section 45-8-201\(2\), MCA](#).

Overnight lodging stay: This is considered to be one night's lodging. For example, three members of a crew staying one night, each in their own room, is considered three lodging stays; three members of a crew renting one house for one night is considered

one lodging stay. Please contact the Film Office for assistance in determining overnight lodging stays.

Principal photography days: The filming period measured in 24-hour day(s) in which all material covering speaking and non-speaking parts is filmed.

Rural: Locations in Montana defined as “not urban”.

Urban: Urban is defined as: (i) one with a population at or exceeding 30,000 people; or (ii) an incorporated city/town within 10 miles of an identified urban area. Currently, the urban areas in Montana are: Billings, Bozeman, Butte, Great Falls, Helena, Kalispell, Missoula, Belgrade, Columbia Falls, East Helena, Laurel, Walkerville and Whitefish. Therefore, there are 13 defined urban areas in Montana, while the rest of the state is considered rural.

Applicants are encouraged to contact the Film Office for assistance.

Application Eligibility

Eligible Applicants

Eligible applicants include:

- Business Individual – sole proprietor or single-member limited liability corporation
- Business entity – LLC, partnership, S Corp., C Corp., for-profit or non-profit
- Non-governmental entity

Grant Categories

Each applicant is limited to one application per funding cycle. Any applicant applying for multiple projects or in more than one grant category is ineligible. An applicant is not eligible if they are a current grantee with an open Big Sky Film Grant contract for an uncompleted project. BSFG funds are available for the following grant categories:

Feature Film and TV

Awards in this category are made to a Montana-based production of a feature-length film or television series with a minimum Montana-spend of \$350,000. Award amounts are not limited but are subject to annual program funding limitations and available funding.

Short Form Content

Awards in this category are made to a Montana-based production of a short-form content film project. Examples include a short narrative, pilot episode, documentary, animation, webisode, Montana-centric story or film series of episodes each 60 minutes or less in length and with a budget of less than \$350,000 per episode. Award amounts are a minimum of \$1,000 and a maximum of up to \$50,000 per project.

Resident Feature Film and TV

Awards in this category are made to a Montana-based production of a feature-length project that is produced by a Montana-resident filmmaker who has a validated credit as a producer, director or primary director of photography. Award amounts are a minimum of \$1,000 and a maximum of up to \$100,000 per project. Proof of Montana residency must be submitted with an application to be eligible.

Resident Short Form Content

This category is awarded to a Montana-based production of a short form content project that is produced by a Montana resident filmmaker who has a validated credit as a producer, director or primary director of photography. Award amounts are a minimum of \$1,000 and a maximum of up to \$50,000 per project. Proof of Montana residency must be submitted with an application to be eligible.

Funding Availability

Award amounts will depend upon various factors, including the number of applications received in a grant cycle, the discretion of the review committee and approval from Commerce. Annual grant funds also are subject to funding availability, and grant awards may be less than requested. The total annual budget for the BSFG Program varies.

Eligible Projects

All eligible projects must be Montana-based and include an eligible production type.

Eligible production types include:

- Feature film
- Short film
- Music video
- Documentary
- Series for theaters
- Television or streaming
- Pilots
- Webisode
- Video game or game sequel

Production type restrictions apply to certain grant categories, which are listed above.

Additional Considerations for Eligible Projects

The project should be ready to proceed with filming within the 12 months following the award date. The applicant must demonstrate readiness by including a plan and budget with the application.

Ineligible Projects

Ineligible projects include:

- A project containing Obscenity
- A project that has completed final editorial
- A project that already has been released
- Concepts
- Development ideas
- Development stage projects
- Projects without funding or investment from the applicant
- Ineligible production type; see the list below

Ineligible Production Type

Ineligible production types include, but are not limited to:

- Broadcast news or current affairs programs
- Interview or talk shows
- Instructional videos
- Sport shows or events
- Religious or political campaigns
- Adult content
- Daytime soap operas

Project Management

Applicants must possess the ability to undertake and satisfactorily complete the project and assure proper management of awarded funds and completion of administrative requirements, including by complying with the Film Office's contract requirements. Applicants should be familiar with film production planning and management, employment laws, basic accounting and progress reporting.

Project Confidentiality

Materials applicants submit to the Film Office will be considered public documents subject to the public's [right to know](#). An applicant may request a nondisclosure

agreement from Commerce to potentially classify application documents it submits as confidential. Please contact the Film Office for assistance prior to application submission. Regardless of an NDA, the grantee's name, the name of the project, a brief description and the amount of the award will be accessible to the public. Funded projects are subject to a compliance audit and must adhere to the process for any requests received under the [Montana Public Records Act](#).

Application Requirements

The following information should be included in the application and will be used by the review committee for application evaluation:

Project Details

A complete and detailed project description or pitch package, including the script, logline, synopsis, treatment, lookbook or mood board, project need and primary filming locations.

- **Script:** The written text of the proposed project.
- **Logline:** Describes the plot in a captivating way and states the main concept in a few concise sentences.
- **Project description/synopsis:** This is a breakdown of the project's story into prose and should fit on a single page. This is the most critical element of the film project proposal because it highlights how compelling the project is and reveals how passionate the filmmaker is. A dynamic synopsis strategically placed makes a strong impression.
- **Treatment:** A multi-page document written in prose which tells the story that happens in the screenplay. It is more detailed than the synopsis and may include details of directorial style. It should be written in present tense.
- **Lookbook or mood board:** A collection of photographs arranged to provide a visual representation of the mood, tone or feeling of the film.
- **Project need:** This establishes the focus and rationale for the grant proposal. This may include the project's economic impact on the local area, region or state.

Project need can also be based on the pure art form or its subject matter, etc. Funding needs should be addressed separately in the Finance Plan and Budget Detail section below.

- **Primary filming locations:** All Montana towns, cities, tribal territories or other defined areas where the majority of proposed principal photography days will take place.

Finance Plan and Budget Detail

Accuracy and relevancy are essential. Although it is an estimate, the finance plan should be thorough and detailed and align with the production plan. The application should include a full expense budget breakdown. All expenses must be labeled as either Montana-spend or out-of-state. The grant amount requested is also compared to the amount of secured funding available.

Include how the project will be financed, such as private cash, investors, grants, etc., and provide a list of secured funding sources and amounts and proof of commitment or availability. This section may include funding sources beyond the grant award, private or otherwise, available to fund the project or a plan for securing funds. If approved, the grant award will be based on the project's plan as compared to the budget and all funding sources. Applications without evidence of secured funding will receive a deduction in evaluation scoring.

Production Details

A complete and detailed production description including a production schedule, information on key individuals, expected employment and compensation. The application should demonstrate the applicant's capacity to complete the process from project startup to project completion.

- **Brief biographies of key crew:** Key crew includes producer, director, writer, director of photography, sound editor, etc. The applicant should provide resumes and information as to how each identified person is beneficial to the project.

- **Schedules:** Preproduction, production, principal photography days and postproduction, if applicable. The schedule should include realistic timeframes.
- **Employment and compensation:** The number of expected Montana jobs created, cast and crew hired, as well as wages and expected compensation for employees.

Marketing and Distribution Plan

The marketing and distribution plan should outline the overall marketing strategy, project genre, specific goals and management of publicity, advances, direct sales and distribution. It should also identify the target audience and customer segment. This section should discuss the distribution goals and methods for project distribution.

Required Documents

Most eligible organizational applicants must register or have a current business registration with the Montana Secretary of State's Office. To obtain registration information and instructions, call the Montana Secretary of State's Office at 406-444-2034 or visit biz.sosmt.gov.

Applicants must submit the following documents with their application:

- A current, signed, IRS form W-9 Taxpayer Identification Number and Certification
- A letter detailing commitment of funds, availability of funds in a financial account or similar document to substantiate the secured funding of at least 1% to 5% of submitted budget is immediately available.

Montana Residency

Evidence of Montana residency is required for an application in either of the specific Montana resident filmmaker categories. Applicants should submit the following, as applicable:

- **Individuals** must provide proof of Montana residency by providing a copy of a current and valid Montana driver's license, Montana-issued ID card, Montana Tribal ID card or voter registration card.
- **Entities** must be controlled by a Montana resident and provide proof of an established physical address located in Montana and an active business registration with the Montana Secretary of State's Office.

Application Submission

The Film Office accepts grant applications annually via an online application. Applicants may apply through the link for the appropriate grant category on the Big Sky Film Grant page of commerce.mt.gov. Links are only available and accessible during the grant submission cycle.

Registration with the State's secure online account access, Okta, is required. Visit okta.loginmt.com. Contact the IT Help Desk 406-444-2000 with issues or for assistance.

Application Deadline

Eligible applicants must submit applications by midnight MST of the application close date. Applicants unable to complete the online application process must contact the Film Office prior to 5 p.m. MST on the application close date.

Application Review Process and Criteria

The review committee meets annually to review and evaluate eligible applications in the respective cycle. The review committee makes funding recommendations to the director of Commerce, who will make the final funding decision.

Receipt of Application

Applications received through the online platform are reviewed for completeness. Staff will contact applicants who submitted incomplete applications to allow for an amendment or withdrawal of the application.

Application Evaluation

All completed applications received by 11:59 p.m. MST on the application close date will be reviewed and evaluated by the review committee. Its members will evaluate applications using the following ranking criteria:

- Project details
- Finance plan and budget detail
- Production details
- Brief biographies of key crew
- Schedules
- Employment and compensation
- Marketing and distribution plan

Special Consideration and Preference

The review committee will grant special consideration and preference to applications that contain the following:

- A project planning to film 50% or more of the principal photography days in a rural Montana location. If claiming this preference, the application must list all

proposed rural locations and the proposed number principal photography days to be spent in each.

- Minimum of \$10,000 in expenditures with a Montana vendor. If claiming this preference, the application must include a quote or bid for services from a Montana vendor.
- Minimum \$25,000 of postproduction expenditures with a Montana vendor. If claiming this preference, the application must include documentation of commitment to hire a Montana vendor for postproduction.
- Crew members hired by the production are comprised of 30% or more of Montana residents. If claiming this preference, the application must include details in the production budget for proposed crew compensation and position — no individual names — and the calculations for explaining how 30% was achieved.
- Officially accredited production company, director of photography or director attached. If claiming this preference, the application must include proof of professional qualifications. The Internet Movie Database at imdb.com is not a professional qualification.
- Production has a name talent attached.
- Project with a story based on Montana of historical, topical or place-based significance and/or a Montana writer is associated.
- Principal photography days are 100% filmed at locations in Montana.
- Filming at locations in Montana during a shoulder season including fall, winter or early spring, outside of peak tourism.
- Wide distribution contracts or agreements have been secured. If claiming this preference, the application must include a copy of the agreements.

Award Process and Contract

Recommendations from the review committee are forwarded to Commerce's director for final review and funding approval. All applicants will be notified by email of funding decisions. Once applicants have been notified of award decisions, grantees will begin the contracting process.

The disbursement of grant funds for awarded projects are subject to grantee's completion of startup requirements and execution of a contract between grantee and Commerce.

Grant Project Administration

The [BSFG Program Project Administration Manual](#) provides information for grantees to manage the grant award from startup to closeout. Instructions, forms and processes for contracting, payments and required reporting are included. The manual is available online at commerce.mt.gov. To request a paper copy, contact the Film Office.

Program Contacts

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