

# Notice of Funding Opportunity

Utah AI Moonshot Program, as part of Higher Education Research Funding Pilot Program — 2026

## Program Overview

The State of Utah, through the Governor's Pro-Human AI Initiative, announces \$5,000,000 in competitive funding for bold projects that use artificial intelligence to improve the lives of Utahns. We are not looking for incremental research. We are looking for moonshots: projects with a concrete, ambitious vision of how Utah will be different in five years — healthier, safer, more prosperous, more connected — and a credible plan to get there.

Utah is uniquely positioned to lead in pro-human AI. We hold world-class assets: the Utah Population Database, the Utah Water Research Laboratory, Hill Air Force Base and the Space Dynamics Laboratory, ARUP Laboratories, a thriving life-sciences and aerospace industry, a permissive testbed environment for autonomous systems, and universities full of talented students. This program exists to combine those assets — across institutions, across sectors, across the urban/rural divide — and aim them at problems that matter to every Utahn.

The funding for the Utah AI Moonshot Program comes out of the Higher Education Research Funding Pilot (HERFP) established under Utah Code §53H-8-211. The purpose of this competitive grant program is to support high-impact research in critical areas that advances Utah’s economic competitiveness, strengthens strategic industry sectors, addresses important public policy challenges, expands research capacity, and provides meaningful opportunities for student engagement. The Board has earmarked \$5M of this funding for the Utah AI Moonshot Program as part of the Pro Human AI Initiative to be administered by The Nucleus Institute.

## Funding Opportunities

| Tier              | Awards  | Amount      | Duration & intent                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|---------|-------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Moonshot Awards   | Up to 4 | \$1,000,000 | 18–24 months to expected impact. These are flagship projects pursuing a bold envisioned future, with a required academic–non-academic partnership and a plan to deliver benefits to Utahns within the award period. |
| Pathfinder Grants | Up to 4 | \$200,000   | 12 months to expected impact. These are proposals focused on de-risking a moonshot-scale idea centered around building the prototype, gathering evidence, and assembling the coalition.                             |
| Spark Grants      | Up to 4 | \$50,000    | 6–9 months to expected impact. These are early-stage, high-risk, or unconventional ideas. Student-led and rural-led teams are especially encouraged.                                                                |

## AI Moonshot Focus Areas

Proposals must identify one primary focus area. Descriptions are intentionally broad: they indicate where Utah's advantages lie, not the boundaries of our imagination. The strongest proposals will tell us something about these areas that we did not already know.

- **Area 1 — Health & Human Flourishing:** AI that augments clinicians and strengthens human connection to close Utah's mental-health and frontline-care gaps, especially in rural counties.
- **Area 2 — Environmental Intelligence:** AI for snowpack/runoff forecasting, irrigation optimization, and air-quality prediction tied to measurable Great Salt Lake and inversion impacts.
- **Area 3 — Bioinnovation:** AI-driven biology that turns Utah's unmatched biomedical data assets into early detection, genetic-variant interpretation, proteomics, and faster diagnostics-to-treatment pipelines.
- **Area 4 — Autonomous Systems:** Autonomous aerial, road, and aerospace systems proven against Utah's hard terrain including winter canyons, search-and-rescue, and a permissive UAV/testbed environment.
- **Area 5 — Open Horizon (Wildcard):** A deliberately open category for outstanding proposals that meet the Five Requirements but fall outside the four thematic areas, with at least one guaranteed award.

## AI Moonshot Core Tenets

The strongest proposals will include all of the following elements.

- **Utah-centric:** led by a USHE institution and organization. The outcome of this proposal will primarily benefit Utah.
- **Partnership:** Proposals must include at least one USHE academic institution and at least one non-academic partner with a substantive, documented role (funding, in-kind effort, data, or deployment channel). Letters of commitment required. Industry, government, community, school district, health system, and tribal partners are strongly encouraged.
- **Delivery & accessibility plan:** A concrete account of how the intended benefits of your proposal reach everyday Utahns across the state. Publication alone does not satisfy this requirement.
- **Pro-human design statement:** one page: who is augmented, how human agency is preserved, what the failure modes are, and how you will detect them.
- **Responsible AI compliance:** Human-subjects approvals where applicable; data governance consistent with state law and partner-institution policy.

## AI Moonshot Proposal Outline

Required sections for each proposal:

| Section    | Limit                 |
|------------|-----------------------|
| Cover Page | Use Provided Template |

| Section                                                | Limit                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Executive Summary - Vision: the bold envisioned future | 1 page maximum outlining the overall project. Please include your vision of what is true in Utah in 5 years if you succeed and also identify why this is a moonshot and not research-as-usual                                                                                                                                                  |
| Team roster & approach                                 | 2 pages maximum + letters of collaboration and support outlining roles, governance, student engagement plan. Dedicated lead must be identified, as identified in the submission process below                                                                                                                                                  |
| Technical Narrative                                    | 3 pages maximum                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| Timeline, Milestones, & Deliverables                   | 2 pages maximum outlining who benefits, how, when; explicit treatment of rural reach, if applicable                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Expected impact, both economic and social              | 1 page maximum outlining intended impact including potential of development of new products, technologies, jobs, startups, follow-on funding strategy, value retained in Utah                                                                                                                                                                  |
| Pro-human design statement                             | 1 page outlining how this proposal, and expected outcome, is using technology in a pro human approach                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Budget & justification                                 | 2 pages Budgets should only include direct costs, no F&A is permitted. Funding goes directly to the project and impact. Direct costs may include personnel, student support, fringe benefits, equipment, travel, materials & supplies, consultants, and subawards. Cost-share between university/industry should be identified, if applicable. |

**Total Page Limit: 12 + LOC/S**

### **Formatting Requirements:**

Unless otherwise specified, all proposal components must adhere to the following formatting requirements:

- Use standard 8.5 × 11-inch pages.
- Use 12-point font (Arial, Calibri, Times New Roman, or equivalent).
- Use single-spaced text.
- Use one-inch margins on all sides.
- Number all pages consecutively.
- Figures, tables, charts, and graphics may use smaller fonts provided they remain legible.
- All proposal materials must be submitted as a searchable PDF unless otherwise instructed by the applicant's home institution.
- Page limits identified within this NOFO apply to each proposal section. Content exceeding stated page limits may not be reviewed.

## AI Moonshot Scoring Rubric

Full proposals are scored by a multi-sector review panel against the published rubric.

### AI Moonshot Scoring Anchors

| Criterion                                                                                     | Weight | Core question                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>A. Moonshot Innovation, Commercialization, and Impact on Everyday Utahns</b>               | 55%    | Who benefits, how much, and how soon? Is the envisioned future bold, concrete, and genuinely new? Is the solution and impact sustainable long term? Does this solution impact everyday Utahns? |
| <b>B. Partnership Strength and Matching Funds</b>                                             | 20%    | Is the academic–non-academic partnership real and load-bearing? Do matching funds exist to support the ongoing impact of the project?                                                          |
| <b>C. Connection to Utah and Relevance to Statewide Economic Development or Public Policy</b> | 20%    | Why does Utah win if this succeeds? Can every Utahn understand and be proud of this?                                                                                                           |
| <b>D. Opportunities for Student Participation</b>                                             | 5%     | How are students involved in the creation and impact of this proposal?                                                                                                                         |

#### A. Moonshot Innovation, Commercialization, and Impact on Everyday Utahns (55%)

| Score    | Anchor                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>5</b> | A vivid, concrete five-year future that would be transformative for Utah; the approach is genuinely novel or combines existing capabilities in a way no one else is attempting; success would be a recognized breakthrough. Large, quantified benefits reaching a broad population of Utahns, including rural Utahns, with a credible delivery pathway that begins during the award period. Benefits are concrete (hours, dollars, acre-feet, lives) rather than aspirational. |
| <b>3</b> | Meaningfully ambitious beyond the team's current trajectory; some novel elements, but the envisioned future is modest or vaguely specified. Real benefits to a meaningful population, but delivery is back-loaded, partially speculative, or concentrated in one region or demographic.                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>1</b> | Research-as-usual: an extension of the team's existing funded work, repackaged. Publishable, fundable elsewhere, but not a moonshot. Benefits accrue mainly to researchers, institutions, or a narrow elite; delivery plan is a publication plan; ordinary Utahns appear only in the motivation section.                                                                                                                                                                       |

**B. Partnership Strength and Matching Funds (20%)**

| Score | Anchor                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5     | Non-academic partner is load-bearing: adding cash or substantial in-kind commitment, named personnel, a deployment channel or hiring pipeline; governance and IP posture agreed in advance; ideally a third leg (agency, district, health system, or tribal partner) is engaged; students integrated across institutions. Matching funds are available from partners. |
| 3     | Genuine partner with a defined role, but commitment is modest or terms are still to be negotiated; single institution dominates. Matching funds may or may not be confirmed.                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| 1     | Letter-of-support theater: a logo and good wishes, no resources, no matching funds, no role, no agreed terms.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

**C. Connection to Utah and Relevance to Statewide Economic Development or Public Policy (20%)**

| Score | Anchor                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|-------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5     | Addresses a problem Utah has or is uniquely positioned to solve; makes essential use of distinctive Utah assets (datasets, labs, geography, industry, regulatory environment); success positions Utah as a national leader and the work could not be trivially relocated. |
| 3     | Solid Utah relevance and some use of local assets, but the project could be executed similarly in several other states. Outcomes moderately impact economic development and/or public policy.                                                                             |
| 1     | Generic project with a Utah affiliation; assets and benefits are interchangeable with any other location. Outcomes do not measurably impact economic development or public policy.                                                                                        |

**D. Opportunities for Student Participation (5%)**

| Score | Anchor                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5     | Students are involved in a meaningful way throughout the creation, development, and deployment of the program. Outcomes directly impact a wide swath of students across the state. |
| 3     | Students are involved in the project. Some students may benefit from the outcomes of this project.                                                                                 |
| 1     | Students are not listed or involved in the creation or outcomes of the project.                                                                                                    |

## Key Dates

| Milestone                 | Date                                        |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| NOFO Release Date         | August 1, 2026                              |
| Full proposals due        | Oct 15, 2026                                |
| Award decisions made      | Nov 30, 2026                                |
| Awards announced publicly | December 8, 2026 - Pro Human Utah AI Summit |

## Submission Process and Key Elements

- Lead applicants must be an R1 or regional USHE institution of higher education. Academic leads must name a non-academic partner and vice versa.
- Academic Institutions that are not a USHE R1 or regional institution may participate in a project funded through this program in a subawardee partnership. The R1 or Regional USHE institution must maintain primary responsibility for the project and the partnership should reflect a genuine collaboration rather than serving as a pass-through for the majority of grant funds.
- Each application must identify at least 1 full-time member of the research team designated as “project lead” that can be fully dedicated to ensuring the milestones and deliverables of awarded projects are met on the proposed timeline. This could be a staff member, post-doc, graduate student, faculty co-investigator, other sr. personnel, etc.
- Lead applicant/principal investigator must hold at least a 0.75 FTE appointment at their home institution.
- Non-academic partners can include a variety of Utah-based companies, non-profits, healthcare systems, school districts, state and local agencies, and tribal nations.
- One lead role per PI per tier; participation as a partner on additional proposals is permitted.

### Application Submission Process/Instructions

Per the statute, the President of each eligible institution will review and prioritize prospective proposals and submit those prioritized proposals to the ad hoc committee via the Talent Ready Utah portal. The link to this portal has been provided to Universities.

To streamline the process, applicants will submit their full proposal to their home institution with all required application materials outlined in this NOFO and follow institutional preference on submission process to the ad hoc committee.

The Presidents at the University of Utah and Utah State University may submit **no more than 15 proposals each**, with each proposal ranked 1-15. The Presidents of Southern Utah University, Utah Tech University, Utah Valley University, and Weber State University may submit **no more than 5 proposals each** ranked 1 to 5, with 1 being the top priority. Applications submitted directly by individual applicants will not be considered.

Please contact your institutional coordinator for details on submitting.

**Award Conditions**

Submission of a proposal does not guarantee funding. The AI Moonshot Committee reserves the right to:

- Make all, some, or none of the awards under this solicitation.
- Fund proposals in whole or in part.
- Negotiate project scope, budget, timeline, or award amount prior to issuing an award.
- Request additional information or clarification from applicants during the review process.
- Modify or cancel this solicitation if necessary.
- Make funding decisions consistent with available appropriations, program priorities, and statutory requirements.

All awards are contingent upon the availability of appropriated funds.

**Conflict of Interest**

To preserve the integrity and fairness of the review process, individuals participating in proposal review must disclose any actual, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest.

Reviewers with a conflict of interest regarding a proposal shall not participate in the discussion, evaluation, ranking, or funding recommendation for that proposal. The Utah Board of Higher Education will establish conflict-of-interest procedures consistent with Board policy and applicable state law.

**Independent Scholarly Review**

To assist in the review of proposals, each eligible proposal will receive an independent scholarly review by a panel of faculty researchers selected by the AI Moonshot Committee. This review is intended to provide an independent assessment of the scholarly merit of each proposal while preserving the committee's responsibility for final funding recommendations.