

Specialty Crops: Some Examples for New Crop Development

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Industries associated with several US specialty crops have mounted regional and national research and extension initiatives to help their industries become more viable and to solve complicated production problems. These efforts lead to the Specialty Crop Competitiveness Act of 2004. The legislation defines specialty crops as fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits and nursery crops, including floriculture. Title 1: State Assistance for Specialty Crops directs the Secretary of Agriculture to make FY 2005 through 2009 state grants to enhance specialty crop competitiveness.

These activities have galvanized the efforts on specialty crops. During the 52 farm bill forums held throughout the United States, many prominent individuals spoke strongly in favor of research and education programs to address specialty crops in the 2007 farm bill. Among the points made are that specialty crops provide some of the best opportunities for new, part-time, and socially disadvantaged farmers to successfully enter the business of farming, that these enterprises contribute to maintenance of the entire agricultural infrastructure, and that they provide good teaching opportunities to reach the non-farm urban and suburban populations (Farm Bill Forums, News Release 0106.06).

There is much to be learned within the new crop community by observing the approach and progress made by these specialty crops advocates and how they have focused on common needs of the various crops. In particular, deliberations among the almond, berry, citrus and tree fruit, walnut, and wine and grape industries revealed common research and extension needs. Representatives from these industries agreed that it would be possible to further their individual research goals by identifying common research priorities and communicating these priorities to USDA agencies and other research intuitions. A white paper (Specialty Crops Research Team Position Paper 6-9-2006) outlined common research priorities as follows:

- Understanding and improving quality
- Understanding consumer perceptions of specialty crops, the role of nutrition in specialty crops, and the economic contribution of Specialty Crops to rural economies
- Enhancing processing and production efficiency
- Developing and promoting sustainable practices.

Groups for some specialty crops have joined efforts to secure greater research and extension funding. Current activities are being focused on broadening the base of interested specialty crop industries and communicating the nature of the effort and the advantages of working together to raise the profile of specialty crop research at USDA and throughout the land-grant system.