



Alternative aid

By RICHARD DAVIS

ONE surprising aspect of the new 2007 Farm Bill, H.R. 2419, is aggressive funding for programs for organic and specialty crop producers.

"We've been happy with the House version of the farm bill, which for the first time recognizes the priorities of this industry that accounts for more than half of all crop value in this country," says Margo Metzger with the North Carolina Wine and Grapes Council. "We really feel like it is a great achievement for specialty crop producers. Finally, we've seen the possibility of some balance in this farm bill."

Metzger's group is a member organization of the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance, or SCFBA, a national coalition of more than 120 specialty crop organizations aimed at getting support in the new farm bill for specialty crops. Their work isn't completed yet. The bill, newly passed in the House, will have to be addressed by the Senate and signed by the president before it becomes law, but members have carried their initiative a long way by getting it passed in the House.

"This is a great achievement for specialty crop producers," SCFBA said in a press release. "The first draft of the farm bill offered much less — \$685 million over five years for specialty crop producers. This \$1 billion increase in funding is a clear sign that House leaders have recognized the crucial role specialty crop producers play in the agricultural economy."

That role, says SCFBA, is to provide "a steady supply of domestically produced specialty crops through the programs established in H.R. 2419. It is also to expand the consumption of fruits and vegetables, expand specialty crop research, control plant pests, and support grower initiatives to improve competitiveness."

SCFBA forecasts the specialty crops would receive \$1.7 billion over five years

Key Points

- New 2007 Farm Bill vastly increases support for specialty crops.
- It would provide for grants, research and a new 'clean plant' network.
- It should help specialty crops improve and enhance marketability.

if the House bill's provisions pass unchanged. Metzger's sources add it up to be somewhat lower: \$1.52 billion. Even at the lower number, it is an immense amount of support "dedicated to specialty crops over five years," Metzger says, "which is a vast increase from the last farm bill."

And how will that money be used to improve the economic position of specialty crop farmers?

"As it relates to specialty crops, this bill will provide greater investment for research to improve the taste and quality of the specialty crops grown in this country," Metzger says.

It would provide funding for local research, such as field trials on various grapes to see which perform best in a local climate.

"Or it could be something as big as fighting this national struggle with Pierce's disease, which is an incurable infection of the grape vine and is a huge problem in California and Texas," Metzger says.

'Clean' plants

Metzger also focuses on a national initiative that has received a lot of attention in the specialty crop community. The bill would establish a "clean plant" network. "That is a system that makes sure when a grower buys nursery stock that it is free from disease.

"The idea is that when you purchase plants, you'll be starting off with clean plants that won't require a lot of additional investment," she explains. "That has been a problem in the past."

The details are still sketchy, but one

way a "clean plant" network might work is that the government would establish a network of certified suppliers.

"They would have inspectors to make sure everybody is on target with having only clean plants," Metzger says. "This is just a proposal at this point, but it would be very important for grape growers."

What the future holds

Many specialty crop growers look at provisions in this farm bill as just a start. Now that the precedent has been set for the future, these crops will be taken more seriously.

"We spent countless hours on Capitol Hill trying to convince people that these crops really need to be included," Metzger says. "The thing about the phrase 'specialty crops' is that it makes them sound like they are small. But the fact is, when you total everything up, specialty crops add up to be more than all the other commodity crops

put together. And specialty crops are a growing industry, where commodity crops have been on the decline."

Taken separately, they remain small, however. With large associations, commodity industries have had more wherewithal to support research. Smaller industries, like the winegrape industry in North Carolina, "have a limited ability to contribute," Metzger says.

"If this farm bill passes in this fashion, this assistance could really help the smaller commodities improve and get better. It could improve their quality and therefore increase their economic impact — and that could be a wonderful thing," Metzger says. "Finally, we feel like specialty crops have been recognized, and it is a new day. We're very excited about the possibilities now that we have some assistance. We really want to be able to grow the best product in the world, and it is nice to know that at least the House version of this bill wants to help us."

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