

National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board

Specialty Crop Committee

October 19, 2015

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack,

Section 7306 of the *Agricultural Act of 2014* requires the National Institute of Food and Agriculture to annually consult with the Specialty Crop Committee (SCC), a permanent subcommittee of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board, on the procedures and objectives used to conduct the relevancy review and the scientific merit review of the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI). The SCC is required to provide an assessment of the procedures used in the previous fiscal year; advice and recommendations on the reviews for the current fiscal year; and any comments on the grants awarded in the previous fiscal year.

The SCC met on October 14-15, 2015, to provide their annual consultation with NIFA on the SCRI review process. During the meeting, the SCC successfully accomplished these goals. This letter is meant to convey the SCC's recommendations and advice to USDA for the FY2016 granting cycle of the SCRI.

The SCC overwhelmingly commends USDA and NIFA for implementing the recommendations they provided in their previous consultation. The process was dramatically improved from the previous year and the grants awarded accurately conveyed the success of the review process. Overall, the grants awarded in FY2015 match the intent of the recommendations made by the SCC to improve both the relevancy and scientific merit review process. The review process worked well, saved time for the reviewers and staff, and saved valuable resources. The members praise USDA, and enthusiastically concur with the decision, for acknowledging the SCRI team with a USDA Abraham Lincoln Honor Award in 2015.

While the program had many amazing successes, the members of the SCC identified several recommendations to improve and ensure continued success of the SCRI review process.

To ensure that the most relevant proposals continue to be submitted for scientific merit review, **the SCC recommends that the relevancy review should continue to aggressively cull proposals according to the needs of the specialty crop industry.** The SCC suggested a soft target of culling approximately 50% of pre-applications received in each specialty crop category, dependent on the quality of the projects received. The members of the SCC recognize that some categories may have more or less pre-applications than other categories therefore, the members did not suggest a hard target. However, the relevancy reviewers should ensure that the most relevant proposals move forward to the scientific merit review.

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Specialty Crop Committee Recommendations

The SCC commends the work of the Relevancy Review Panel Manager, who obviously worked tirelessly to fully implement the relevancy review as it was intended. **The SCC recommends that the Relevancy Review Panel Manager continue to be an industry representative with a working knowledge of the needs of the specialty crop industry.** It is apparent that the expertise, knowledge, and hard work of the industry expert ensured that the relevancy review process was well-managed and communicated to the scientific merit reviewers.

The SCC commends USDA and NIFA for providing timely information to the committee and to the specialty crop industry on the steps implemented to improve the relevancy review and scientific merit review process. **The SCC recommends that NIFA continue to provide information in a timely manner and keep the lines of communication open.** That being said, it was communicated to the SCC that the timeline for the FY2016 granting cycle will change and be advanced significantly this year because of the timing of the release of the Request for Pre-Applications. Researchers schedule their preparation of grant proposals around major academic events, field work, and other industry events and the major change in the timeline for this year could result in a decrease in the number and quality of research proposals received. **The SCC recommends that NIFA and USDA communicate the FY2016 timeline to the specialty crop research community, including industry, as soon as possible.**

In order to strengthen the communication between the reviewers and the grant applicants, **the SCC recommends that the relevancy review panel should identify the positives and weaknesses of the projects after the proposals have been ranked.** This could be a simple summary of 2-3 questions answered by the relevancy review panel at the end of their review and it should be provided back to the grant applicant for their consideration in future proposal submissions.

In the consultation with the SCC, both NIFA and the Relevancy Review Panel Manager communicated the need to identify and recruit additional relevancy reviewers for future grant cycles of the SCRI. **The SCC recommends that NIFA provide a one-page fact sheet outlining the requirements for being a relevancy reviewer to the SCC by November 15, 2015.** This document should include information on how much time the reviews are expected to take, what the level of commitment is, and information on conflicts of interest. In turn, the members of the SCC will send personalized requests to commodity groups, active producers, and industry representatives to attract potential relevancy reviewers. **The SCC also requests that NIFA provide a summary of the SCRI program and several success stories in 4-5 promotional presentation slides to assist in the recruitment of the relevancy reviewers.** The SCC members heard presentations from several Project Directors who had previously received SCRI grant awards. The presentations outlined the amazing work being done through the SCRI program. The SCC members want to utilize that information to promote the relevancy review to industry.

It should also be noted that specialty crop industry representatives should also be encouraged to suggest names to NIFA for possible participation in the scientific peer review panels. Not only would they be familiar with university and extension personnel with relevant expertise, there are also many highly qualified scientists with expertise in a wide range of scientific disciplines employed in the private specialty crop sector. Once again, when recruiting individuals for peer review panels, they should be informed about what participation entails, including estimated time frames and extent of likely project reviews.

In future years, **the SCC recommends that the project abstracts include information on industry stakeholders/involvement.** This will provide the members of the SCC, and the general public, with broader information on the relevance of the awards to the specialty crop industry.

Specialty Crop Committee Recommendations

Lastly, the SCRI program provides several types of projects including: Standard Research and Extension Projects (SREPs), Coordinated Agricultural Projects (CAPs), eXtension Projects, and Research and Planning Projects. Each project type has an allowed budget amount and for the SREP and CAP awards, an anticipated award amount. For example, it is anticipated that the SREP awards will be in the range of \$2,000,000 to \$4,000,000 per project. **The SCC recommends that the anticipated SREP funding levels be refocused to the range of \$1,000,000 to \$4,000,000.** The SCC stated that since the program is still in its infancy, no other changes to anticipated funding levels for the other types of projects were warranted at this time. However, the SCC will review the award limits and anticipated amounts during future consultations with NIFA.

The SCC will be convening two listening sessions in the winter of 2015/2016 and intend to draft a more broad report on the specialty crop industry as it relates to their charge outlined in the Specialty Crop Competitiveness Act of 2004. This will include recommendations on the scope and effectiveness of research, extension, and economics programs affecting the specialty crop industry.

The SCC members thank USDA and NIFA for taking their recommendations into consideration and again commend USDA and NIFA for the dramatic improvements to the review process for the SCRI program. The results of the SCRI are a direct testament to the hard work and implementation of the program and staff. We ask that you convey our recommendations to NIFA for inclusion and consideration in the FY2016 SCRI RFP. On behalf of the SCC, we look forward to our continued work and collaboration on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Dr. Milo Shult
Chair, NAREEE Advisory Board

Mr. Chalmers Carr III
Chair, Specialty Crop Committee

cc:

Dr. Catherine Woteki, REE Under Secretary/USDA Chief Scientist
Dr. Sonny Ramaswamy, Director, NIFA