



Research, Education, and Economics (REE) -- Office of the Chief Scientist (OCS)
National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory Board

July 27, 2022

Under Secretary and Chief Scientist Chavonda Jacobs-Young
Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area
US Department of Agriculture
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Washington, DC 20250

Acting Director Dionne Toombs
National Institute of Food and Agriculture
US Department of Agriculture
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RE: The NAREEE Board Specialty Crop Committee's (SCC) Recommendations for the
Research Priorities for the FY2023 Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI)

Dear REE leadership,

The Specialty Crop Committee (SCC) is a permanent, statutory committee responsible for studying the scope and effectiveness of research, extension, and economics programs affecting the specialty crop industry. The committee also provides consult on the procedures and objectives used to conduct the relevancy review and the scientific merit review of the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI).

To date, the SCC has met seven times this fiscal year. The committee has heard updates on awarded projects that impact the challenges of components of food and agriculture in U.S. food production systems. The SCC has learned more about the SCRI program to be able to develop improved communication and collaboration strategies and resources to help guide the future of this granting program. The SCC also met with the leaders of national programs associated with nutrition to better understand how the SCRI could impact nutrition opportunities and current granting programs. This correspondence provides SCC comments and recommendations (**bolded**) on NIFA's SCRI program.

Matching Requirement

The first area of interest the SCC addressed is the matching requirement of the SCRI program. Based on current information received from past SCRI recipients, researchers seem to be spending an inordinate amount of time setting up funding matches for this program. The SCC finds that locating a match and facilitating the agreement process may be detracting from the scientific results intended for the program to deliver. Identifying, documenting, and managing matching requirements are time consuming and may present an administrative burden to grant



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recipients. In some cases, Principal Investigators (PIs) outsource the paperwork behind matching requirements, which often uses grant funding for project management rather than conducting research. **The Committee recommends (1) that instructions regarding matching requirements (if reinstated) be made clear up front (i.e., in the program's Request for Pre Applications (RFPA)); and (2) the ability to make exceptions to the matching requirement and the process for doing so be clarified.**

The SCC also observed that universities and partners without an Extension or outreach component may not be able to compete with other organizations where there is a strong proponent in the 'field' that would help PIs connect with growers and other cooperators who may help meet matching requirements. These academic institutions may not be as competitive as others, as they may not have access to match/partners/outreach services to deliver on project outcomes and to show program impact. This dichotomy in universities with and without outreach arms may lead to universities with outreach to take more of a lead in SCRI programs while universities without outreach programs are relegated to collaborator level. **The Committee also recommends additional clarification on the ability to make exceptions to the matching requirement for less well-financed institutions.**

Evaluation

The second area the SCC investigated was the current process on how individual SCRI projects are evaluated. This evaluation component of the program is perceived to take considerable time and resources from the actual research that is being conducted or could be conducted. Often the evaluation piece of this program is outsourced or contracted with professional evaluators, many of whose services require a significant price tag. **The Committee recommends NIFA consider a central administrative unit that could provide applicants evaluation tools.**

Presentations and Input Sessions

The SCC appreciated the opportunity to hear presentations from different PIs on projects that were funded by SCRI in 2021 and collectively felt that the awardees represented a broad mixture of practical and forward-looking research. The Committee noted that the SCRI program is re-evaluated every time it comes up for re-authorization, and that re-authorization may include qualifiers to the program. The example the committee cited was that mechanization was added under production efficiency in the last Farm Bill. These qualifiers were deemed positive, and the SCC acknowledged that organizations such as the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance, a membership-based industry advocacy group, ensure industry is suggesting additions/revisions to the SCRI program. **The Committee recommends additional listening sessions be scheduled to increase the quality of industry feedback provided to the SCRI program in the future. The SCC believes that key specialty crop industry associations are aware of the opportunity to weigh in, but perhaps regularly scheduled listening sessions could/should be held.**



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Funded Projects and Categories

The SCC understands that the SCRI funding areas are established by Congress and can only be changed by legislation. Current legislative focus areas include the following: a) plant breeding, genetics and genomics, b) crop protection, including pollinator health, c) efforts to improve production efficiency, handling and processing, productivity, and profitability over the long term (including specialty crop policy and marketing), d) new innovations and technology, and e) food safety. **The SCC would appreciate increased understanding of how these legislatively-mandated categories are explored on a regular basis (i.e. every time the program is re-evaluated).** We understand that the original five categories change, but there have been qualifiers added. For example, is there a particular category that is not receiving equal number of applications? The SCC wants to be sure the program is reaching a broad applicant pool. **We believe that, by understanding the numbers of applications in the different program categories, there may be an opportunity to enrich and refine categories and qualifiers. The committee also thinks exploring more on who is funded and in what categories could help the program reach out to more underserved audiences and communities.** Assessing which projects are funded would help guide future awardees. More information on who and what projects are funded may help broaden the applicant pool and ensure that unique, needed research may be considered for funding.

Schedule

Finally, the SCC would like to acknowledge that establishing a standard RFPA/RFA schedule has been helpful and appreciates NIFA implementing this program revision.

We ask that these recommendations are appropriately conveyed for inclusion and consideration in the FY2023 SCRI program. On behalf of the SCC, we look forward to our continued work and collaboration on these important specialty crop issues. If you have any questions or need additional information about our feedback, please contact Kate Lewis, Executive Director of the NAREEE Advisory Board at 202-631-1434 or kate.lewis@usda.gov.

Sincerely,

Edmund R. Buckner
Chair, NAREEE Advisory Board

Gregory D. Goins
Chair, Specialty Crop Committee (SCC)

*2022 SCC Members include: Donnell Brown, National Grape Research Alliance; Marguerite Green, SPROUT; Carlos Iglesias, NC State University; Shawn Peebles, Shawn Peebles Organic Farm; Nikki Lynn Rothwell, MI State University; and Jim Tunier, Post Gardens of Battle Creek.