



United States Department of Agriculture

Research, Education, and Economics (REE)
National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics (NAREEE) Advisory
Board

Specialty Crop Committee (SCC) Meeting Notes – Thursday, April 13, 2023

SCC Members Present: Gregory Goins (Chair), Carlos Iglesias, and Jim Tuinier– 3

SCC Members Absent: Donnell Brown & Marguerite Green - 2

NAREEE Board Staff Present: Kate Lewis, NAREEE Board Executive Director/Designated Federal Officer (DFO) and Michele Simmons, Program Support Specialist

I. Welcome, Roll Call, and Approval of March 2023 meeting minutes

DFO Lewis welcomed the group and attendance was taken of members. A quorum was established amongst the SCC members. There were a few edits added to the March minutes. After the corrections/additions were incorporated, the March 2023 meeting minutes were approved by consensus and will be posted to the NAREEE Advisory Board Webpage.

DFO Lewis informed the Members that the NAREEE Advisory Board is scheduled to meet in Washington, DC, June 6-7, 2023, for an all-day meeting on both days. Dr. Goins confirmed that he is scheduled to virtually attend the Meeting on Tuesday, June 6th during the 8:30-10am session. He will provide an update to the NAREEE Advisory Board on what the SCC has worked on in FY22, what is currently being worked on in FY23, and items that might be worked on in FY24. She has also asked the other Committee and Sub Committee Chairs to provide brief updates. SCC Members are also welcome to attend any session.

We do not have an update from the Secretary's office. The package that includes the SCC candidate slate is still with the Secretary's office for review. As soon as we get the candidate selection from the Secretary, she will inform the Chairs of the new members.

Ms. Marguerite Green, Dr. Iglesias, and Mr. Tuinier's terms expire the end of September 2023. DFO Lewis will email the website with the application details if you wish to reapply. She is available by phone or email if you have any questions. Applications are due by May 31, 2023. We will review the new FY24 applications in June. Hopefully the new members will be onboard by October 2023.

DFO Lewis asked if there were questions about this situation; there were none.

II. Statement from Chair:

Dr. Goins – He hopes that Dr. Iglesias and Mr. Tuinier reappplies for the SCC. He has learned a lot from them.

Question for DFO Lewis – When the new Members are on board, will there be a vote for the next Chair?

DFO Lewis – Yes. There will be a vote for a new Chair. Once the new Members are on board, we will set up a meeting so they can meet you and the other Members and vote to elect a new Chair.

III. Continued Discussion about SCC’s “Work Plan” for 2023

Dr. Goins - Do we have an archive of the work plan so we can see where we stand? Being this is a Farm Bill year, what are the deliverable dates?

DFO Lewis – As far as the deliverable dates, the SCC is on track. According to the statutory language, your Committee must communicate at least once a year with the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI). The SCC submitted recommendations for the SCRI program. The recommendations were communicated to the National Program Leads back in the early fall of 2022 for their considerations. The overall goal for the SCC is to give advice and feedback on how the SCRI program is run. There needs to be some time for the program to implement your advice and recommendations to see if the program is working. A letter will be drafted to NIFA stating we recognize you’ve implanted the recommendations that we made last year. We thank you for implementing our feedback. We support the continued implementation of SCRI. Once the letter is sent to NIFA, the SCC can continue to talk about other advice and guidance to provide to USDA in specialty crops.

DFO Lewis - The workplan isn’t a formal document, but a phase that I use. It consists of what you think you might want to address in research and specialty crops, what recommendations does this Committee want to put forward for this fiscal year and maybe into FY24. What’s your plan going forward.

Dr. Goins – Colleagues, should we address water issues?

Dr. Iglesias – I think water, labor, and food safety are some issues we should address.

Mr. Tuinier - Michigan recently had a local bagged lettuce recall because of hysteria. Anything we can do to help specialty crops and food safety is helpful.

Dr. Goins – What about vertical farms. Is that outside our area? Does it save water?

Mr. Tuinier - One of the larger indoor producers just filed bankruptcy. There are some issues with vertical farming.

Dr. Iglesias – Labor, food safety, food waste, and water relating to specialty crops are the main issues.

Dr. Goins – When you cull crops it doesn't automatically go to composting or does it just stay in the field? What happens to the cull depending on the crop?

Mr. Tuinier – Cucumbers are basically 100% water. They're easy to compost. Some of the animals don't want them. It's not so much wasted at the farm level, but it's wasted once we get them in the retail environment.

Dr. Goins – When the students are peeling vegetables at A&T's cafeteria, they don't mix them with the rest of the trash. That automatically goes to the compost.

Mr. Tuinier – Students at Michigan State worked with food service programs on campus to take on food waste.

Dr. Goins – Maybe we can call that group waste and recycling issues.

Mr. Tuinier – Waste happens because some food doesn't meet specifications and it gets rejected. Grocery stores want the prettiest displays possible. USDA may have extremely high standards in creating waste also.

Dr. Iglesias – There's countries in Europe that minimize food wastes to below 25% which is an accomplishment. Most specialty crops have a short shelf line. Recalls are very damaging for the producers. I was talking to a baby spinach producer in California. In regard to avoiding recalls, that's where every competitor comes together. Even if a competitor gets recalled, that's going to affect most producers because some people will avoid buying baby spinach.

Mr. Tuinier – Recalls are expensive. A few years ago, there was a disease that spread onto geraniums. USDA and the State Agricultural Department had to quarantine crops. It's costly when you can't go into a greenhouse because a small portion has been quarantined.

Dr. Goins - What about the use of plastics?

Dr. Iglesias – The use of micro plastics for fruits and vegetables are a big issue.

Mr. Tuinier - I know the plastic is biodegradable. They're using a liquid in Canada on cucumbers almost like the wax on apples. The standard wax dip for apples doesn't work on cucumbers. They're developing an environmentally safe coating to put on cucumbers, but the technique to put it on them isn't there yet.

Dr. Goins – Are the massive field beds like strawberries using biodegradable plastics?

Mr. Tuinier – A lot of the plastic can be broken down in a landfill, but once it gets into an animal it can no longer be broken down.

Dr. Iglesias – Issues of pesticides, recalls, and using biodegradable plastics on fruits and vegetables may prevent some people from consuming them. All these issues need solutions.

Mr. Tuinier - The increase of yields is the reason why plastic is used on fruits and vegetables so they can last longer.

Dr. Goins – Climate Smart is the thing.

Mr. Tuinier – The producer might not participate in Climate Smart techniques if it's not going to make them money. It's much easier to spray than to apply bio control.

Dr. Goins – We might have to note somewhere that we are sensitive to the farmers viability.

Mr. Tuinier – Maybe we should ask the Specialty Crops Research Initiative (SCRI) folks to keep a broad focus on specialty crops, food safety, the environment, and economics.

DFO Lewis - The research priorities are legislatively set. I'll pull this Committee's letter from last year to see your recommendations. Your FY24 recommendations could be to keep running your suggestions. You can use your time across the year to identify 3-4 recommendations to provide to USDA on research and specialty crops. It could have something to do with pesticides, water, waste recycling, labor, or food safety.

Dr. Goins – The Farm Bill might not be out.

Mr. Tuinier - The Farm Bill funds the program. Is that where the program priorities are also legislatively set?

DFO Lewis – For SCRI – That's where the priorities are legislatively set. I'll pull the language and will send it to this Committee.

The Committee's charge is what are the goals for SCC and what does it do. I'll forward the charge to this Committee. It's a fact sheet that I developed with information that I've pulled from the Farm Bill. It lists about 12 programs in the area of SCRI that's open for this Committee to explore.

The Chair works with the Members to get suggestions about what the list of priorities/recommendations could be going forward. It's easier to do this in an in-person meeting. Michele and I are making plans for the SCC to meet in-person.

Are there any more questions? There were none.

IV. Wrap-up/Adjourn

The meeting adjourned at 2:44 p.m. EDT.

The next meeting will be held on Thursday, May 11, 2023, 2pm EDT.