



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

September 18, 2023

Secretary Thomas J. Vilsack
US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Under Secretary and Chief Scientist Chavonda Jacobs-Young
Research, Education, and Economics Mission Area
US Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250

RE: The NAREEE Board Specialty Crop Committee's (SCC) Recommendations for the
Research Priorities for the FY2024 Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI)

Dear USDA 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 consultation on the procedures and objectives used to conduct the relevance and scientific merit reviews of the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI).

To date, the SCC has met 11 times this fiscal year, including participating in the SCRI Project Director's Listening Session and one-on-one meetings with SCRI leadership. Throughout its meetings, the committee has heard updates on awarded projects that impact the challenges of components of food and agriculture in U.S. food production systems. From these meetings, as well as committee members' own direct experience of NIFA's SCRI program, the SCC has formed a gathered insight on the challenges and opportunities for this important granting program. This correspondence provides our comments and recommendations (**bolded**).

Topic: Proposal Reviewer Recruitment

Recruitment of industry reviewers for the relevance review has always been a key challenge for SCRI program administrators.

Issues to address:

Voluntary industry and academic insight is critical to the administration of the SCRI program. In an effort to ensure best representation in the process, the proposal panel reviewer requirements have become restrictive. For instance, only one panel reviewer can be included from each state (except Texas and California). This means that even if two people, by chance, originate from the



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same state, this could impact overall intellectual input from different disciplines and diverse institutions.

In addition, due to the systems approach required under the program guidelines, SCRI projects are complex and transdisciplinary. Hence, many projects include large teams of investigators. If a reviewer is a collaborator on a proposed SCRI project, they cannot review for the program that year.

Recommendation:

Formulate inclusive panel structure requirements that reflect larger, transdisciplinary programs which can facilitate a broad reviewer matrix while maintaining panel diversity and integrity.

Topic: Program Evaluation

The SCRI program would benefit from a program gap analysis to assess what states, crops, and program priorities are being funded, and whether SCRI efforts reflect USDA's commitments to scientific integrity and diversity, equity and inclusion.

Issues to address:

This type of evaluation will likely be complex and require substantial time and resources. However, examination of NIFA touchpoints of the SCRI program can be leveraged to increase the likelihood of amplified impacts.

Recommendation:

Program evaluation could be a component in RFAs, so that research labs that specialize in program evaluation could submit proposals.

Topic: Transdisciplinary Efforts

SCRI projects are required to demonstrate a systems approach, which often requires that project teams span transdisciplinary boundaries.

Issues to address:

Some SCRI applicants may lack a deep understanding of how traditional disciplinary boundaries may limit the ability to address complex challenges involved with broad implications from agricultural research. Thus, they may falter in their efforts to build truly transdisciplinary projects.

Recommendation:

Take steps to increase awareness of transdisciplinary approaches and ensure projects are transdisciplinary in nature, based on feedback from past panel reviewers and reviews. For



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instance, NIFA should consider offering pre-testing, perhaps based on AI technology, to help applicants pre-screen their projects for transdisciplinary fitness.

We ask that these recommendations are appropriately conveyed for inclusion and consideration in the FY2024 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,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Kenrett Jefferson-Moore".

Kenrett Jefferson-Moore, Ph.D.
Chair, NAREEE Advisory Board

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Gregory D. Goins".

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

*FY2023 SCC Members include Donnell Brown, National Grape Research Alliance; Marguerite Green, SPROUT; Carlos Iglesias, NC State University; and Jim Tuinier, Post Gardens of Battle Creek