

Written Statement of
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on behalf of
The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture

before the
House Committee on Agriculture
Subcommittee on Livestock and Horticulture

regarding the
Review of Domestic Policies Affecting the Specialty Crop Industry
Wednesday, November 5, 2003

As president of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, I present my statement on behalf of my fellow agriculture commissioners, secretaries and directors from the 50 states and four U.S. territories. I would like to thank the subcommittee for convening this hearing on specialty crops and providing me an opportunity to share the perspectives of NASDA and its members. I believe that State Departments of Agriculture are in a unique position to provide productive input to policy discussions in the area of specialty crops. As directors, secretaries and commissioners, we are on the front lines in delivering many of the services critical to the success of specialty crop growers. We are also very well aware of the demands for additional resources to meet unmet needs. The chance to contribute to this discussion is very much appreciated.

As you know, times are changing in the agriculture industry. No longer are bulk commodities the only crops that come to mind when people think about American

agriculture. In the early 1900's, bulk commodities like wheat, corn, and cotton were the dominant crops grown on the majority of America's farms. While they remain a very important component of America's agricultural landscape, today they share the spotlight with specialty crops. During the latter part of the last century it is plainly evident that farmers and ranchers became much more diversified and more involved with their products from the farm gate to the consumer.

As the production of specialty crops across the nation increases, so does the value they add to the U.S. economy. In 1999, total cash receipts for vegetable, fruit and nut production was more than \$28 billion. This figure tells us that specialty crops have become a dominant contributor to the economic strength of American agriculture.

As times have changed, so have the needs of farmers and ranchers in our country. Specialty crop growers are faced with a variety of challenges – many of them brought about by the diversity of the specialty crop industry. Just like any farmer or rancher, specialty crop growers face the risk of their crop being destroyed by a pest, disease or natural disaster. But they also carry additional risk due to compliance with ever changing regulatory requirements and exotic pest pressures while competing on a non-level playing field against imports from outside the United States.

State Departments of Agriculture have seen the demand for resources to address the challenges faced by specialty crop growers in each of our states. On a day to day basis, we have seen increasing demands for state marketing programs that promote our

products in the domestic and international marketplace. In addition, over the last two years, State Departments of Agriculture have successfully provided resources to assist specialty crop growers through a block grant program approved by Congress in August of 2001 (H.R. 2213, P.L. 107-25). We have seen overwhelming demand for assistance in marketing, pest and disease projects, food safety, applied research, and nutrition outreach. We saw more than \$1.5 billion in project requests for a grant program of \$159 million. A major reason the block grant was a success, we believe, was the designation of State Departments of Agriculture as the delivery mechanism for the grant funds. It allowed each state to tailor the aid to fit its unique circumstances. We recommend that the specialty block grant program be permanently authorized with funds directed to the state entity responsible for agricultural production and regulation.

Block grants are not always an easy sell when budgets are tight. However, given the flexibility of such aid packages, I would encourage members to consider this option in delivering future aid to specialty crops producers around the country.

As the challenges continue to mount, specialty crop growers will depend on applied research and transfer of new technologies to provide tools that will increase competitiveness. They will depend on improved varieties, new integrated pest management or better irrigation technology to name a few. It's time for the public sector to realize the value of specialty crops and make long term investments in securing their future.

Public investment in critical infrastructure will benefit not only the economy but public health and the environment. This investment can be used to sustain on-going research that is furthering the development of new varieties of specialty crops and contributing to advances in fighting foreign pests and diseases. It will bolster statewide marketing and promotion campaigns that are increasing the consumption of fruits and vegetables across the nation. It will facilitate competitive prices, both domestically and internationally. And more importantly, federal resources will provide for nutritional education programs in our schools which will give our children the tools to make healthy eating choices – advancing the battle against an obesity epidemic that is affecting each and every one of our states.

Specialty crops grown across our nation from east to west, from north to south and every state in between, feed the world. From small farms to large farms, from growing to processing, specialty crops are not only unique but they are the core of the agriculture industry. Whether it be apples, mint, mushrooms or lettuce, consumers would be at a loss without specialty crop production from every one of our 50 states and U.S. territories. It's time for the specialty crop industry to receive the recognition it deserves and it's time we give specialty crop growers the help they need to deal with challenges that come with being a part of such a unique and diverse segment of our industry.

Farmers and ranchers need government policies that make it possible for them to remain competitive. When farmers earn a profit, they are better equipped to adapt to

change. These changes bring better results for the environment, for workers, for consumers and for the economy. Everyone benefits from a strong specialty crops industry. I ask you to please take a minute to think about what you want agriculture to look like in the next 5, 10 or even 25 years. We can shape that vision today by committing to a long-term investment in our specialty crops producers and ensuring that they continue to feed the nation and the world.

The members of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture are ready to continue this important dialog and to be a part of the solution in keeping specialty crops producers competitive and viable. Again, thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to the subcommittee.