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NASDA CALLS FOR SPECIALTY CROPS BLOCK GRANT PROGRAM

Washington, D.C. — NASDA President Gene Hugoson called on Congress this week to support the permanent authorization of the specialty blocks grant program and annual appropriations. Hugoson provided written testimony before the House Agriculture Subcommittee on Livestock and Horticulture. Subcommittee Chairman Robin Hayes (NC) held the hearing to review domestic policies affecting the specialty crop industry and to hear testimony from representatives of the fruit and vegetable sector.

“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, Hugoson said. “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.”

Congress approved a one-year specialty crop block grant program in August of 2001 (H.R. 2213, P.L. 107-25). “A major reason the block grant was a success 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,” Hugoson said. His written statement can be found on NASDA’s website at www.nasda.org.

NASDA has noted that the economic significance and needs of specialty crops growers is clearly evident by the types of projects funded through the 2001 block grant program. Attached is a sampling of projects that are keeping specialty crops producers competitive and viable. NASDA plans to issue a report on the outcome of the 2001 specialty crops block grant program.

NASDA believes this program is a public investment in critical infrastructure that will benefit not only the economy but public health and the environment. This investment, in the form of grants, 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.

Legislation has been introduced in Congress this session, H.R.3242, the Specialty Crop Competitiveness Act of 2003, that will set forth a specialty crops block grant program. The bill authorizes \$470 million of funds annually for five years for block grants. H.R. 3242 was introduced by U.S. Representatives Doug Ose and Cal Dooley of California. The bill, which currently has 43 cosponsors, also provides for programs concerning marketing, research, international trade, pest and disease exclusion and conservation.

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NASDA is a nonprofit association of public officials comprised of the Commissioners, Secretaries, and Directors of agriculture in the fifty states and four territories

Specialty Crop Grant Projects

Examples of Projects Funded by State Departments of Agriculture

Growing the Domestic and International Marketplace

In Michigan –

- The Michigan Apple Committee developed an inspection program and promotion program to facilitate export of Michigan apples to Mexico.

In Virginia –

- The “Virginia Grown” Specialty Crop Promotion was developed to increase awareness and demand for Virginia grown specialty crops including fresh fruits and vegetables, nursery products, Christmas trees, and wine.

In Washington -

- The “From the Heart of Washington” campaign was launched to encourage consumers to purchase Washington agricultural products and to promote an understanding of the importance of agriculture to the state’s non-agricultural community.

Ensuring a Safe Food Supply

In Ohio –

- The Ohio Specialty Crop Food Safety Initiative was launched to increase awareness and promote adoption of Good Agricultural Practices among the state’s specialty crop growers.

In Florida –

- A food safety initiative was launched to provide hands-on assistance to producers to develop, apply and implement individual food safety programs and best practices for their operations.

In California –

- The Melon Research Board and Cantaloupe Advisory Board developed and distributed “Key Points of Control and Management of Microbial Food Safety for Melon Producers, Handlers and Processors” and “Good Agriculture Practices.” The project is noted as easily tailored to fit additional industries and commodities in the future.

Research – Finding the Solutions

In California –

- The Minor Crops Council, the IR-4 Program, and the University of California formed a partnership to develop low impact pest management practices and products.

In Texas -

- Texas A&M researchers are investigating salinity tolerance of Texas-grown roses and crape myrtles – economically important crops for Texas nursery growers. Increased salinity tolerance will allow for irrigation of nursery crops and landscapes with reclaimed, recycled or saline water.

In Florida –

- The Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association is facilitating research into irrigation management, integrated pest management, enhancement of specialty crop post-harvest shelf life and environmental mitigation of farming operations.

Nutrition – Advancing the Fight against Obesity

In Texas –

- The Texas Department of Agriculture through the CATCH Program – the Coordinated Approach to Child Health – introduced nutritional education to third through fifth graders on four different levels - classroom curriculum, physical education, cafeteria/food service and parent outreach.

In Florida –

- The Florida State Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services in cooperation with Produce for Better Health Foundation launched a school “Eat Your Colors Every Day” program. A salad bar and salad option was piloted in 28 schools across 12 counties to increase student consumption of fresh produce, introduce new products to food service operations, and to provide nutrition educational information. The program includes a significant evaluation and data analysis component that will assist in future efforts.

In California –

- The California Department of Food and Agriculture partnered with the California Department of Health Services and the Public Health Institute to spread the “5 a Day Power Play” message in California schools. Children 9-11 were encouraged to consume five servings a day of fruits and vegetables and to engage in 60 minutes of physical exercise each day.

Pest and Disease Programs – On the Front Lines

In North Carolina –

- The North Carolina Department of Agriculture invested funding to protect the public and the state’s agricultural industry by improving their ability to reduce the vulnerability and minimize the impact from pest and disease outbreaks or any natural or man-made disaster, or terrorist attack and to facilitate a rapid return to normalcy.

In California -

- The California Department of Food and Agriculture established a laboratory to examine the genetic make-up of exotic fruit flies trapped in the state. The information will be used to improve exclusion techniques to keep the foreign flies out of the United States.

In Florida –

- The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services invested funding to stop the spread of citrus canker. The Department’s Citrus Canker Eradication Program was funded to help rid the state of the disease and prevent its spread to uninfected areas of Florida and other citrus producing states.