

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

October 2, 2024

The Honorable Mike Johnson
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
1236 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
2433 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
322 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
317 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

As chairs of the Congressional Specialty Crop Caucus, we would like to reiterate the needs of the thousands of fruit, vegetable, tree nut, and horticulture producers in the United States on the importance of passing a comprehensive, bipartisan Farm Bill before the end of this year.

American farmers confront rising challenges from international competition at home, lost markets overseas, unpredictable and increasingly severe weather, evolving threats from pest and disease, onerous requirements from big retailers, and restrictive government regulations, to name just a few.

The Farm Bill should ensure that all Americans have access to nutritious, domestically grown foods. Specialty crops include nutrient dense fruits, vegetables, and tree nuts, which should make up more than half of an American's diet according to the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that nine in ten Americans do not consume enough fruits and vegetables as a part of their daily diets.

Although specialty crop production represents nearly half the farm gate value of American agriculture, specialty crops historically receive far less than 10% of the Farm Bill's investments. In fact, the Horticulture Title of the 2018 Farm Bill, which includes many of the programs designed exclusively for specialty crops, received about one-half of one percent of the Farm Bill's resources according to the Congressional Research Service.

We are joined by colleagues from both sides of the aisle who have introduced bills, offered amendments, and expressed their strong support for new and innovative investments in specialty crops. We commend Chairman Thompson for including many of those priorities in H.R. 8467, which was favorably reported by the House Agriculture Committee in May, and Chairwoman Stabenow for the many advancements for specialty crops included in her framework released earlier this year. Although specialty crops still have a long way to go toward achieving parity, investments in research, innovation, crop insurance, and trade are vital to enhancing the competitiveness of - growers and supporting a healthier America. Specialty crop priorities must appear in any Farm Bill that Congress sends to the President.

More specifically, critical investments for specialty crops in the House and Senate proposals include:

- An enhanced safety net in the form of affordable, effective crop insurance. We need to move away from ad hoc relief programs and provide growers with affordable whole farm revenue protection that clearly covers market disruptions due to no fault of their own. The establishment of an industry-led specialty crop advisory committee with meaningful influence over how the Risk Management Agency (RMA) operates will bring vital expertise to the federally subsidized crop insurance program.
- More research to help specialty crop growers innovate and compete into the future by providing an additional \$50 million per year to the flagship Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI). An additional \$20 million per year dedicated exclusively to the research and development of mechanization and automation in specialty crop operations, which the private market all too frequently leaves behind. Sustained investments in crop protection tools to combat pests and diseases, adapt to a changing climate, and comply with more restrictive environmental requirements from big retailers and regulators alike.
- An additional investment of \$15 million per year in the Specialty Crop Block Grant program, which helps meet the local and regional needs of a diverse range of specialty crops across the United States.
- Tools to reach new markets across our borders by fully funding the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) program and the Market Access Program (MAP). Although only a third of MAP funding goes directly to specialty crops, it remains a vital tool for our growers and is long past due for that funding to be doubled.
- Procurement reform and other measures to ensure that all Americans have access to healthy foods regardless of their means. A new investment in the fruit and vegetable incentive of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) will provide hungry families with additional funds to buy healthy foods.

The Farm Bill should invest more, not less, in specialty crops. As the Farm Bill advances toward the finish line, we encourage you to protect these modest and incremental gains for specialty crops included in the House and Senate proposals. It would be money well spent on a vital sector of our agricultural economy as well as an investment in healthier Americans.

We stand ready to work with you to achieve these important objectives.

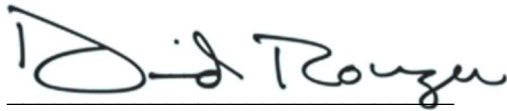
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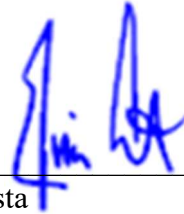
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