

U.S. House of Representatives

Testimony Before the Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research

—

Hearing on "*A 2022 Review of the Farm Bill: Horticulture and Urban Agriculture*"

—

Brie Reiter Smith

Vice President, Product Leadership, Driscoll's, Inc.

Tuesday March 29, 2022

10.00 a.m.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of Driscoll's and the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance.

At Driscoll's, I am the vice president of product leadership. My team and I are responsible for the 5-year strategic plans for each berry type (strawberries, raspberries, blackberries, and blueberries) and each field type, meaning conventional and organic, in the Americas. Essentially, this is building supply (acres, varieties, growing practices, regions) to meet projected demand. The central plan for each berry is ultimately divided and allocated to hundreds of independent growers in our network who grow, pick, and pack our proprietary varieties. Driscoll's generally cools, handles, markets, and sells the fruit and then we split the proceeds with our growers. My husband, Brian, and I also grow blackberries in Watsonville, California, where my family has been growing berries for more than 125 years. My grandfather was a founder of Driscoll's. In addition to our home state of California, Driscoll's berries grow in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, New Jersey, Oregon, and Washington. We have winter production in the U.S., Mexico, and South America for US consumers, and farmers grow Driscoll's berries in Europe, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, and China to supply fresh fruit to consumers in those markets as well.

Specialty crop production in the United States accounts for \$66 billion in farm gate value which translates into about 33% of all farm crop cash receipts. The specialty crop industry has gone through tremendous change to satisfy consumer demand, adapt to new technology, and compete in an increasingly global marketplace. This is why we raise the importance of specialty crops today – not simply as one more sector of the agricultural economy, but as an important source of food to every American. We hope specialty crops garner fair consideration and prioritization in each congressional district as you develop the 2023 Farm Bill.

The specialty crop industry is united to advocate for a common set of priorities as Congress prepares to reauthorize the Farm Bill before it expires in 2023. A broad coalition of more than 120 specialty crop organizations, known as the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance, represents the whole of the fruit, vegetable, and tree nut industry in the United States. The Alliance works to form common objectives that transcend different regions, commodities, and other interests, to support this vital source of food for American families. Driscoll's is a member of several specialty crop associations which in turn are members of this Alliance. I can assure you that the produce industry stands ready to work closely and collaboratively with Congress on the next Farm Bill.

Toward that end, the Alliance has formed working groups covering each title of the Farm Bill along with some additional working groups to evaluate cross-title policy recommendations. Over the coming weeks, these working groups will evaluate existing Farm Bill programs and consider new policy proposals on a wide range of topics throughout the Farm Bill. The Alliance will use this work product to form a single set of recommendations representing the collective views of the specialty crop industry.

I would like to highlight some of the programs our industry is currently using as well as preview some areas of interest that are likely to come forward during the policy development process.

### **Research**

The Farm Bill provides our industry with vital tools to satisfy our diverse and expansive research needs. Through a combination of specific programs like the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, the IR-4 program for pest management, and the Specialty Crop Research Initiative, along with other USDA resources, our industry is able to address research concerns of all shapes and sizes.

The produce industry is using federal research dollars today to address pests and diseases and better prevent and respond to multiple types of food safety hazards across dozens of crops in multiple farming regions. We are also increasingly looking to federal research programs to identify and develop technology for automation and mechanization. We access research funding to improve organic production, plant breeding, and enhance crop characteristics to improve yield under increasingly challenging climatic conditions.

Our industry includes hundreds of crops each with unique challenges.

As you can imagine, the demand for funding under these programs consistently outstrips available dollars.

### **Trade**

Farm Bill programs both promote the export of America's specialty crops and help prevent unwanted plant pests from accompanying specialty crops imported into the United States.

While the fruit and vegetable industry is not the primary user of the Market Access Program, many of our crops successfully use this program to gain access to foreign markets. In addition, our industry has used the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops program to help American producers overcome technical barriers to trade imposed by foreign countries to exclude American made products from their markets.

### **Nutrition**

The Farm Bill authorizes the government to purchase and then donate a variety of non-price supported commodities, including fruit, vegetable, and tree nut products, through USDA's domestic nutrition and food assistance programs. These donations help vulnerable Americans to eat a healthy diet and avoid hunger, while also helping to balance supply and demand for various commodities in our sector. During the COVID crisis those programs were used to help remove excess product from the system and provide a vital source of food to those in need.

## **Natural Resource Management**

The Specialty Crop Industry strongly supports USDA's conservation programs. They help producers across the country to better and more efficiently use our Nation's natural resources, and for our industry's growers, these voluntary conservation programs help address a myriad of obstacles. For example, in my home state of California programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provide critical assistance to upgrade irrigation systems and improve the efficiency of on-farm water usage, which is critical in the arid West.

Although we support these working lands conservation programs, payment limits and adjusted gross income eligibility requirements have a disproportionate impact upon the fruit and vegetable sector and our ability to access the important benefits of these programs. Our crops typically have a much higher cost of production, and hence return on investment, than other agricultural sectors. As the produce industry moves forward with our Farm Bill recommendations, we want to work with the Committee to develop creative solutions that preserve the policy objectives of these limitations while allowing this vital sector of the agricultural economy to participate fully in USDA's conservation programs. Addressing these impediments will only become more important as we work together to address climate change.

## **Disaster and Crop Insurance**

And speaking of climate change, the specialty crop industry has increasingly been impacted by natural disasters across the United States. In my home region in the Western United States, we have seen the impacts of the longest and deepest drought, in some places, in all of recorded history. The West has not been alone in facing natural disasters over the last few years with producers across the South also being hit. In addition to natural disasters, our industry was impacted when COVID severely disrupted our supply chains for retail and food service customers.

These experiences, along with USDA grower assistance programs for trade and COVID initiated since the last farm bill, have prompted our industry to examine risk management and commodity support programs in a new light.

One aspect of the farm bill that the specialty crop industry looks to in times of disaster is the crop insurance program. Although many in the perennial crop industry growing trees and vines participate in federal crop insurance, these risk management tools have not been embraced by the field produce sector. With few products available and even fewer that can be deemed "modern" in design, we will want to work with the Committee and USDA on ways to improve crop insurance to attract a larger percentage of the field produce industry - which represents the majority of specialty crop acres.

### **A Final thought regarding Labor**

While I know this issue is not directly in the jurisdiction of this committee or within the traditional parameters of the Farm Bill, I would be remiss if I did not mention the ongoing and increasingly urgent need to address labor issues. Agricultural producers across the country need a legal and stable workforce. Not only is agriculture's role in maintaining a safe and secure food supply vital to our national security, it is critical to the strength of rural America.

Without immigration reform, growers across the country will eventually face the predicament of closing operations or moving them abroad. These are not theoretical discussions. Growers struggle to secure the labor they need which means they gamble every year on getting enough labor to harvest crops or they make the choice to plow under the food they have grown for lack of labor.

The House passed a bipartisan immigration reform bill recently and I urge you to reach out to your colleagues in the Senate to take action. Closer to home I suspect that the specialty crop farm bill alliance will approach this Committee looking to see how the Farm Bill could be used to address labor needs in whatever ways this Committee can.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about the specialty crop industry. I welcome any questions you may have.