

Testimony for Dr. Ramesh Sagili before House Committee on Agriculture

“An Examination of the State of the Specialty Crop Industry”

September 16, 2025

Chair Thompson, Ranking Member Craig, Representative Salinas, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the role of the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) to help support a robust and diverse specialty crop industry. My name is Dr. Ramesh Sagili, and I am a Professor in the Department of Horticulture at Oregon State University, a land-grant institution deeply committed to agricultural research, innovation, and outreach.

Oregon is a major producer nationally in specialty crops, many of which are pollination-dependent crops like blueberries, cherries, or pears. According to the USDA 2022 Census of Agriculture, Oregon ranks among the top states nationally in production value for fruit, tree nuts, berries, vegetables, and nursery. Pollinators play an essential role in the production of many of these specialty crops with direct impact on both yield and quality.

As a university researcher in apiculture, I have the privilege of working closely with beekeepers, farmers and industry partners in addressing critical challenges impacting Oregon’s and the US specialty crop production. I am a current recipient of an SCRI grant and have been part of other SCRI funded projects in the past. A focus of my work is on the role of pollinators and complex threats to pollinators for specialty crop production. The SCRI is uniquely suited among federal agricultural research programs to effectively invest resources in work that enhances understanding and strategies to address complex, existing and emerging challenges faced by specialty crop industries.

In this testimony, I offer the following key points for your awareness: (1) the important role of pollinators in specialty crop production; (2) the unique research funding opportunity of the SCRI program; and (3) opportunities to further improve the implementation of the SCRI program.

Specialty Crops Overview

Specialty crops are defined in law as “fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits and horticulture and nursery crops, including floriculture.” Specialty crops are produced in all 50 states with a market value (farm-level) of \$115 billion, as most recently assessed in 2022, and were produced on approximately 240,000 farms with a total acreage of about 15 million acres (USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022) (Figure 1).

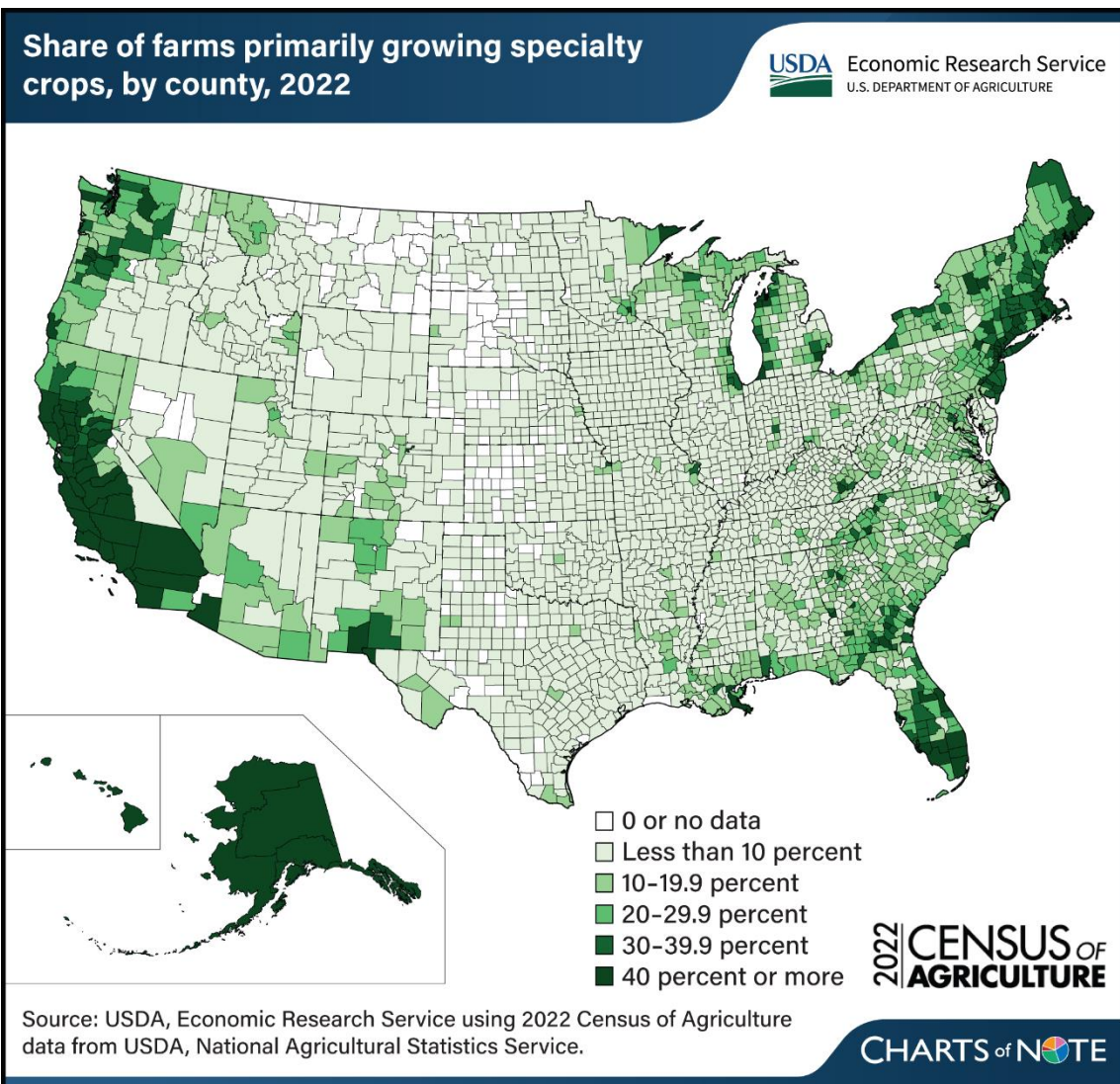


Figure 1. Specialty Crop Growing Farms (by County, 2022)

Role of pollinators in specialty crops and importance or impacts of research to support pollinator health critical for specialty crop production

Managed honey bees and other native bees play a critical role in our food production and food security via pollination of numerous crops including a large number of specialty crops. Honey bee pollination is valued at \$15 billion in the United States (Calderone, 2012). Pollination services provided by managed honey bees owned by commercial beekeepers are vital for the yield and quality of many specialty crops, affecting their competitiveness. Many high-value specialty crops—such as almonds, apples, blueberries, cherries, pears and vegetable seed crops—depend on honey bee pollination to achieve optimal yield, fruit quality, and consistency.

Further, a vibrant, thriving beekeeping industry is essential in maintaining healthy colonies for crop pollination and honey production. Unfortunately, for the past two decades the beekeepers in the United States have reported unsustainably high colony losses due to multitude of stress factors including parasites, diseases, and poor nutrition. The colony losses that were reported during 2024-2025 have been particularly alarming, with reports of about 60% colony losses by commercial beekeepers across the United States (Project Apis m, 2025). These significant colony declines are threatening pollination of specialty crops in all states. Hence, research to address the challenges facing honey bees is critical for sustainable apiculture and crop production.

I am a principal investigator on a 4-year, \$4.2 million SCRI grant awarded in 2023 that is addressing an urgent problem threatening honey bee colonies (European foulbrood disease) that pollinate specialty crops in several states. The beekeepers that employ their colonies for pollination of some of the early season specialty crops such as blueberries are increasingly reluctant to provide pollination services to these specialty crops due to the fear of exacerbating this disease when providing pollination services. We have assembled a transdisciplinary, multi-state research team to comprehensively address this problem impacting commercial honey bee colonies. The beekeepers from four different states (California, Mississippi, Oregon and Washington) are also collaborating on this project. The long-term goal of this research is to identify causal factors associated with European foulbrood disease in honey bees and develop strategies to mitigate this disease. We anticipate that several specialty crops grown in multiple states that are dependent on honey bees will greatly benefit from stronger and healthier colonies that beekeepers will be able to manage following the best management practices formulated from the findings of this SCRI funded research project. This project sits uniquely at the intersection of pollinator health and crop production, bridging two critical areas of agricultural sustainability. This ambitious research project, aimed at tackling a multifaceted challenge requiring diverse expertise and substantial funding, would not be possible without the support of a federal grant program like the SCRI.

The SCRI Program provides unique funding opportunities

The SCRI program is unique among the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture competitive grant programs because of its targeted focus on specialty crops, its broad scope, and robust funding levels that allows for multi-disciplinary, multi-state projects. The program requires proposals to address at least one of five required focus areas, and also encourages focus on emerging priorities, such as threats to specialty crop pollinators. The SCRI program strongly encourages transdisciplinary research, which is critical in solving complex problems, as many problems facing agriculture are multifaceted and need diverse

expertise from different disciplines. Further, SCRI also encourages a systems approach that emphasizes understanding a problem by focusing at the entire system rather than looking at individual components. This program also emphasizes multi-institution and integrated projects that incorporates research, extension and education as well as direct engagement with producers. In addition, the SCRI program closely involves stakeholders in identifying the needs, and in the initial review of grant proposals. This unique process allows SCRI to effectively meet the needs of specialty crop farmers by supporting predominantly applied/practical research that benefits farmers both in the short term and in the long term.

Opportunities to support and improve the SCRI Program

The majority of researchers in the USA spend a large portion of their time seeking funds for their respective research by submitting multiple grant proposals each year. This process is quite demanding and time consuming. My overall experience with submissions of SCRI proposals has been positive, but I offer three opportunities to improve and streamline the SCRI grant process.

First, the SCRI program could improve the timely and reliable release of request for applications (RFA). Uncertainty around when or if RFAs are released makes planning challenging for applicants as they need adequate time for preparation of quality proposals. Secondly, the SCRI could provide more time between the RFA and submission for the proposals – this would be particularly helpful if the RFA release schedule remains unreliable. Finally, a key challenge with the SCRI program is the limited success rate in securing grants by the applicants. There are over 300 specialty crops grown in the United States with a wide range of complex challenges demanding attention. In recent years, funded at \$80 million per year, the SCRI program was able to fund between 20-25 awards per year. The program receives a large number of meritorious proposals each year and the success rate is approximately 15 percent of the total applications submitted. For my current award, I had to apply twice before I was successful.

With this said, I applaud this Committee for recognizing the importance of the SCRI program and the impact of investment in this research program. The Committee action in HR 1 enacted in July to increase annual investment of mandatory funds from \$80 million per year to \$175 million starting in 2026 creates a meaningful opportunity for USDA to increase and expand projects awarded each year to address the most pressing challenges impacting specialty crops. Further, this increased investment encourages and supports researcher's interest and effort to pursue these grants to help address the most pressing industry challenges.

Conclusion

In my opinion, SCRI is an exemplary program that has served the specialty crop industry needs exceptionally since its inception and is the most significant research funding opportunity for addressing challenges at the intersection of pollinator health and specialty crop production. Investment in SCRI not only advances innovation but also helps secure the future of American agriculture. Your continued support of SCRI is much appreciated and helps to ensure the SCRI program will thrive and benefit the specialty crop farmers in the United States.

References:

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