

Written Testimony  
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Agriculture Committee

“The Next Farm Bill: Technology & Innovation in Specialty Crops”

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Chairman Conaway, Ranking Member Peterson, and other Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the critical role Farm Bill funding plays in the continued success of the specialty crop industry, particularly citrus.

My name is Paul Heller, and I am the Vice President of Wonderful Citrus’ Texas Division. Wonderful Citrus is the largest vertically integrated grower, packer, and shipper of fresh citrus in the United States. In connection with our grower partners, we farm and process a number of citrus varieties across Texas, California and Mexico, including Texas Red Grapefruit, and Valencia and Navel Oranges in the southern Rio Grande Valley in Texas. Wonderful Citrus owns, cultivates and harvests nearly 60,000 acres of fresh citrus and ships around the world to ensure a year-round supply. With multiple packing facilities and state-of-the-art grading and packing equipment, Wonderful Citrus is able to ensure quality produce on a global scale. Our citrus can be found across all channels of distribution, with our products most visible in the produce department of grocery stores throughout America under the flagship consumer brands of Wonderful Halos mandarins and Wonderful Sweet Scarletts Texas Red grapefruit.

The Farm Bill contains many programs that are important to the citrus industry, with the crop insurance program and specialty crop provisions – including programs to respond to pest and disease threats – among the most critical.

## **Crop Insurance**

Farming is an inherently risky business, and tree crops – like citrus – carry an even greater risk as they require multiple years of growth to reach fruit-bearing maturity. Every year, growers face an increasingly long list of uncertainties, including pest and disease issues, devastating drought, floods, heat or frost that can destroy an entire crop. Unlike annual row crops, citrus trees cannot simply be removed from the ground to wait out a natural disaster. As such, the Farm Bill’s crop insurance program has become a vital risk management tool for specialty crop producers to mitigate some of the risks that come with producing high quality fruit for market.

For example, the South Texas citrus industry remains in existence today because of the support of crop insurance programs put into place in the 1980s. It was because of these programs that the industry was able to recover after two severe tree killing freezes in 1983 and again in 1989. Today, growers still depend on the stability of crop insurance and make serious business decisions based upon these programs. Over the years, industry has worked side by side with underwriters and developers to enhance the safety net provided by these programs, while also ensuring that they provide adequate coverage without incentivizing abuse.

## **Pest and Disease Funding**

Pest and disease issues remain a key priority area for Wonderful and the citrus industry at large. This is especially true as we continue to fight the devastating disease known as Citrus Greening or Huanglongbing (HLB). With no known cure for HLB, it is critical that the citrus industry take every possible action to prevent the spread of the disease while continuing to search for a treatment or other solution. The citrus industry has been fortunate to have the support of the pest and disease research programs in the Farm Bill to help advance our understanding of disease management and pest mitigation tools. For example, the USDA’s Citrus Health Response Program (CHRP) has been an integral part of the battle against Mexican fruit flies and citrus canker while continuing to make strides in controlling the spread of HLB.

Another example of an essential research program is the HLB Multi-Agency Coordinating Committee (HLB-MAC). The HLB-MAC Fund has been integral in supporting “shovel-ready” short-term projects looking at early detection and treatment methods for HLB and the Asian Citrus Psyllid. While the HLB-

MAC Fund is currently supported through the annual appropriations process, it would be preferable if the program were authorized in the Farm Bill. Regardless, it is essential that programs like CHRP and the HLB-MAC Fund remain intact and receive adequate funding to support the research necessary to advance the U.S. specialty crop industry into the future.

While pest and disease research is critical to the success of our industry, specialty crop block grant funding – money that goes directly into state departments of agriculture – has become an integral part of our ability to combat immediate threats at the local and state level. In South Texas, this funding has been especially important. Recent citrus canker surveys, fruit fly programs, and HLB outreach programs have been critical in raising awareness within not only the farming community, but with the general public as well. The specialty crop block grant program has provided South Texas citrus producers with key programs and invaluable information on various pests and diseases.

#### **Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops**

The future of U.S. specialty crops are also dependent on our ability to promote our products overseas. Programs designed to open new markets or further develop existing ones are important to specialty crop producers and keep U.S. commodities competitive in the global market. For instance, the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) program that provides funding to U.S. organizations for projects that address sanitary, phytosanitary, and technical barriers that prohibit or threaten the export of U.S. specialty crops, is integral in maintaining the presence of U.S. agriculture abroad. We fully support preserving the funding for these types of programs in the 2018 Farm Bill.

#### **Importance of Private-Public Partnerships**

One of the most valuable aspects of the Farm Bill for Texas citrus producers, and specialty crop producers in general, is our ability to leverage public-private partnerships (and funding) that bring innovation and technology to the entire chain of operations.

For example, red grapefruit, the basis of our grapefruit operation in South Texas, was discovered on a pink grapefruit tree. It wasn't until the 1960s, through the innovative work of Dr. Richard Hensz at the Texas A&M Kingsville Citrus Center, that we had the first true red grapefruit in South Texas. Dr. Hensz's work was made possible through federal funding for the research center and the cooperation

of industry, higher education, and state level support. Today, Dr. Eliezer Louzada continues to build upon Dr. Hensz' research using advanced biotechnology in plant cell and tissue culture.

The Kingsville Citrus Center, which was founded in the late 1940s through the result of public-private partnerships, is also home to our Texas Budwood program. The Budwood program is primarily focused on ensuring the availability of clean plant material to the citrus industry, as well as homeowners and hobbyists across the State. This effort is funded by industry, budwood sales, Federal grants and state higher education funding through classes and degree programs. Our Texas Citrus Center is an example of how public-private partnerships can work to create lasting institutions that support specialty crop producers as well as the general public.

While advances in technology have historically been made on the production side of the citrus business, such as fruit sorting and sizing, our Texas operations use technology to assist in new ways. For instance, we are currently piloting new technology that grades the amount of decay present on an individual piece of fruit. We have also started using high resolution surveys of our orchards to count missing trees and are looking at ways to advance that technology to conduct surveys of pests and disease.

There are numerous benefits to bolstering private-public partnership when it comes to research and development. The next Farm Bill should promote these types of relationships and leverage the knowledge and inspiration of the private sector to move the needle on innovative farming practices in the U.S.

### **Immigration and Stable Workforce**

While all of these programs enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops, their value is undermined if fresh produce providers cannot cultivate and harvest their crops. Simply put, much of the agriculture industry relies on foreign-born labor to get specialty crops from the fields to the marketplace. Should anyone still believe the myth that foreign workers who harvest specialty crops are taking jobs from Americans, I invite them to talk to growers across the country and learn the simple truth. Americans by and large will not do these jobs. But, fortunately for consumers and other workers in the production chain, there are individuals from other countries willing to come to the United States to do

these crucial on-farm jobs. We should not punish them for providing an essential service, nor should we penalize the employers in our industry who are doing everything they can to make sure America has an adequate supply of healthy and fresh food.

The only federal program that provides a legal agriculture workforce, H-2A, is both overburdened and underperforming in providing workers in a timely manner. It's easy to say that the H-2A visa program is badly in need of reform. While specialty crop providers understand why Congress and the Administration have both chosen to focus on policies to strengthen immigration enforcement, we urge you to keep the needs of agriculture in mind when considering any immigration policy. Enforcement-first or enforcement-only policies will be devastating to our industry. It is critically important for the specialty crop industry that any enhanced enforcement is done in a way that supports a workable agriculture guestworker program.

Once again, I would like to thank the Committee for inviting me to testify before you today on the priorities of the citrus industry for the next Farm Bill.

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