



**Statement of the
Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development**

**To the United States House Committee on Agriculture
“An Examination of the State of the Specialty Crop Industry”**

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**Submitted By:
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Good morning, Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Craig, and members of the Committee. Thank you for opportunity to speak before you for today's hearing: *"An Examination of the State of the Specialty Crop Industry."*

The perspective I bring to this hearing is as Director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) and sixth-generation family farmer. I'm proud to lead a state agency of dedicated public servants who are committed to providing opportunities for our food and agriculture businesses, lifting up our rural communities, and preserving Michigan's natural resources.

I'm also a proud member of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA). Many of you know my colleagues from around the country who are currently in Arkansas for NASDA's annual meeting this week. I appreciate all of the work NASDA is doing at the federal level and look forward to participating in the rest of the conference when I return to Arkansas following this hearing.

My focus this morning will be on Michigan's specialty crops—their importance and the challenges and opportunities that growers and consumers face in this vital industry. Members of this Committee have the ability to foster the success of specialty crops today and for years to come and I'm looking forward to the constructive solutions and policy decisions that will come out of this hearing.

Earlier this year, I was honored to speak before your colleagues in the Senate, and I want to first acknowledge the progress that has been made since I submitted that testimony.

I appreciate that the recent federal budget did extend portions of the Farm Bill through 2031, but we all know we're still barreling toward a September 30 expiration for remaining provisions that were not included in H.R. 1. We also know food security is national security, and the next Farm Bill will dictate how effectively we will be able to feed ourselves by ourselves in the future.

Agriculture is a nearly \$126 billion industry for Michigan, and I consider our specialty crop farmers the backbone of our success.

While Michigan is largely considered "THE" specialty crop state with more than 300 crops produced, specialty crops are grown and consumed in all 50 states. Specialty crop producers feed the country and much of the world with nutritious fruit, vegetables, legumes, and more while supplying our homes and businesses with cut flowers and potted plants. Our holidays include celebrations that see families partake in food and drink flavored with herbs and spices, snacking on an array of tree nuts, or maybe putting up Christmas trees in December. Our yards and gardens are often landscaped with a fir, spruce, or hemlock. The point is that specialty crops truly *are* special and are integrated into what we eat, how we decorate, and when we share moments with friends and family.

This Committee is well aware of the breadth of crops designated as “specialty” and it may be easy to assume these products have always been here and always will be. But given the tenuous times we’re in, I’ve remained in close contact with a number of producers to hear just how vital specialty crop support programs are for their existence.

Unfortunately, for many specialty crops, the future has never been more fragile. What once provided an avenue for farmers to diversify their products has forced many to choose whether or not their farm will welcome the next generation. Whether it’s due to trade pressures, market access challenges, rising input costs, climate variability, labor constraints, and threats of pests and disease—many specialty crops in this country are either harder to grow, more difficult to get to markets, or as challenging as ever to access for the consumer.

This Committee has a history of championing specialty crops in a purposely intentional way by passing Farm Bills that have opened market opportunities through purchasing and food access programs, as well as by funding programs that foster trade and advance agronomy and plant pathology.

For example, MDARD – in conjunction with USDA – has awarded nearly \$16 million in Specialty Crop Block Grants since 2019. These investments supported activities such as new leaf disease and seedling root rot research in celery; determining action thresholds and management strategies for root lesion nematodes in carrot production; methods to combat onion *Stemphylium* leaf blight; and advancing etiology, detection, and management of blueberry viruses. All of this work has been critical to the health of crop yields.

Last year, the Block Grant funding made it possible for Michigan specialty crop companies and associations to attend national and international trade shows including the National Restaurant Association Show, SIAL Paris, and the Global Produce and Floral Show. These trade shows resulted in 266 new buyers of specialty crops or specialty crop-processed products. Companies and specialty crops groups realized \$1.4 million in sales immediately from participating in these three trade shows with an additional \$7 million in sales anticipated through the buyer conversations and negotiations started at these events. The year before last, Specialty Crop Block Grant dollars funded consumer preference and market demand studies for blueberries, promoted specialty crops as healthy food options for school-aged children in urban communities across West Michigan, furthered sustainable dry bean production practices to meet evolving market demands, and advanced social media marketing support to engage target audiences and enhance competitiveness for Michigan apples.

The Block Grant program has wide-reaching impacts – from increasing profits to growing market potential and advancing disease management – and the funding provides a lifeline to address the needs of Michigan’s specialty crop industry.

In the lead up to the Farm Bill effort in the previous Congress, NASDA worked closely with the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance on a stakeholder proposal to increase funding, as well as to improve transparency and the priority-setting process concerning how state departments of agriculture fund awards under this program. This proposal was shared with members of this Committee last year and was ultimately incorporated as section 1002 of H.R. 8467. We are thankful for the increase in funding for the program, but once again reiterate our support for improving states' flexibility to work closely with specialty crop farmers and grower groups in establishing annual priorities. We support maintaining this language in the next iteration of the Farm Bill.

The nation's first land grant college, Michigan State University, is driving additional research, much of which is supported by the Farm Bill's Specialty Crop Research Initiative. Land grant universities across the country are also recipients of this research funding and are actively engaged on the front lines of keeping farmers one step ahead of the next pest or disease threat. The increase in Research Initiative funding to \$100 million is a positive signal to our industry, and we ask that funding continue to be supported by this Committee so progress is not interrupted.

One program not included in H.R. 1's agriculture funding is the Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crops program. We appreciate Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins announcing another round of payments through this program back in April, and hope our federal partners continue to see the benefit of it by implementing it into the next Farm Bill.

MDARD is in constant communication with growers and specialty crop groups to ensure their state government is listening, engaged, and responsive. Everywhere I go in Michigan, growers continue to express concern over increasingly erratic growing conditions. For instance, in 2024, our cherry farmers lost between 30 and 75 percent of their crop, depending on locality and variety, because of multiple abnormal weather events that drove unprecedented insect and disease pressure. This year, early spring frost events reduced yields by 30 to 90 percent across our state depending on the farm location. Our state has experienced some of the warmest and wettest spring seasons on record in recent years, resulting in changes to pest life cycles and early bud breaks. When followed by events such as late frosts, we see crop disasters our growers cannot continue to endure. With the future of our specialty crop industry in such doubt, many farmers don't know how long their operations can continue. Accordingly, in Michigan, we've taken a posture of intentional coordination with federal and local partners to ensure we're taking action to support farmers when they need it most. A Farm Bill that provides growers the support to ensure the continuation of their family farms in the face of these unprecedented challenges is critical for the long-term viability of specialty crops in Michigan and across the country.

At MDARD we're focused on several overarching priorities: Climate resiliency and regenerative agriculture, diversity in agriculture production, and economic prosperity across Michigan. Specialty crops are key to the realization of these priorities not just in Michigan but in many places across the country. Towards this end, Governor Gretchen Whitmer has leveraged federal funding supporting specialty crops, investing state dollars in two new flagship programs: MDARD's Regenerative Agriculture Program and the Farm to Family program.

Regenerative agriculture is an active approach to land management driven by improving soil health. Rather than a rigid set of rules, it embraces a blend of sustainable farming methods tailored to each farmer's needs and thus drives profitability and creates opportunities for farmers to diversify. Core principles include understanding the context of an individual's farm operation, minimizing soil disturbance, maximizing biodiversity, keeping soil covered, maintaining living roots year-round, and integrating livestock.

Our regenerative agriculture unit is the first of its kind to be embedded in a state department. It allows Michigan producers to receive support to engage in this approach to production agriculture, which will only be more important in the years ahead. By adopting regenerative agriculture practices, farmers and landowners can improve profitability and find new ways to diversify while restoring healthy soils and safeguarding natural resources for future generations. Commodity row crop farmers are on the front lines of integrating many of these practices, but they are equally important for specialty crop growers.

The second program I'd like to highlight for its success is Farm to Family, which is a first-of-its-kind program in state government that's working to strengthen agri-food systems across two peninsulas. This year we administered our first grants to food hubs and farm stops, which are creating new market opportunities for Michigan farmers and meeting demands from community members who want locally grown, healthy food on their tables. We're excited about the potential of this program in strengthening local food systems in a meaningful way.

Both of these state-based programs serve as examples of innovative ways we can be approaching this work in supporting our specialty crop growers. Together, federal and state dollars are critical to the vibrancy of rural communities, quality of life from the Atlantic to the Pacific, enhancing America's economic competitive edge, and establishing and broadening lifelong consumers for U.S. food and agriculture produce domestically and in markets across the globe.

I share all of this in today's testimony because support for our specialty crops directly translates to tools to keep farmers farming, keep rural communities vibrant, and keep fruits and vegetables on dinner tables across America. Specialty crops are a vital piece in this puzzle, and I urge the Committee to ensure it doesn't get lost in the big picture and our continued need for a new Farm Bill.

