


NEXT FARM BILL

Holds Promise for

HORTICULTURE



The next farm bill could benefit greenhouse growers in many ways, say the policy experts at AmericanHort.

BY EVAN LEE AND SARA NEAGU-REED

As blossoms and new growth renew the landscape, renewal of another kind is sprouting on Capitol Hill: The 2023 Farm Bill rewrite.

For the uninitiated, the Farm Bill is a multi-year law to address agriculture and food policy, which Congress typically re-evaluates and renews every five years. Comprised of 12 “titles” that detail programs ranging from nutrition assistance to agriculture research, the Farm Bill promotes home-grown food, fiber, fuel, and flora for domestic consumption and export to markets abroad.

The legislation’s historical roots span 18 farm bills and date back to the New Deal in 1933. However, much has changed in farm policy since the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. The price control and supply management schemes that dominated the first farm bill evolved over time into risk management programs (e.g., crop insurance), which growers pay into during the good years for the safety net it provides in bad years. Out of the Dust Bowl catastrophe, too, emerged conservation programs to promote soil health, water management and other resource concerns for a sustainable future. More recent catastrophes led to creation of mitigation and recovery tools to protect farm productivity and financial stability in the wake of extreme weather, disease or pests.

Although every Farm Bill touched upon specialty crop production in some manner, support for nurseries and floriculture greatly expanded in 2008 with the addition of a dedicated horticulture title. Today, the law provides explicit support for our industry, investing in fundamental and practical research, building markets, and assisting response to pest and disease challenges.

Despite decades of hard-earned progress by advocates, specialty crops still lack parity with much of agriculture in the support the Farm Bill provides. AmericanHort now carries the mantle into the 2023 Farm Bill rewrite, partnering with more than 140 farm organizations through the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance to help ensure and enhance success and competitiveness of our growers. While current law expires over a year from now, AmericanHort and partners are already drafting new policies and educating Congress. Here’s a preview of where we see opportunities to advance policy for horticulture.

MANAGE RISK AND RECOVER WHEN DISASTERS STRIKE

Diverse plants under cultivation and production practices employed make our industry vibrant and unique. Although a



strength in the marketplace, dynamism presents a challenge when working within the often too rigid requirements of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) farm programs.

Federal risk management programs, like crop insurance, work best for farmers planting homogenous crops with annual harvest cycles (i.e., corn and soybeans), but underserve specialty growers. In two successive Farm Bills, AmericanHort secured better tools to manage financial exposure to disease outbreaks and natural disasters, including the Nursery Value Select Program launched in 2020 and new greenhouse coverage for diseases currently under development. While more responsive to perils faced in nursery and floriculture production, enhancing flexibility and affordability in the current suite of crop insurance policies is a top priority. Our sector is not alone — despite thousands of crops eligible for USDA insurance, compared to other crops, specialty growers are under-insured because available policies make less financial sense. If coverage is too expensive or doesn't pay when disaster strikes, what's the point?

Under-insurance means growers lean more on programs designed for catastrophic disaster relief. However, many such programs too need improvement. The severity and frequency of

natural disasters led Congress in four of the past five years to enact "ad-hoc" assistance programs, including WHIP+ and the new Emergency Relief Program, to supplement existing USDA assistance. While vital for those eligible, often growers waited years for Congress to act before assistance arrived. Broadening flexibility and eligibility for programs like the Noninsured Disaster Assistance Program (NAP) for uninsured crops and the Tree Assistance Program would reduce dependence on new programs after extraordinary events, saving taxpayer dollars and accelerating recovery.

GROW A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

All farmers know our success depends on good stewardship of the land and its resources. In nursery and floriculture, our unique produce also contributes to quality air, water, and soil while making the landscape beautiful. Nonetheless, voters and consumers expect all industries to become more sustainable and environmentally friendly. The Farm Bill presents an opportunity to promote innovative incentives for sustainability, including new revenue streams for farmers such as carbon credit marketing. Changing consumer expectations and the specter of new government regulation on production methods pose a challenge, however. If you need to dramatically change your mix of inputs — water, fertilizer, crop protectants — could you maintain productivity and profitability, or would you require cost-share assistance? Anticipating changes in climate, consumer preferences and regulation, with the right mix of voluntary incentive-based financial assistance, is a key challenge and opportunity in the next Farm Bill.

LEVERAGE INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS THROUGH RESEARCH

The Farm Bill authorizes programs to promote research, as well as the cultivation, marketing, and consumption of specialty crops, including nursery and floriculture crops. Two key programs that AmericanHort advocates for include the Specialty Crop Block Grant (SCBG), for which the 2018 Farm Bill set aside \$85 million annually, and the Specialty Crop Research Initiative SCRI, which receives \$100 million annually under the most recent law.

The Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) was created to provide much-needed federal assistance to the specialty crop industry through grants to state departments of agriculture to enhance the competitiveness of these crops. SCBGP funds can support an array of projects, such as locally and regionally focused specialty crop research or promotion.

Funding aside, the 2018 Farm Bill made some minor but important changes to the program, one being the addition of language requiring periodic evaluation and performance measures for the states and projects funded through the program. Flexibility in the program is key, but accountability is also important. The bill also made permanent the \$5 million in annual mandatory funding for the Specialty Crop Multi-State subprogram (SCMP).

SCBGP has been supporting horticulture industry projects since 2006 when it was first created. These funds have supported state partners' projects, including:

- Educating and marketing the green industry in Arizona
- Plant Something marketing program in New Jersey
- Research related to protecting pollinators in ornamental plant production in North Carolina
- Mitigation practices in stopping the spread of pests in Oregon.

Heading into the new Farm Bill cycle, we'll look to expand upon progress achieved in the 2018 law.

Meanwhile, the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI), administered by USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), has provided competitive grants to support regional and multi-state horticultural research. Our industry supports several SCRI grants each year. One notable project funded recently was a \$5 million grant led by Marc Van Lersel, Ph.D., University of Georgia, for research and outreach on maximizing profits through improved lighting systems used in controlled environmental agriculture. Another was a \$4 million grant led by Chuan Hong, Ph.D., Virginia Tech, aimed at safeguarding boxwood — the nation's No. 1 evergreen ornamental shrub crop — from boxwood blight disease. These grants have had significant positive impacts on horticultural producers, and AmericanHort will continue advocating for robust investment in the fundamental research solutions it supports.

MITIGATE PEST AND DISEASE RISK

In continuing to build on the successes of the Farm Bill's invasive pest programs, we seek to sustain and strengthen these programs to assist with the threat many invasive pests and diseases pose to horticulture. The successful Plant Pest and Disease Management & Disaster Prevention and the National Clean Plant Network is funded annually at \$75 million.

The National Clean Plant Network is a major success story, now considered as "critical infrastructure" serving high-value crop sectors with high-consequence pathogen threats. Improved access to "clean plants" such as tree fruit, citrus, berries, grapes, and roses enhances the competitiveness of these sectors, benefiting growers, entire market chains, and ultimately American consumers.

The Plant Pest and Diseases Management & Disaster Prevention program has funded targeted projects focused on solutions for specific pests like downy mildew and Ralstonia. Other projects are more broadly focused on industry-focused programs

like the Systems Approach to Nursery Certification (SANC). Speaking of SANC, AmericanHort's research arm, the Horticultural Research Institute (HRI), received an award in 2020 to deploy an online risk assessment tool that simplifies the process for nurseries

and greenhouses to implement the Systems Approach for Nursery Certification (SANC) program.

We as industry stakeholders intend to advance policy and funding proposals in the context of the next Farm Bill that allows clean plant centers to continue to serve the grower community into the future. Consistent mandatory program funding and coordination will continue an ongoing initiative that supports our nation's comprehensive network of local, state, and federal stakeholders combating pests and diseases that are harmful to our industry.

CONCLUSION

Both the House and Senate Agriculture Committees have begun to host Farm Bill-specific hearings, both in D.C. and throughout the nation. These hearings are intended to receive direct feedback from agricultural producers and industry

in order to improve the next bill. This is where our opportunity lies. As things move along, we will continue to work with our coalition partners in the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance to develop our priorities and plan to have them finalized and ready to share with our Congressional allies in the fall. We anticipate that both chambers of Congress will begin the drafting of their bills early next year.

The Farm Bill process provides the horticultural industry with an opportunity to advocate for assistance in combating the challenges we face today and those we will most certainly face in the future. It is up to each one of us in our industry to engage with our members

of Congress from both rural and urban districts, too, who may not understand how farm bill programs impact our industry and provide invaluable resources that allow us to continue producing what we do for consumers and markets. It is time to tell your story and join us in ensuring this important legislation continues to provide our industry with the resources they need moving forward. ■

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