February 9, 2024

Senator Debbie Stabenow  
Chairwoman, Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry  
328A Russell Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow,

The American Society for Horticultural Science (ASHS) is the premier professional society for horticultural science. Founded in 1903, the mission of ASHS is to promote and encourage national and international interest in scientific research and education in horticulture in all its branches.

We are writing to urge you and the other members of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees to proceed with Farm Bill reauthorization legislation. We understand that this has been a challenging legislative environment, but it remains vital for Congress to act on this important legislation. The Farm Bill policies support programs and provisions that develop access to the best data tools, technologies, and other information to our agriculture and food sectors. U.S. investment in public agricultural research has declined by one-third over the last two decades. Meanwhile, China, the European Union, and Brazil have continued to increase their investments in this area. China, the largest importer of U.S. agricultural goods, has become the world’s largest funder of agricultural R&D. (https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2022/june/investment-in-u-s-public-agricultural-research-and-development-has-fallen-by-a-third-over-past-two-decades-lags-major-trade-competitors/) We cannot keep putting this legislation on the back burner.

The timely reauthorization of the Farm Bill is important for the crucial policy updates and investments in critical, publicly funded research, including the following programs:

- **Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI)** - Specialty crops constitute half of all crop value in the United States and are central to the nutrition and well-being of Americans. They provide regional economic development as a high-value enterprise for rural communities. We support the specialty crop industry’s recommendation to reauthorize this program at $130 million a year. Past matching requirements have proven to be an ineffective and detrimental burden to the effective and efficient operation of this program and are unnecessary.

- **Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI)** – These efforts keep the U.S. secure in food, fiber, and bioenergy production. At present, AFRI can only fund about one third of projects recommended for funding. We support funding at $500 million a year.

- **Specialty Crop Block Grants** – This program has been highly successful in overcoming regional limitations to competitiveness and sustainability. We support funding at $100 million annually.

- **Organic Research and Education Initiative (OREI)** – Continues to be a rapidly expanding sector and continues to need targeted research.
• Organic Transitions Program (ORG) – Has been incredibly successful in supporting the development and implementation of research, extension and higher education programs to improve the competitiveness of organic livestock and crop producers, especially those who are transitioning from conventional and adopting organic practices.

• IR4 Project – The IR4 project is critically important for the management of pest solutions in specialty crops. Specialty crops by their nature are often left with few tools for managing pests. The need for specialty crop pest management continues to increase while federal assistance has stayed level for the past ten years. There is a desperate need to address existing pest management problems. We recommend Congress increase federal funding to $50 million per year.

• New Program Recommendation: Standalone Mechanization and Automation Research and Development Program – Adequate agriculture labor supply is an ongoing problem that limits specialty crop producers nationwide. Increased mechanization and automation within specialty crop agriculture is increasingly important to successfully grow, harvest, and handle specialty crops. Currently, mechanization and automation research is funded through several different program areas in the USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). Creating one dedicated program would reduce redundancies and provide more relevant and focused oversight for projects seeking funding. We recommend $20 million to establish this new program.

• New Program Recommendation: Standalone Controlled Environment Horticulture Research - Food access, availability, and nutritional insecurity are at alarming rates in the US, causing direct/indirect impacts on human health, well-being, and healthcare costs. Controlled Environment Horticulture (CEH) serves as a solution for a resilient food supply chain. We recommend $30 million to establish this new program.

The food and agriculture sectors are facing many challenges from extreme weather to supply chain disruptions and rising food costs from natural and geopolitical events to health problems related to food and nutrition instability. The key to meeting many of these challenges is a strong federal investment in agricultural and horticultural research. We thank you for your work on these important issues. Please do not hesitate to let us know if we can provide any additional information.

Sincerely,

Dean A. Kopsell
ASHS President
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