The green industry does what it can to step up and address practical and applied research and development challenges through our research foundation, the Horticultural Research Institute. However, longer-term and basic research needs exceed our capacity to self-fund, and we look to key federal programs included in the Farm Bill for leverage and partnerships.

Increasing funding for “core” research programs, including the Specialty Crop Research Initiative, Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, and Plant Protection Act Sec. 7721

The Farm Bill authorizes programs to promote research and the cultivation, marketing, and consumption of specialty crops, including nursery and floriculture crops. Two key programs the horticulture industry relies on include the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) and Specialty Crop Block Grant program (SCBGP).

The Specialty Crop Research Initiative (Title VII, Research):

Policy Recommendation – Congress should allocate an additional $50 million in annual mandatory spending to SCRI and maintain a flexible governance structure for SCRI.

Policy Recommendation – Congress should reinstate the Secretary’s authority to waive the matching funds requirement.

Current Status and Challenges – Administered by USDA’s National Institute for Food and Agriculture, SCRI now provides $80 million in annual funding via competitive grants to support regional and multi-state horticultural research. Projects are vetted in a two-part review process that considers industry relevance and scientific merit. Successful projects tend to involve interdisciplinary research teams and collaboration among research institutions. However, the program is vastly oversubscribed, with many more high-quality applications each year than can be funded. Specialty crops represent one-third of the total value of U.S. crop production, justifying the request for the funding increase.

Example of Successful Project in Horticulture – An SCRI-funded project to develop “intelligent” spray technology resulted in laser-guided application equipment with specialized nozzles that open and close depending on the structure of the plant canopy being treated. The technology minimizes drift and non-target application, dramatically decreasing the amount of pesticide active ingredient used and saving money. The results have applicability in nurseries and greenhouses, orchards, vineyards, and other cropping systems, and commercialization has proceeded.

Our industry supports several Specialty Crop Research Initiative proposals each year, but given the overall resource limitations, few are actually funded.

Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (Title X, Horticulture):

Policy Recommendation – The Specialty Crop Block Grant Program should be increased to a funding level of not less than $100 million annually. The set-aside of not less than $5 million for multi-state projects should be maintained.
Policy Recommendation – USDA should require Block Grant administrators (e.g., state department of agriculture) to conduct stakeholder outreach and engagement before the application process.

Current Status and Challenges – The 2014 Farm Bill subsequently increased the program’s mandatory funding to $72.5 million annually through 2017 and then $85 million annually in perpetuity starting in 2018. The 2018 Farm Bill also made permanent the $5 million in annual mandatory funding for the Specialty Crop Multi-State subprogram (SCMP). This program must be maintained, and Congress must continue to build on its success by increasing the mandatory funding and requiring USDA to improve its administration of multi-state grants and provide greater guidance to state program administrators on best practices for program administration.

Example of Successful Project in Horticulture – The SCBGP has supported the horticultural industry since 2006, when it was first created and included in the Farm Bill. These funds have supported many of our state partner’s projects, including the ‘Plant Something’ campaign in states ranging from Arizona to New Jersey to Oregon that helped the green industry educate consumers on the myriad benefits landscape plants bring to their lives, including increased health and well-being and improved environmental quality.