

Grants directed to specialty crops

Oregon’s specialty crop industry is hoping to increase its success in the marketplace with the help of \$1.75 million in federal funds authorized by the 2008 Farm Bill. The money will fund 24 projects selected by the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) and an industry advisory board — projects designed to help a major portion of the state’s agricultural production.

Funding has been allocated for projects dealing with such issues as food safety, marketing, promotion, carbon reduction, school gardens, and certification.

“These funds are very critical to a state like Oregon, where a vast majority of our agriculture is based on specialty crops,” said ODA Director Katy Coba. “This program enables us to reach the diversity of specialty crop growers in the state and allows our industries to ultimately be more competitive in the marketplace.”

Specialty crops are defined as commonly recognized fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, and nursery crops. Oregon ranks fifth in the nation in production of specialty crops. In past farm bills, federal appropriations targeted large program crops primarily grown in the Midwest and South, such as wheat, corn, soybeans and cotton.

Under the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Specialty Crop Block Grant Program, each state received a base amount, but additional funds were awarded to states in proportion to the percentage of specialty crops they produce. This year, Oregon received \$250,000 more than a year ago.

A major focus in the grant process was outreach to beginning farmers and socially disadvantaged groups. ODA and the advisory board found that many of those in the targeted area currently lack the organizational capacity necessary to apply for and administer grants. As a result, very few

eligible projects were received from beginning farmer or socially disadvantaged groups.

To address the priority areas, ODA designed internal projects to assist these populations. Projects include an integrated Farm to School and School Garden Program to be piloted in both rural and urban school districts. Another internal project focuses on cultivating “agripreneurs” to address some of the primary barriers to entry for new farmers. Funding is being directed for a series of events titled “My Oregon Farm Days” to facilitate relationships between specialty crop producers and distributors. Funding will also help established growers, including a project to help Oregon Christmas trees gain better access to export markets.

“Many of the areas we are funding internally include opportunities for new farmers, direct farm marketing, food safety issues, and addressing major export barriers,” said Katie Pearmine, ODA’s Specialty Crop Grant Program Coordinator.

The other 17 funded projects are external and represent a variety of efforts that reflect the diversity of Oregon agriculture.

ODA has awarded \$92,073 to a collaborative marketing partnership of family owned farms in the Klamath Basin to help promote organic specialty potatoes to retail outlets. These small, colorful potatoes have already become a hit overseas at targeted promotions in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Philippines. The grant award targets domestic retail interest. Additional markets will help a thirsty area of the state.

“Many of these varieties have a lower demand for water and are ideally suited for the drought conditions the Klamath Basin is currently facing,” says ODA Assistant Director Dalton Hobbs. “We’ve worked with the growers in that area to develop varieties of specialty potatoes that are drought resistant, that re-

quire less water to produce, and actually fetch a higher price in the marketplace because of their specialized nature.”

ODA is also awarding \$92,500 to expand a voluntary food safety testing program that started last year in Malheur County’s onion industry. About 90 percent of the Treasure Valley’s onion growers participated in the one-of-its-kind program that tests for pesticide residues and microbial contamination -- ultimately leading to a certification that gives the onions consumer confidence and a market advantage.

“This area produces about 30 percent of the nation’s supply of storage onions,” said Hobbs. “We think this will set a very good example and do some of the up front work necessary for other fresh produce crops to come on board with similar testing programs for pesticide residues and microbial contamination.”

The Oregon Wine Board will receive \$92,500 to increase consumer awareness of the Oregon Certified Sustainable Wine Program through online marketing, trade marketing, and media relations. The program centers on showcasing the wine industry’s commitment to sustainability.

“Increased awareness of the program will hopefully create additional demand for Oregon wine and support the value of the state’s wine industry,” said Hobbs.

“What we are seeing from the successful sustainability-related projects is a focus on growing value-based consumers,” said Pearmine. “These are consumers that are looking for more value in their product based on its attributes and characteristics, and they are willing to pay for it.”

ODA will review quarterly reports from each of the grant recipients to measure success.

“Overall, we are really excited about these projects and what they can do for our agricultural economy,” said Pearmine.

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