

**A Case for Specialty Crops Funding for a Sustainable Health and Food System**

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FCS 280-01: Food Systems and Policy

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December 10, 2024

## **Funding Specialty Crops: A Policy for Healthier and Sustainable Agriculture**

### **Background/Context**

For decades, the United States agricultural system has directed most federal subsidies toward commodity crops such as corn, soybeans, and wheat. These crops play a central role in producing processed foods, animal feed, and biofuels. However, this emphasis has limited financial and structural support for specialty crops, including fruits, vegetables, nuts, and herbs—foods essential to human health.

This imbalance in funding has contributed to widespread health challenges, such as rising rates of obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases, which are partly linked to diets lacking fresh produce. The federal MyPlate dietary guidelines recommend filling half of one's plate with fruits and vegetables, yet access to these foods remains limited for many Americans due to affordability and availability issues. Additionally, the reliance on monoculture practices for commodity crops damages soil health and contributes to climate change (Springmann et al., 2018).

### **Proposal**

To address these issues, I propose implementing a policy to increase funding for specialty crops. This policy would provide ongoing support to farmers who grow specialty crops, enhance research and innovation in this sector, and expand access through federal nutrition programs like SNAP. These steps would help align agricultural priorities with dietary guidelines, making healthy foods more accessible and affordable while promoting sustainable farming practices.

I also propose amending the Farm Bill to make funding for specialty crops mandatory, thereby providing guaranteed financial support for the growing and marketing of fruits, vegetables, and

other health-promoting crops. This policy would ensure that specialty crop farmers receive the necessary financial resources for production, research, and marketing, and it would help balance the federal agricultural support system between commodity and specialty crops.

Recent actions by the USDA demonstrate progress. In November 2024, the USDA committed over \$2 billion to support the specialty crop sector. While this is an encouraging step, it is insufficient to reverse decades of systemic underinvestment. A lasting solution requires a long-term commitment to balancing subsidies between specialty and commodity crops (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2024).

### **Opposing Viewpoint**

Critics of this proposal might argue that commodity crops are essential to the economy and food security, as they provide key inputs for livestock feed, biofuels, and export markets. They may express concern that reallocating subsidies would destabilize commodity markets, harm farmers reliant on these crops, or increase the cost of basic goods. Additionally, some may question whether increasing specialty crop production would guarantee widespread dietary improvements, given that other barriers, such as food education and distribution infrastructure, also play significant roles.

### **For Policy**

While commodity crops are undeniably important, the disproportionate focus on their production has led to a food system that neglects both public health and environmental sustainability. Specialty crops, on the other hand, directly support dietary needs and provide environmental benefits. Research shows that greater consumption of fruits and vegetables can lower the risk of chronic diseases, such as heart conditions and diabetes (Micha et al., 2017).

Moreover, expanding specialty crop production can mitigate environmental damage by encouraging diverse, sustainable farming practices.

The USDA's \$2 billion investment in specialty crops is a step in the right direction, but it highlights how much more is needed. Commodity crops still receive the lion's share of agricultural funding, creating a system that perpetuates health disparities and environmental harm. To address these challenges comprehensively, additional measures should include:

- **Infrastructure Investment:** Supporting urban agriculture to access to fresh produce
- **Crop Insurance:** Providing cover for farmers who call in losses
- **Direct Payments and Counter-Cyclical Payments:** Payments to provide direct income
- **Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) Loans:** Loans to farmers growing specialty crops. **Education Campaigns:** Increasing public awareness of the health benefits of specialty crops and encouraging dietary changes
- **Research and Development:** Advancing innovations to enhance the productivity and resilience of specialty crop farming

Addressing these gaps in funding would also promote equity. Many low-income communities face food deserts, where fresh produce is scarce and processed foods dominate. Increasing specialty crop production and affordability can help these communities access the nutritious foods they need (Springmann et al., 2018).

### **Closing Argument**

The current agricultural funding system prioritizes short-term economic benefits over long-term public health and environmental resilience. While the USDA's recent funding initiative for specialty crops is a positive development, it should serve as the foundation for a broader policy

overhaul. By prioritizing specialty crops, the United States can create a food system that aligns with dietary guidelines, promotes health equity, and fosters sustainability.

The Farm Bill is one of the most powerful tools in shaping the U.S. food system, and it must be used to promote the production of health-promoting foods. By making funding for specialty crops mandatory, we can create a food system that aligns more closely with public health goals, supports sustainable farming practices, and provides affordable, nutritious foods to all Americans.

Investing in specialty crops is not just an agricultural policy; it is a public health initiative and a step toward environmental stewardship. Congress has the responsibility and opportunity to enact lasting change by supporting this critical shift in agricultural priorities.

## References

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