

Research suggests public funding for specialty crops inadequate

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Specialty crops, including fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, and nursery crops, have become increasingly important compared to other categories of agriculture in the United States over the past 50 years. These crops have continued to grow in production value, but this growth has not been matched by growth in public agricultural research spending. In fact, spending on specialty crops research has remained constant during a time period when the value of production for these crops has increased significantly.

A recent article published in the August 2008 issue of *HortScience* reviewed trends in the economic importance of specialty crops and public funding for research on these crops. Researchers Julian M. Alston of the University of California, Davis, and Philip G. Pardey from the University of Minnesota, questioned the adequacy of funding for specialty crops and whether the share of funding allocated to research these crops should be increased.

Previous research has indicated that government involvement in agricultural research and development is justified, because the private sector typically invests too little in certain types of R&D. The rates of return to publicly funded agricultural research have been very high, suggesting that government intervention to date has been inadequate, and that the U.S. government could have profited from spending much more on agricultural R&D, especially in the area of specialty crops.

Agricultural research in the United States is funded from a variety of

sources. Historically, the majority of funding has come from the U.S Department of Agriculture. Other agencies, including the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Energy, the Department of Defense, and the U.S. Agency for International Development have been increasing sources of funding over the last several years. Overall spending on R&D grew rapidly during the 1960s and 70s, but since then, growth has slowed and become erratic. In general, support has stagnated.

The growth in the value of production of specialty crops has not been matched by commensurate growth in public agricultural research spending. There could be many benefits to increasing funding in this area. One possible benefit is that there can be a much larger social rate of return if it makes fruit and vegetables less expensive and more available to more Americans, encouraging people to eat healthier diets.

The authors concluded that although the evidence is mixed, specialty crops research is underfunded and that a case can be made for increasing funding going for research of these crops. They suggest that a producer check-off program with a matching government grant could be one way to give incentives to both private industry and government agencies to enhance research funding. The Australian government has implemented such a program with much success. Another option would be to simply redirect funds that would otherwise be spent on other types of agricultural research.

The complete study and abstract are available on the ASHS HortScience electronic journal web site: [hortsci.ashspublications.org/c...t/abstract/43/5/1461](http://hortsci.ashspublications.org/content/abstract/43/5/1461)

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