Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

May 19, 2006

Secretary Mike Johanns
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave, SW
Washington, DC 20250

RE: Docket Number FV06-1290-1PR, Federal Register Vol. 71, No. 76, pages 20353-20357

Dear Secretary Johanns,

We are writing in response to the proposed rule for the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) as authorized under Public Law 108-465. We thank you for your dedication to ensuring this rule moves expediently through the regulatory process.

As you well know, Congress passed H.R. 3242, the Specialty Crops Competitiveness Act, in December of 2004 to promote the competitiveness of U.S. specialty crop products in the global marketplace. Even though we produce the highest quality, most abundant specialty crops in the world, the challenges of competing on an uneven playing field continue to thwart the progress of our domestic industry. Significant federal investment in initiatives such as the SCBGP is absolutely essential to fostering the future of American agriculture.

We are concerned, however, about Section 1290.4 (a) in the proposed rule addressing the eligibility of projects. Specifically, this section bestows priority to "fresh" specialty crop projects. If this priority is approved in the final rule, we fear projects enhancing other sectors of the specialty crop industry such as canned, dried, frozen or processed products would be given lesser consideration. In no other section of the proposed rule or the underlying legislation is priority assigned to "fresh" specialty crops, nor is the word "fresh" even mentioned.

During consideration of H.R. 3242, Congress attempted to balance the historical competition within the specialty crop industry between the value, nutritional or otherwise, of fresh versus processed products by specifically not prioritizing one sector over another. Instead, all specialty crops were to be given equal weight and consideration and grants were to be awarded on the merit of the application and the ability to meet the goal of increased competitiveness. We can find no foundation for this priority and believe it would go against Congressional intent of the SCBGP. As such, we urge you to reject the language in Section 1290.4 (a) that gives priority to "fresh" specialty crop projects.

Furthermore, in the proposed rule, comments are specifically solicited for the definition of "enhancing the competitiveness", as well as how to incorporate outcome measures into the State plans. We appreciate your interest in gathering additional information about these terms but caution against creating a definition that is either too broad or too narrow in the final rule. Increasing competitiveness is not only about increasing consumption, although that is a worthy goal. Grants may also be awarded to increase innovation, research and market development. As such, outcomes measures may need to be quantified in a number of different ways.

Thank you again for your consideration and for your attention to the SCBGP. We look forward to working with you on the implementation of this worthy program.

Sincerely,

DENNIS CARDOZA
Member of Congress

RICHARD POMBO
Member of Congress

JIM COSTA
Member of Congress

JOE BACA
Member of Congress

GEORGE RADANOVICH
Member of Congress

JOHN DOOLITTLE
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MIKE MICHAUD
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MIKE MCINTYRE
Member of Congress

CC: Administrator Lloyd Day, Agricultural Marketing Service