

After more than 18 months of work, the House of Representatives and the Senate agreed on a Farm Bill that will fund agriculture, nutrition and conservation programs for the next five years.

The final result was a mixed bag, to be sure. Many lawmakers, myself included, feel that we can do even more to minimize taxpayer dollars that go to Midwest farmers growing corn, wheat and other commodity crops. But at the same time, fresh fruit and vegetable farmers were included the Farm Bill for the first time ever. That means the Central Coast's \$4.5 billion agriculture industry will see some exciting increases in funds directed to research, marketing and nutrition programs.

Fresh fruits and vegetables, known as specialty crops, make up the bulk of farm product in our region. And while there have been drips of federal funding for fresh produce research, that stream has been insufficient. But in this Farm Bill, California lawmakers were able to negotiate significant levels of funding.

- The newly created Specialty Crop Research Initiative will receive \$230 million over five years. This pot of money will be managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and will fund research grants that will benefit our farmers.
- The Specialty Crop Block Grant program will receive \$224 million over five years. These funds are doled out to states -- with California receiving the largest portion -- and will allow an increase in the scope of research grants across the country.
- The bill also provides \$377 million over 10 years for a variety of pest and disease detection and control programs.

Although I don't serve on the House Agriculture Committee, I was able to secure an agreement that at least 10 percent of the Specialty Crop Research Initiative funds, or \$23 million, specifically for fresh produce safety grants. Keeping our food supply safe must be a top priority.

Additional federal feeding programs, such as the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program for our schools, will open up even more markets for California producers. In fact, more than 70 percent of the Farm Bill is directed to nutrition programs. In 2002, when the previous Farm Bill was passed, that number was only 35 percent. We're finally seeing agriculture funds that will support the healthy foods we're supposed to eat.

Much of the funding increases for California's farmers came at the expense of commodity programs that previously were sent to the Midwest. Democratic leaders were able to pass many important reforms, a process that is expected to accelerate in future Farm Bills. Two major reforms include a reduction of support for commodity crops by \$58 billion and a lowered income ceiling for individuals to qualify for support, meaning benefits go to those who need it.

This Farm Bill was a compromise bill, but it's an important first step to more lasting reform. I look forward to working in the years to come on our next Farm Bill, which will see even more improvements.

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