



**Statement of the
Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development**

**To the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
“Perspectives from the Field: Farmer and Rancher Views on the
Agricultural Economy, Part 2”**

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Good morning, Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Klobuchar, and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you as a part of your “*Perspectives from the Field: Farmer and Rancher Views on the Agricultural Economy*” series. My focus will be on specialty crops – their importance, and the challenges and opportunities that growers and consumers face as you continue to work on a Farm Bill. Members of this committee have the ability to foster the success of specialty crops today and for years to come and I’m looking forward to the constructive solutions and policy decisions that will come out of this hearing.

As the junior Senator from Michigan, Senator Elissa Slotkin, likes to point out: food security is national security. I believe the next Farm Bill serves as the crossroads for whether or not we take that fact seriously.

The perspective I bring to this hearing is as Director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD). I’m proud to lead a state agency of dedicated public servants who are committed to providing opportunities for our food and agriculture businesses, lifting up our rural communities, and preserving Michigan’s natural resources.

Agriculture is a \$105 billion industry for Michigan, and I consider our specialty crop farmers the backbone of our success.

While Michigan is largely considered “THE” specialty crop state with more than 300 crops produced, specialty crops are grown and consumed in all 50 states. Specialty crop producers feed the country and much of the world with nutritious fruit, vegetables, legumes, and more while supplying our homes and businesses with cut flowers and potted plants. Our holidays include celebrations that see families partake in food and drink flavored with herbs and spices, snacking on an array of tree nuts, or

maybe putting up Christmas Trees in December. Our yards and gardens are often landscaped with a fir, spruce, or hemlock. The point is that specialty crops truly *are* special and are integrated into what we eat, how we decorate, and when we share moments with friends and family.

This committee is well aware of the breadth of crops designated as “specialty” and it may be easy to assume these products have always been here and always will be. But since your invitation was extended for my testimony, I’ve been asked by a number of producers to share with you just how vital specialty crop support programs are for their existence.

Unfortunately, for many specialty crops, times have never been more tenuous. What once provided an avenue for farmers to diversify their products has forced many to choose whether or not their farm will welcome the next generation. Whether it’s due to trade pressures, market access challenges, rising input costs, climate variability, labor constraints, and threats of pests and disease – many specialty crops in this country are either harder to grow, more difficult to get to markets, or as challenging as ever to access for the consumer.

This committee has a history of championing specialty crops in a notably intentional way by passing Farm Bills that have opened market opportunities through purchasing and food access programs, as well as by funding programs that foster trade and advance agronomy and plant pathology.

Public sector research is critical for specialty crops. In Michigan, Specialty Crop Block Grants annual investments of approximately \$2 million in recent years support activities such as new leaf disease and seedling root rot research in celery; determining action thresholds and management strategies for root lesion

nematodes in carrot production; methods to combat onion Stemphylium leaf blight; and advancing etiology, detection, and management of blueberry viruses, to name a few.

Growing conditions are rapidly changing and becoming more unpredictable, making research to manage disease and pests more essential than ever. This is important not just because of the economic importance of specialty crops for growers and entire regional agricultural systems, but because these specialty crops are the food we eat. The nation's first land grant college, Michigan State University, is driving additional research, much of which is supported by the Farm Bill's Specialty Crop Research Initiative. Land grant universities across the country are also recipients of this research funding and are actively engaged on the front lines of trying to keep farmers one step ahead from the next pest or disease threat.

Last year, the Block Grant funding made it possible for Michigan specialty crop companies and associations to attend national and international trade shows including the National Restaurant Association Show, SIAL Paris, and the Global Produce and Floral Show. These trade shows resulted in 266 new buyers of specialty crops or specialty crop-processed products. Companies and specialty crops groups realized \$1.4 million in sales immediately from participating in these three trade shows with an additional \$7 million in sales anticipated through the buyer conversations and negotiations started at these events. The year before last, Specialty Crop Block Grant dollars funded consumer preference and market demand studies for blueberries, promoted specialty crops as healthy food options for school-aged children in urban communities across West Michigan, furthered sustainable dry bean production practices to meet evolving market demands, and advanced social media marketing support to engage target audiences and enhance competitiveness for Michigan apples.

Growers have also made clear with increasing urgency in recent weeks both the importance of the Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crops (MASC) program as well as the importance of passing a Farm Bill for all of the reasons mentioned above, and more.

MDARD is in constant communication with growers and specialty crop groups to ensure their state government is listening, engaged, and responsive. We hear from asparagus growers that the H2A program continues to present availability and affordability constraints; our blueberry growers echo that plus concerns around pests and disease; our potato growers note challenges around input costs and closely track the evolutions of nutritional guidelines and recommendations; our dry bean farmers constantly balance domestic and international market access; and Michigan cherry growers consider ripping out entire orchards due to development pressures and multiple, extreme weather events that have affected production and harvest in consecutive years.

On that last note in particular, I'll remark that everywhere I go in Michigan, growers continue to express concern over increasingly erratic growing conditions. For instance, last year our cherry farmers lost between 30 and 75 percent of their crop, depending on locality and variety, because of multiple abnormal weather events that drove unprecedented insect and disease pressure. Our state has experienced some of the warmest and wettest spring seasons on record in recent years, resulting in changes to pest life cycles and early bud breaks. When followed by events such as late frosts, we see crop disasters our growers cannot continue to endure. With the future of our specialty crop industry in such doubt, many farmers don't know how long their operations can continue. Accordingly, in Michigan, we've taken a posture of intentional coordination with federal and local partners to ensure we're taking action supporting farmers when they need it most. A

Farm Bill that provides growers the support to ensure the continuation of their family farms in the face of these unprecedented challenges is critical for the long-term viability of specialty crops in Michigan and across the country.

At MDARD we're focused on several overarching priorities: climate resiliency and regenerative agriculture; diversity in agriculture production; and economic prosperity across Michigan. Specialty crops are key to the realization of these priorities, not just in Michigan, but in many places across the country. Toward this end in Michigan, Governor Gretchen Whitmer has leveraged federal funding supporting specialty crops, investing state dollars in two new flagship programs: MDARD's Regenerative Agriculture Unit and the new Farm-to-Family program.

Regenerative agriculture is an active approach to land management driven by improving soil health. Rather than a rigid set of rules, it embraces a blend of sustainable farming methods tailored to each farmer's needs. Core principles include understanding the context of an individual's farm operation, minimizing soil disturbance, maximizing biodiversity, keeping soil covered, maintaining living roots year-round, and integrating livestock. Our regenerative agriculture unit is the first of its kind to be embedded in a state department. It allows Michigan producers to receive support to engage in this approach to production agriculture, which will only be more important in the years ahead. By adopting regenerative agriculture practices, farmers and landowners can improve profitability while restoring healthy soils and safeguarding natural resources for future generations. Commodity row crop farmers are on the front lines of integrating many of these practices, but they are equally important for specialty crop growers.

Established just this year, Michigan's new Farm-to-Family program is an innovative, first-of-its-kind program in state government that's working to strengthen agri-food systems across two peninsulas. Our first investment through this initiative is a middle-of-the-supply chain program that invests in expanding and bolstering food hubs and farm stops, both innovative models of market outlets, aggregation, and distribution that are important value chain nodes for an array of specialty crops in our state. Together, these programs are working to add value to the crops grown on Michigan farms and getting those crops to the people of Michigan.

The federal and state dollars that together support specialty crops are critical to the vibrancy of rural communities, quality of life from the Atlantic to the Pacific, enhancing America's economic competitive edge, and establishing and broadening lifelong consumers for U.S. food and agriculture produce domestically and in markets across the globe.

I share all of this in today's testimony because support for our specialty crops directly translates to tools to keep farmers farming, keep rural communities vibrant, and keep fruits and vegetables on dinner tables across America. Specialty crops are a vital piece in this puzzle, and I urge the Committee to ensure it doesn't get lost in the big picture as you negotiate the next Farm Bill.