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NEBRASKA SPECIALTY CROP PROJECTS RECEIVE $822,737 IN USDA GRANTS

LINCOLN – The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recently awarded $822,737 in grants to fund 16 projects designed to strengthen the specialty crop industry in Nebraska. The USDA provides grant monies through the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) to fund research and ag education activities to increase demand for specialty crops. The Nebraska Department of Agriculture (NDA) monitors and administers Nebraska's specialty crop program.

"Nebraska is home to a diverse range of agricultural products due in part to the state's varying terrain, elevation, soil and climate," said NDA Director Steve Wellman. "In addition to variety, specialty crops add value to Nebraska's agricultural industry which helps to grow the state's economy."

SCBGP supports farmers growing specialty crops, including fruits, vegetables, tree nuts and nursery crops. Grant recipients include agricultural departments and agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the five U.S. territories. A list of eligible specialty crops is available on USDA's website at ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/specialty-crop.

The University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL) received 12 of the 16 grants that the USDA awarded to Nebraska this year. Those grant-funded projects include:

- hosting an annual Nebraska Specialty Crop Conference and Trade Show from 2021 - 2023 to teach growers about farm practices, marketing methods, and research projects that will grow and enhance the specialty crop industry;
- examining the practicality of growing Vinifera grapes in high tunnels for the Midwest;
- researching novel weed management solutions for matted-row strawberry production;
- increasing dry edible bean usage by developing a high value-added yogurt product;
- optimizing nitrogen fertility management of mint production in western Nebraska;
- collaborating with local growers and area beekeepers to do on-farm testing of a trap crop tactic to manage pest and beneficial insects in sunflower fields;
- conducting a study that will test new, relatively inexpensive commercially available chemicals for their ability to reduce damage and improve yields in chickpeas due to the fungal disease Ascochyta blight;
- evaluating novel herbicides and herbicide timings in dry edible beans for control of herbicide-resistant Palmer amaranth;

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- developing a quick, reliable and reproducible analytical methods of evaluating the protein quality of the pulse crop, and an innovative processing technique to enhance the functional properties of pulse proteins for further development of innovative pulse protein-based foods;
- evaluating nitrogen fertilizer management and iron fertilizer management strategies for improving dry edible bean quantity and quality in western Nebraska;
- identifying mungbean varieties adaptable to western Nebraska; and
- mapping common bacterial blight and common rust resistance genes in Tepary beans to learn how to enhance resistance levels in dry beans.

Four additional groups in Nebraska received funding this year. Mac's Creek Winery and Brewery received funding to study a more sustainable approach to grapevine weed and disease control by eliminating and reducing chemical pesticide and herbicide spraying in Nebraska vineyards and apple orchards.

The USDA awarded funds to the Arbor Day Foundation to use ozone technology to reduce pesticide usage and improve food safety in small Nebraska fruit orchards.

The USA Dry Pea and Lentil Council received funding to conduct an international trade mission to meet with food aid organization CEOs, purchasing managers, nutritionists and other key personnel. The trade team will travel to Washington, D.C. and Rome, Italy.

Through USDA funding, NDA will continue to conduct Potato Cyst Nematode (PCN) soil surveys to monitor for the presence of PCN as required to maintain Nebraska's PCN pest-free status.

All of the projects receiving SCBGP funding this year must be completed by Sept. 29, 2023. For a list of funds awarded to each state and more information about past projects, go to USDA's website at ams.usda.gov/services/grants/scbgp/awards.

NDA administered a two-phase competitive grant application process for these SCBGP funds. Phase I involved the submission of concept proposals, which allowed applicants to explain the main points of their project. The concept proposals were independently and competitively scored by a field review panel. Projects with the highest combined scores were asked to complete Phase II of the application process and include a more in-depth description of the project.

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