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Testimony before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on  
Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies

Honorable Jimmy Panetta CA-20

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Though I am a new member of Congress, I truly appreciate the opportunity to come before you today in the hopes of building upon the work of Sam Farr, former Ranking Member of this Subcommittee, on behalf of California's agriculture industry. I proudly represent a region on the central coast of California that is home to an abundant agriculture industry known as the Salad Bowl of the World. This multi-billion dollar economic engine produces some of the country's highest quality fresh fruits and vegetables, including lettuce, strawberries, artichokes, and over one hundred other specialty crops.

Today, I offer my testimony with the goal of supporting this portion of the agriculture industry and the rural communities that rely upon its success. I am here to advocate strongly for funding support of the specialty crop and organic sector, giving focus to the research that helps equip producers with innovative tools in plant breeding, pest management, and resource conservation.

I am here today to advocate for continued funding for the Agricultural Research Station (ARS) building and facilities account. It is too easy to think that cutting a construction account will not have any impact. However, research is the essence of agriculture innovation, food

safety, and improved environmental stewardship. My district is home to a USDA ARS station in Salinas, with projects focusing on refining agricultural production systems, increasing sustainability efforts, and advancing overall soil and air quality. Funds previously appropriated by this subcommittee to ARS were critical in funding much needed renovations to this aging facility, first constructed in the 1930s. This project has been designated by USDA as a high priority project, recognizing the value this research has on the specialty crop industry.

I also urge the inclusion of report language specifically stating the committee's commitment to specialty crop research as a directive for ARS. These labor intensive, high value crops face unique challenges like lack of mechanization, pests and diseases, and fewer coverage options for risk management when compared to traditional commodities. The report language should urge ARS to be attentive to these unique needs and encourage the agency to develop effective solutions for this sector through scientific research.

In addition to the work being done by ARS, the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) is facilitating further advancements in specialty crop knowledge. NIFA is doing so through its Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI), for which I advocate for full funding. The research conducted through these grant programs is working to address some of the most critical challenges affecting the specialty crop industry, particularly pertaining to genomics, pest management, and food safety. For this industry to thrive, along with the rural communities depending on it, this Committee must continue to support these efforts and the partners with whom USDA works.

Advancements made in specialty crop research programs help equip producers with innovative tools, but they do not completely safeguard growers from the threat of invasive pests and plant diseases. USDA's Animal Plant Health and Inspection Service (APHIS) provides a

critical role in the detection and eradication of these threats to ensure the economic viability of special crop operations.

The Committee has shown strong support for these programs, with a \$9.5 million increase for specialty crop pest efforts in FY17. I advocate for continued robust investment in APHIS specialty crop pest protection as a way to further help producers mitigate the risks they are subjected to when growing. From field inspections to surveys to trappings, these funds are critical in combating pests impacting producers. Investments in detection and response are vital to ensure the continued economic success of the specialty crop industry given the destructive nature of many of these pests and their associated diseases.

Additionally, these APHIS programs are strategic investments that can save money in the long run. The response to the European grapevine moth by AHPIS led to its eradication in California, saving the wine industry from substantial economic losses. Further investments are needed in the detection and protection against light brown apple moth or the glossy winged sharpshooter to ensure the economic viability of many agricultural businesses. If these pest detection and response efforts are not supported financially, the agriculture industry can expect to experience higher losses and decreased profit because of pests and diseases.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to focus on continued support for the organic agriculture sector. Through years of consistent growth, organic agriculture has come to represent over \$40 billion in sales annually. As policy makers, I believe we must recognize these ongoing shifts in consumer demands and work to ensure that the organic sector is supported by effective programs. For this reason, I advocate funding of \$15 million to the fully authorized level for the National Organic Program (NOP). By fully funding the NOP, the Committee will provide

USDA with the resources necessary to develop effective standards and to enforce such standards that ensure consumer confidence.

The costs associated with transitioning a farm from conventional to organic production often serves as a barrier to entry into this sector. As the age of an average conventional grower climbs, the agriculture industry needs to be attentive to the needs of younger growers interested in entering the business, many of whom have an increased interest in organic production. For this reason, report language should be included urging USDA to use its full authority when administering the National Organic Certification Cost Share Program. This would allow growers interested in producing organic products, particularly new and beginning farmers, to defray the costs associated with their transition from convention to organic crops.

In addition to ensuring the NOP is fully operational, the Committee should ensure that organic agriculture has representation in other USDA programs. Specifically, more work is needed when focusing on USDA's flagship competitive grant program, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). Report language should be incorporated to address organic agriculture's potential to meet the goals set forth by the initiative, particularly pertaining to agricultural economics and rural communities. With organic agriculture experiencing year after year of growth, AFRI funds directed to advancements in organic agriculture production could greatly assist rural communities where conventional agriculture has not sufficiently met their economic needs. By expanding these practices through AFRI, rural communities could diversify their production portfolio, thus improving their economic conditions.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank my colleagues on the Committee. It is always a pleasure to advocate for issues that are so vital to the economy and communities of

California's central coast. I look forward to working with you all to best serve the growers, shippers, farmworkers, and consumers who depend on us to enact effective agricultural policy.