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Viewpoints: Crop research will wither if farm bill fails to pass

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Obscured by the immense shadow cast by the Civil War is one of President Abraham Lincoln's most significant and enduring legacies – the creation of the land grant university system now celebrating its 150th anniversary.

In 1862, the Morrill Land-Grant College Act committed 17.4 million acres of land to all states for the purpose of establishing universities aimed at making higher education accessible to the masses while simultaneously boosting the nation's farm economy with practical research for improving the ability of farmers to feed their countrymen.

Since that time, a world-renowned network of scientists from within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, universities and cooperative extension offices across the nation have increased our country's abundance of food, fiber and fuel. In the modern era, the fruits of this ongoing commitment to research have been sustained through a series of farm bills approved every five years.

But the clock is now ticking on the 2008 farm bill, set to expire unless Congress acts before adjourning this year. Not only must Congress act, it must pass the new 2012 farm bill rather than merely opt to extend the 2008 measure as a stopgap approach. Otherwise, there will be no mandatory research funding for specialty crops, leaving fruit, vegetable, nursery and nut farmers out in the cold.

This may be a challenge because the 2012 farm bill currently before Congress contains numerous elements, including such politically-charged provisions as commodity support, food stamps and conservation programs. But congressional failure to act would be a travesty for specialty crop agriculture, which has reaped significant benefits from a relatively small research program first signed into law five years ago.

Specialty crops include wine and table grapes, strawberries, almonds, walnuts, pistachios, avocados, apples, carrots, peaches, raisins, nectarines, garlic, mushrooms, lettuce and dozens of other crops that are grown by farmers who feed the nation and world.

Therein lies the importance of the Specialty Crop Research Initiative, or SCRI, which was included in the 2008 farm bill to expand and strengthen research for more than 250 specialty crops long overlooked despite their collective value. Specialty crops now comprise more than half of the total value of U.S. agricultural production. In a short time, SCRI has resulted in game-changing innovations not just in California, where specialty crops dominate, but also in such diverse states as

New York, Michigan, Virginia, Florida, Washington, Ohio, Kansas and Oklahoma.

After all, our country's pre-eminence in specialty crops did not occur in a vacuum. Since 1862, Congress has funded farm research, which has been responsible for real-world breakthroughs that have made agriculture a pillar of the economy and the envy of the world.

Looking at the grape industry, research impacts have been astonishing. Wine grapes and wine production have become world-renowned. Grapes comprise the nation's largest of all specialty crops, generating $162 billion in annual revenue, $33 billion in wages and $17 billion in state and local taxes.

Our industry's experience reflects a University of California economic study that pegged an astounding 32-to-1 return on investment for every dollar spent on agriculture research.

Besides economic benefits, agricultural research is key to solving a host of major societal and environmental problems. It prevents crippling plant diseases that can wipe out crops. An example that hits close to home for the American wine and grape industry is the epidemic of trunk diseases, which decimate crops to the tune of $200 million in losses annually. Our industry is mapping the genome of vines in a research effort essential to combating these vineyard scourges. Another project funded by this program is developing practices to produce high quality grapes under drought conditions.

Research also protects the environment by finding ways to reduce water and pesticide use. Research helps develop sustainable farming practices. It ensures national food independence and an ample supply of nutritious fruits and vegetables for all Americans. For all these reasons congressional delegations from specialty crop districts across the United States should rally to ensure research funding for specialty crops is included in any vote.

It is not hyperbole to assert that the land grant act of 1862 has served as a common thread unifying our nation as we've evolved from an agrarian to an industrial and now to an information society. With a tiny percentage of farmers now feeding more than 300 million Americans and many more around the world, a bipartisan approach to funding meaningful agricultural research is more important now than ever before.

If President Lincoln were alive today, he would certainly agree.

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Jean-Mari Peltier is the president of the National Grape & Wine Initiative, a Sacramento-based nonprofit organization dedicated to industry research in California and throughout the United States.

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