

Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance
Working to Make American Agriculture Stronger

January 6, 2009

The Honorable Edward T. Schafer
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Schafer:

We have learned of your recent letter to the U.S. Senate and House Appropriations Committee leadership regarding your intention to transfer funding from the Specialty Crop Block Grant program to fund oversight and enforcement responsibilities for mandatory country of origin labeling (COOL) for covered commodities.

The undersigned organizations strongly oppose this action and request that the Department reverse this course and explore more appropriate potential funding options.

The Specialty Crop Block Grant program is an extremely important tool for producers across the country and was enacted by Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill with mandatory funding. As you know, funding for specialty crops make up a minimal amount of funding in the overall Farm Bill, despite our sectors contribution of almost half of all crop farm-gate value. Congress decided to begin funding a small amount for this block grant program to assist specialty crop producers in enhancing our productivity and competitiveness, and it is simply wrong for USDA to consider raiding these congressionally directed mandatory funds for COOL enforcement.

As you know, mandatory country of origin labeling impacts a wide range of agriculture and food stakeholders. It is incomprehensible that USDA would place the burden of funding this program on just one sector that is impacted by COOL. In addition, USDA has acknowledged that COOL will be expensive to implement by the impacted food sectors. To turn around and ask the industry to use one of its programs to fund enforcement appears to be asking them to take a disproportionate hit compared to other food sectors impacted by COOL. If USDA believes additional funding is required for COOL enforcement, we strongly believe Congress which passed the COOL provisions should appropriate funding solely for that purpose. To be blunt, USDA's inability to persuade the Congress which passed mandatory COOL to appropriate money for enforcement cannot be used as an excuse for robbing specialty crop farmers of the small amount of investment guaranteed in the Farm Bill.

We respectfully ask that you withdraw this policy decision as soon as possible, and ask to meet with you and your staff to ensure that specialty crop provisions in the Farm Bill are not raided for any cause, now or in the future.

Sincerely,

American Mushroom Institute

America Nursery and Landscape Association

Cherry Marketing Institute

Leafy Greens Council

National Berry Crop Initiative
National Grape Cooperative Association
National Grape and Wine Initiative
National Onion Association
National Potato Council
National Watermelon Association
North American Blueberry Council
North American Bramble Growers Association
North American Strawberry Growers Association
Ocean Spray Cranberries, Inc.
Produce Marketing Association
Society of American Florists
U.S. Apple Association
United Fresh Produce Association
United Potato Growers of America
Welch's
Wine Producers Commission
WineAmerica
Winegrape Growers of America
Alabama Watermelon Association
Arizona Winegrowers Association
Blue Diamond Growers
Buy California Marketing Agreement
California Association of Nurseries & Garden Centers
California Association of Winegrape Growers
California Citrus Mutual

California Dried Plum Board

California Fig Institute

California Fresh Fig Growers Association

California Grape & Tree Fruit League

California Strawberry Commission

California Table Grape Commission

California Walnut Commission

California-Arizona Watermelon Association

Grower-Shipper Association of Central California

Sun Maid Growers

Sunkist Growers

Western Growers

Western Pistachio Association

Wine Institute

Colorado Potato Administrative Committee

Colorado Wine Industry Development Board

Rocky Mountain Association of Vintners and Viticulturalists

Connecticut Farm Wine Development Council

Connecticut Vineyard & Winery Association

Florida Citrus Mutual

Florida Citrus Packers

Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association

Florida Strawberry Growers Association

Florida Sweet Corn Exchange

Florida Tomato Exchange

Florida Watermelon Association

Indian River Citrus League

Miami-Dade County

Peace River Valley Citrus Growers Association

Tropical Fruit Growers of South Florida

Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association

Georgia Watermelon Association

Winegrowers Association of Georgia

Idaho Grape Growers and Wine Producers Commission

Idaho Grower Shippers Association

Idaho Potato Commission

Potato Growers of Idaho

United Fresh Potato Growers of Idaho

Indiana-Illinois Watermelon Association

Northern Kentucky Vintners & Grape Growers Association

Maine Potato Board

Wild Blueberry Commission

Maryland-Delaware Watermelon Association

Maryland Wineries Association

New England Vegetable and Berry Growers

Michigan Apple Committee

WineMichigan

Minnesota Area II Potato Growers Research and Promotion Council

Minnesota Grape Growers Association

Northern Plains Potato Growers

Missouri Wine & Grape Board

Missouri-Arkansas Watermelon Association

New Mexico Wine Growers Association

Empire State Potato Growers

New York Apple Association

New York Wine & Grape Foundation

North Carolina Blueberry Council

North Carolina Grape & Wine Council

North Carolina Potato Association

North Carolina Strawberry Association

North Carolina Watermelon Association

Fruit Growers Marketing Association

Ohio Wine Producers Association

Oklahoma Grape Growers & Wine Makers Association

Oregon Potato Commission

Oregon Raspberry & Blackberry Commission

Oregon Strawberry Commission

Oregon Winegrowers Association

Peerbolt Crop Management

South Carolina Watermelon Association

Tennessee Farm Winegrowers Association

Texas Citrus Mutual

Texas Produce Association

Texas Vegetable Association

Texas Wine & Grape Growers Association

Texas-Oklahoma Watermelon Association

Virginia Apple Growers Association

Virginia Wineries Association

Northwest Horticultural Council

Washington Association of Wine Grape Growers

Washington Red Raspberry Commission

Washington Apple Commission

Washington State Potato Commission

Wyoming Grape & Wine Association