

House Agriculture Committee

Specialty Crop Industry

16 September 2025

Highlights:

No specific Tribal food and agriculture mentioned. The House Agriculture Committee hearing on the specialty crop industry highlighted support for expanding research, improving crop insurance, and addressing labor shortages. Witnesses emphasized the urgent need for tailored federal programs to help producers navigate rising costs, regulatory burdens, and climate-related risks.

Witnesses:

- [Dana Brennan](#), Vice president of corporate affairs at Grimmway Farms
- [Tim Boring](#), Director of the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, on behalf of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture
- [Michael Frantz](#), President of Frantz Wholesale Nursery, LLC
- [Ramesh Sagili](#), Professor of Horticulture at Oregon State University

Key Points:

- Challenges Identified
 - Labor Shortages and H-2A Reform
 - Labor costs are rising, and the H-2A visa program is seen as burdensome and unpredictable.
 - [The Adverse Effect Wage Rate \(AEWR\) methodology](#) is criticized for being disconnected from real wage trends.
 - Bipartisan support exists for revisiting the [Farm Workforce Modernization Act](#) and implementing recommendations from the [Agriculture Labor Working Group](#).
 - Crop Insurance Limitations
 - Specialty crop producers face unique risks due to crop diversity and perishability.
 - Existing insurance programs (e.g., [Whole Farm Revenue Protection](#)) often fail to meet their needs due to high loss thresholds and lack of tailored coverage.
 - Trade and Tariffs

- Tariffs on essential inputs (e.g., peat moss, burlap) and machinery increase costs.
 - Market volatility and trade wars have disrupted exports and increased uncertainty.
 - Specialty crops are vulnerable to non-tariff barriers and unfair competition from imports.
 - Research and Innovation Gaps
 - Specialty crops receive only a fraction of federal rural development funding despite representing a third of crop cash receipts.
 - Mechanization and automation are needed to reduce labor dependency and improve efficiency.
 - Nutrition and Market Access
 - Cuts to programs like SNAP-Ed, Local Food Purchase Assistance, and Local Food for Schools have reduced access to fresh produce.
 - Specialty crop producers need stronger domestic promotion and institutional market access (e.g., schools, hospitals).
- Farm Bill Policy Recommendations
 - Labor Reform
 - Streamline the H-2A application process.
 - Reform AEWR to reflect regional wage realities.
 - Expand H-2A eligibility to greenhouse and controlled environment agriculture.
 - Support bipartisan labor legislation, including a modernized Bracero-style program.
 - Crop Insurance Improvements
 - Lower the 50 percent loss threshold in Whole Farm Revenue Protection.
 - Refine pilot programs like Nursery Value Select and Controlled Environment coverage.
 - Expand coverage for quarantine-related losses and diversified operations.
 - Research and Development
 - Increase [Specialty Crop Research Initiative](#) (SCRI) funding to \$275 million annually starting FY2026.
 - Restore IR-4 program funding for pest and disease management.
 - Invest in pollinator health, mechanization, and climate resilience.
 - Trade and Market Access

- Double funding for [Market Access Program](#) (MAP) and [Foreign Market Development](#) (FMD).
- Reaffirm USDA's authority to promote domestic specialty crops.
- Address non-tariff barriers and enforce fair trade practices.
- Nutrition and Local Food Systems
 - Expand SNAP and WIC incentives for fresh produce.
 - Broaden the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program in schools.
 - Reauthorize and fund [Local Food Purchase Assistance](#) and Local Food for Schools.
 - Support urban agriculture and regional food hubs.
- Specialty Crop Block Grants
 - Increase funding and flexibility.
 - Enable multi-state collaboration and broader use for pest management, climate resilience, and market development.
- Climate Resilience and Conservation
 - Link conservation programs to risk mitigation.
 - Support regenerative agriculture and soil health initiatives.
- Infrastructure and Innovation
 - Invest in cold chain capacity and precision agriculture.
 - Remove tariffs on essential inputs and automation equipment.
 - Support public breeding programs for high-value crops.