



03-04-09

Stimulus bill: \$10 billion for NIH research vs. \$0 for ag research

By Jon H. Harsch

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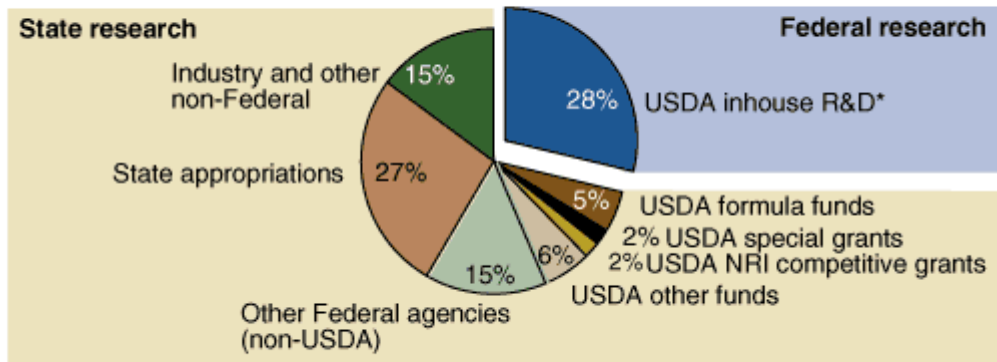
After a coalition of farm, food and Land Grant organizations lobbied hard to include \$200 million for agricultural research in the stimulus bill, the final Senate version provided \$50 million. But when House, Senate and administration negotiators pared the final American Recovery & Reinvestment Act down to \$787 billion, **they eliminated the ag research funding entirely.**

Slashing ag research from \$200 million down to zero was particularly galling because the stimulus bill that President Obama signed into law Feb. 17 included \$10 billion for the National Institutes of Health, \$3 billion for the National Science Foundation, \$1.6 billion for the Energy Department's research programs, and \$400 million for NASA research programs. Stephanie Patrick, President of the National Coalition for Food & Agricultural Research (NCFAR) which fought hard for the \$200 million, laments the loss. During the fight, she sent a letter to President-elect Obama in January urging him to double ag research funding over the next four years because **"The potential payoff is enormous for both Americans' health and the nation's economy."** She followed up in February with an e-mail to House Appropriations Committee Chair David Obey (D-WI) and Rural Development Subcommittee Chair Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) insisting that new ag research funds would create "1,500 high quality jobs" and that studies have shown "an average 81% annual rate of return on public investments in ag research & extension."

With no stimulus bill funding for ag research – and the threat that ag research funds authorized by last year's Farm Bill could be trimmed back in this year's congressional budget process – Patrick warns that **"The stakes are enormous. If you are not paying for research in areas like drought now, what will happen as water shortages and other problems manifest themselves over the next 50 years?"** NCFAR President Patrick, who is Vice President for Policy Initiatives & Advocacy at the American Dietetic Association, is particularly concerned about human health implications. For human health, she explains, **research is needed to improve agricultural production, yield and quality because "that keeps agriculture profitable."** Without profitability, she insists, food availability, nutrition and human health all will suffer.

Federal and State research institutions both fund and conduct public research and development

Total 2005 funding: \$4.6 billion



* Inhouse R&D includes research by USDA's Agricultural Research Service, Economic Research Service, and Forest Service. 4 percent of funds come from non-USDA sources.

Total expenditures on agricultural research in the public sector increased from about \$4.5 billion in 1995 to \$4.6 billion in 2005, when adjusted for inflation. Research expenditures at State-level institutions, such as land-grant universities, accounted for most of the growth in public R&D; expenditures increased at about 2 percent annually between 1970 and 2005, in real terms. The rate of increase for research expenditures at Federal agencies was 0.2 percent annually. Source: USDA, Economic Research Service

American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman, a member of the NCFAR board, shares Patrick's concerns. "Research, in terms of maintaining our productivity, is very important," he says. "But then the issue is, when you are looking at a one budget number that has to be split among all the other priorities that we have, we're forced to make decisions about which priorities to pursue." He points out that **"neglecting agricultural research will decrease our productivity and that's been our competitive advantage in the world."** But he adds that "Realistically, given the economic conditions and the budget deficits we're facing in this country, it's unlikely that we're going to be doing anything but be fighting about money in this Congress, and that's across the board, not just for agriculture but for all authorized programs."

After their NCFAR board meeting in Washington, DC last week, Stallman and Patrick explained they're searching for new ways to publicize the importance of agricultural research. They'd like to generate far greater awareness within Congress, farm organizations, the food industry, and Agriculture Secretary Vilsack's office of the urgent need to boost agricultural research funding dramatically. **Yet, they also acknowledge that making longer-term ag research a top priority for the key commodity groups with great influence on Congress will be a tough sell.** Stallman explains that "producers like to see research dollars targeted for production research." Patrick concludes that as highlighted by recent food contamination problems including nine peanut-related deaths, "Clearly there is a need for a viable, productive, focused-on-the-future, 21st century agricultural research component. But at current funding levels, that isn't going to happen."