



WASTE REPORT for November 23, 2015

Special Thanksgiving Foods

On Thursday, millions of Americans will sit down to Thanksgiving dinner. While you enjoy Thanksgiving staples of sweet potatoes and green beans, you might not realize that according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), **except for the turkey and stuffing, just about everything else on your table is considered a “specialty crop” and eligible for federal support from the \$72.5 million Specialty Crop Block Grant program (SCBGP).**¹

According to USDA, **“The SCBGP focuses on projects that enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops...The block grants are designed to increase the long-term success of producers and broaden the market for specialty crops.”**² Allowable activities under these grants include some types of marketing, travel, consultants, attending conferences, development of websites or mobile apps, and more.

So, what exactly qualifies as a specialty crop? You may be envisioning some exotic herb or something new to the market. It would probably be something rare, atypical, and thus in need of competitive enhancement. You would probably be surprised to learn that according to USDA, just about everything is “special.”

In fact, USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack said in his April 18, 2014 blog post, “Specialty crops make up the bulk of what we eat—all of our fruits and vegetables, tree nuts and dried fruits—as well as things like cut flowers and nursery crops.”³ It seems when Congress created the program, the definition of “specialty” was wide enough you could drive a truck through it... and it is a big truck.

But, the bulk of what we eat? Yes, USDA lists over 300 special crops and only 36 non-qualified crops. So, what exactly is on the list? Here is just a sampling:

- apples • strawberries • raspberries • blueberries • blackberries • peaches • sweet corn • potatoes • green beans • peas (all varieties) • broccoli • grapes • almonds • pears • cherries • carrots • Brussels sprouts (yuck)⁴

Seems these are hardly new and unheard of crops. USDA blog post a Deputy Administrator said of one specialty crop, “[w]hether purchased fresh, frozen, or pureed, the **blueberry has long been a staple in the diets of many people.**” A specialty-staple, who knew? Even more weird is quinoa is on the non-qualified list of crops.⁵

Oh, and it is not just food. Turfgrass (sod) makes the cut and so do live Christmas trees (future Waste Report maybe). So even after Thanksgiving dinner is over your pocketbook is not safe - your tax dollars might have gone to support the football field you see on TV or the tree the family cuts down at the local u-cut place.

Doesn't this make you feel special?

¹ *SPECIALTY CROP BLOCK GRANTS: Helping farmers who raise fruits, vegetables, and nuts with improved training, infrastructure, and marketing*; National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition; Washington, D.C.; October 2015

² *Grants & Opportunities: Specialty Crop Block Grant Program*; United States Department of Agriculture; Washington, D.C.; November 2015
<http://www.ams.usda.gov/services/grants>

³ Vilsack, Tom; Secretary of Agriculture; *Secretary's Column: Farm Bill Supports Specialty Crop Growers, Improves Access to Healthy Food*; United States Department of Agriculture; Washington, D.C.; April 2014 <http://blogs.usda.gov/2014/04/18/secretarys-column-farm-bill-supports-specialty-crop-growers-improves-access-to-healthy-food/#more-51325>

⁴ <http://www.ams.usda.gov/sites/default/files/media/USDASpecialtyCropDefinition.pdf>

⁵ Parrott, Charles; *Celebrating the Blueberry – A Fruit and an Industry That Really Packs a Punch*; United States Department of Agriculture; Washington, D.C.; July 2014 <http://blogs.usda.gov/2014/07/03/celebrating-the-blueberry-a-fruit-and-an-industry-that-really-packs-a-punch>