

Competitive Funding for Agricultural Research in the USA

*A commentary by the Public Policy Board of the American Phytopathological Society
September, 2001*

Observations:

1. There has been a chronic shortage of funding for competitive research in agriculture. This is obvious through the static to declining budgets for the USDA National Research Initiative (NRI), and has ironically occurred in a period when problems associated with U.S. agriculture have intensified. This situation threatens the long-term health of the U.S. agricultural enterprise, delays progress on important issues such as quality of life, agricultural wastes, exotic pests and diseases, alternative energy sources and agricultural biotechnology/genomics and will, unless rectified, reduce the international competitiveness of the USA.
2. There are serious problems within the USDA concerning the placement and recognition of the NRI as a legitimate Departmental function. This has led to chronic under-funding and the consequent failure to attract many of the best U.S. Laboratories, Institutes and Universities into agricultural research. Unfortunately, some State Experiment Station administrators would prefer that funds be channeled directly to their institutions rather than through a competitive process such as the NRI. These conflicts have all exacerbated relations with the OMB and the Congress such that the inflation-adjusted USDA research budget has not increased over ten years and major Federal research initiatives such as the plant genome project have been placed with other governmental agencies. Despite the fact that the Department had a long and respected record of early research, the USDA is widely regarded as currently failing to support sufficient science-driven competitive research programs in agriculture.

Possible Solutions:

1. To remedy the current paucity of funding for competitive research in the USDA absolutely requires the full commitment and leadership of the Secretary and Undersecretary. This means legitimizing the NRI within the mix of other Departmental agencies, showing leadership with State Experiment Stations, and fostering close cooperation between agricultural companies, advocacy groups, the OMB and Congress to markedly increase the total USDA research budget. Without such support by the Secretary/Undersecretary, the events of the last 10 years will continue.
2. Elevate USDA science and technology funding to a priority mission area for the Department to ensure that the USDA is perceived as a major research-driven science agency. Legitimize function of the NRI as a competitive granting agency. Use the revitalized NRI and an emphasis on agricultural genomics/biotechnology to push Congress for increases in the total USDA agricultural research budget, including the ARS and CREES as well as the NRI.