

Support funding for research to help state's farmers, economy

By Jack Payne
Guest columnist

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Florida's farmers need help. Their farms are the engines of the state's second-largest industry, but they face a flurry of challenges to continuing their annual \$142 billion economic contribution.

Among those challenges:

- A disease called citrus greening threatens the continued existence of the state's signature crop and a \$10 billion-a-year industry.
- Climate change is likely to require farmers to adapt the way they grow crops, raise animals and catch fish. Producing food will require dealing with a rise in temperatures, the arrival of new pests and diseases, and more-frequent extreme weather events such as floods or drought.
- If the U.S. normalizes relations with Cuba, Florida farmers may have to compete with a new source of imports and defend against the hitchhiking pests that arrive with those imports.
- In a state with nearly 100 million annual visitors, we have yet to realize the promise of agritourism, which could give travelers a glimpse of the real Florida and give small farmers an income supplement that keeps them in business.
- We have 47,000 farms, but we're behind nationally in establishing businesses that keep more of our agricultural dollars in Florida. Research parks and food-business incubators — like those the University of Florida is trying to help local governments launch — could pay huge economic dividends.

As the research and innovation arm of Florida agriculture, UF's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences recognizes the need to do more to address these challenges and many more.

For example, think of the economic boost we could give Florida if we made the state a major player in biofuel production. UF/IFAS scientists in Quincy are growing a mustard-family plant that can be converted into jet fuel. A Gainesville-based expert in forest genomics is investigating how to make pine trees sources of fuel precursors for the domestic production of aviation and diesel biofuels.

We're trying to increase our base funding to do more for Florida's farms, families and economy. Yet as the proposed budget stands today, we could potentially lose funding for some of our high-impact research programs.

Florida is second in the nation in nursery crop sales; yet state funding for horticultural research like that done at our center in Apopka is in jeopardy.

Our animal-sciences department — a good portion of which operates at our cattle research center in Hardee County — provides know-how to ranchers with 1.7 million head of cattle, but it too may go under the budget knife.

Florida produces the greatest variety of tropical fish in the nation in part because of research done by our aquaculture experts; yet its operations are also the target of proposed spending cuts.

Although UF/IFAS is a state institution, it's an entrepreneurial organization that goes out and finds more than half of its funding from sources other than state government.

We need the state Legislature to support us at this key moment when we can do so much more to promote healthy people, healthy communities and healthy economies. Counting website visits, patents, field consultations, drop-ins at our 67 extension offices, publications and classes, we have more than 15 million annual contacts with Floridians.

These are examples of how state support for UF helps communities all over the state.

A recent study by respected academics estimates that every dollar invested in public agricultural research returns \$20 to the economy.

Florida agriculture can't afford to stand still, much less cut back on its pursuit of progress through new scientific knowledge. What our legislators work out in the next couple of weeks will be key to whether we can help propel our economy forward by strengthening agriculture.

UF/IFAS doesn't do it alone, of course. The private sector, donors and local governments all play key roles. So does the state. We know our elected representatives want the best for the community. One of the best ways to provide that is to invest in institutions dedicated to finding solutions to local challenges.

It is our hope that our funding needs do not get lost in the much larger budget debate.

Jack Payne is the University of Florida's senior vice president for agriculture and natural resources and leader of the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.