WASHINGTON, Oct. 14, 2011—Agriculture Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan today announced 29 grants across 19 states to develop and share science-based tools to address the needs of America’s specialty crop industry. USDA’s National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) is awarding the grants, totaling $46 million, through its Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI).

“Over the last 60 years, agriculture, including horticulture, has become increasingly reliant on science and technology to maintain profitable production,” Merrigan said. “Specialty crop producers in the United States—as with all of American agriculture—are seeing sales surge both domestically and abroad as consumers search for high quality, ‘Grown in America’ fruits, vegetables, and tree nuts. These projects will help provide specialty crop producers with the information and tools they need to successfully grow, process and market safe and high quality products, supporting jobs and opportunities for Americans working in specialty crops. From herbs to apples, from walnuts to grapes, specialty crops are central to the richness of American agriculture.”

SCRI supports the specialty crop industry by developing and disseminating science-based tools to address the needs of specific crops. Specialty crops are defined in law as “fruits and vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits and horticulture and nursery crops, including floriculture.” Funded projects address five focus areas: 1) improve crop characteristics through plant breeding, genetics and genomics; 2) address threats from pests and diseases; 3) improve production efficiency, productivity and profitability; 4) develop new innovations and technologies and 5) develop methods to improve food safety.

SCRI gives priority to projects that are multistate, multi-institutional, or trans-disciplinary; and include explicit mechanisms to communicate results to producers and the public. Each of the focus areas received at least 10 percent of the available funds.
The majority of funded projects addresses two or more focus areas, and includes many collaborating institutions in addition to the awardee. The projects funded address research and extension needs for crops that span the entire spectrum of specialty crops production, from researching plant genetics to improving crop characteristics; identifying and addressing threats from pests and diseases; improving production and profitability; developing new production innovations and technologies; and developing methods to respond to food safety hazards.

Projects were funded in Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin. Most of the grant recipients are universities and colleges. Grant highlights include:

The University of Massachusetts Amherst will study pollination security for fruit and vegetable crops. Michigan State University will develop a system to deliver resource-efficient, ecologically sustainable fruit production systems for apple and cherry producers. The University of Wisconsin system will study improved breeding and variety evaluation methods to increase quality in processed potato products. The University of Georgia Research Foundation will help to improve the long-term competitiveness of U.S. pecans based on their nutritional and health-promoting components. Washington State University will help U.S. raspberry producers find new tools for breeding and reaching markets.

A full list of awardees can be found online at: www.nifa.usda.gov/newsroom/news/2011news/SCRI_awards.html.

Through federal funding and leadership for research, education and extension programs, NIFA focuses on investing in science and solving critical issues impacting people's daily lives and the nation's future. For more information, visit www.nifa.usda.gov.

###

For more information, please contact Jennifer Martin at 202-720-8188.