

# FUNDING FOR THE FUTURE

**Recent victories in Washington are good news for industry research and innovation.**

BY MARY WESTBROOK

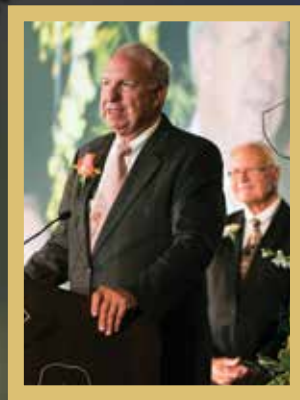
**I**n March of this year, during the Society of American Florists' annual Congressional Action Days in Washington, D.C., dozens of industry members from all segments took a similar message to their lawmakers: Innovation requires investment — and as a critical segment of the economy, the floral industry deserves a reliable source of research funding and data.

Just two weeks after CAD, lawmakers responded in significant and positive ways. One of the biggest victories: The Floriculture and Nursery Research Initiative received \$1 million in funding through an omnibus spending bill approved by Congress and signed into law by President Trump.

The increase is a direct result of CAD and SAF's strategic year-round lobbying for FNRI, said Shawn McBurney, SAF's senior director of government relations, who called the seven-digit figure "a testament to the effectiveness of SAF members becoming directly involved in working with their members of Congress. Their work is a big reason Congress specifically wrote that floriculture would receive a funding increase in its bill, where many other industries weren't mentioned."

“Research funding is not just about growers. It’s about the industry. Unless we are consistently improving product quality, no one will have increased products or sales.”

—Terril Nell, Ph.D., AAF



SHUTTERSTOCK/LOVELYDAY12

## A History of Collaboration

The \$1 million for FNRI represents the largest single increase in almost 20 years for the initiative, which plays a critical role in generating scientific research on high-priority issues that affect all segments, including postharvest technology, water quality and pest and disease management.

FNRI's history is rooted in problem solving, said Terril Nell, Ph.D., AAF, research coordinator for the American Floral Endowment, a former SAF president and professor emeritus at the University of Florida. In the early 1990s, universities around the country began to cut funding for floriculture programs, a reality that compelled SAF to join with the university community to find ways to create sustainable funding sources for the industry.

"One of our first challenges was educating lawmakers on a House subcommittee about what 'floriculture' was and how important it is to the U.S. economy," said Nell, who played a lead role in establishing FNRI, lobbying lawmakers and forging relationships with key congressional staff. "An early victory was getting just the word 'floriculture' into the Farm Bill."

The late Paul Ecke Jr., AAF, of the Ecke Ranch in Encinitas, California, and Jim Leider, AAF, of Leider Horticultural Company in Buffalo Grove, Illinois — both members of SAF's Floriculture Hall of Fame — also played critical roles in



SHUTTERSTOCK/NENOV BROTHERS IMAGES

**FIERCE FIGHT** In the early 2000s, researchers relied on FNRI funding to end an outbreak of *Ralstonia solanacearum*, a bacterium that attacks geranium plants but also potato crops. The situation imperiled the livelihood of all U.S. geranium growers.

helping to establish FNRI, arguing successfully to lawmakers that the effort would benefit both the industry and the general public by giving support and resources to some of the top minds in academia as they tackled pressing problems that slowed production, created inefficiencies and reduced product quality.

"The whole idea was to bring high-quality products to market efficiently," Leider said. "Pests and diseases increase production cost. We had to make the case that great products depend on great research."

## Research Successes

Once FNRI was created in the late 1990s through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Research Service (ARS), it quickly became a source of support for researchers and industry members. In the early 2000s, for example, researchers relied on FNRI funding to end an outbreak of *Ralstonia solanacearum*, a bacterium that attacks geranium plants but also potato crops. Because of the potential effect on the U.S. food supply, USDA took an aggressive stance and required growers to destroy infected plant material. The situation imperiled the livelihood of all U.S. geranium growers. Nell recalled one grower having to destroy some 200,000 plants.

Working together with FNRI funds, and with significant leadership from SAF, researchers and the government created new methods for inspection and disease prevention. Since that time, funds have also been used to create solutions to challenges posed by the fungus botrytis, along with pests such as whiteflies and thrips, and to forge new technology in future pest management practices, including biological controls that could reduce the use of pesticides.

"Research funding is not just about growers," Nell said. "It's about the industry. Unless we are consistently improving product quality, no one will have increased products or sales."

## WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?



Thrips



Botrytis



Whiteflies

Thanks to funding from the Floriculture and Nursery Research Initiative, researchers have been able to mitigate the effects of pathogens, pests and diseases in the industry, including threats posed by botrytis, whiteflies, thrips, and *Ralstonia solanacearum*. The result: healthier products and more efficient supply chains for everyone.

SHUTTERSTOCK/L-R: JARUNG H, ALEJO MIRANDA, CHA\_CHA

## The Work Continues

Today, Nell added, the trend of reduced funding at the university level has continued: There are no longer any postharvest research labs in the United States. Within the last three years, once robust programs at the University of Florida, the University of California at Davis and North Carolina State have languished as retiring professors, including Nell and John Dole, Ph.D., have retired or moved on to other roles.

That reality makes FNRI even more important. Part of the ongoing challenge: making the industry's case persuasively and consistently, said SAF Chairman Martin Meskers, AAF, who has been advocating for increased funding as part of SAF's coalition for at least 15 years.

"There is research funding money out there, and we are big enough as an industry to go after it," he said. "Everybody benefits from good research."

That's a sentiment echoed by Rodney Crittenden, CEO and executive vice president of the Michigan Floral Association and Wisconsin & Upper Michigan Florists Association.

"Our industry researchers will put this money to good use exploring ways to make the flowers and plants we sell better," said Crittenden, who has lobbied for years at CAD for increased funding. "Our collective voices do make a difference." 🌸

**Mary Westbrook** is the editor in chief of *Floral Management*. [mwestbrook@safnow.org](mailto:mwestbrook@safnow.org)

## KEY REPORT REINSTATED FOR 2018

Another important victory also came this spring when the government announced that a key report that provides critical data on floral industry products will be published in 2018 after a two-year hiatus.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's announcement that it will produce the **2018 Floriculture Crops Report** is a dramatic example of the power of SAF's voice on Capitol Hill, said Shawn McBurney, the Society of American Florists' senior director of government relations.

SAF initiated a strategic advocacy campaign to resume the publication of the report. That campaign included SAF members lobbying Congress to prioritize the report during SAF's Congressional Action Days in March.

"The floriculture industry considers the Floriculture Crops Report to be the benchmark in identifying market trends and projecting sales opportunities," McBurney said. "The report shows changes in domestic production and helps show year-to-year direction. In addition, the report is used in determining government agricultural policy as well as providing data for academic studies."

The report is the only source of annual data on annual bedding and garden plants, potted herbaceous perennials, potted flowering plants for indoor and patio use, foliage plants for indoor or patio use, cut flowers, cut cultivated greens, and propagative floriculture materials.

Citing budget constraints, USDA decided it could not publish the report in 2016 and 2017, which deprived the floriculture industry of critical information it needs.

While securing funds for the 2018 report is a major success, SAF will continue to lobby for funding the 2019 report and beyond.

SAF welcomed other industry organizations in a coalition effort to secure publication of the 2018 report. The coalition included the American Society for Horticultural Science, AmericanHort, CalFlowers, the California Cut Flower Commission, the Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association, and the Produce Marketing Association.

-M.W.



**DREAM TEAM** When industry members traveled to Washington, D.C., in March of this year for SAF's Congressional Action Days, they asked Congress for increased research funding and the publication of the 2018 Floriculture Crops Report.