

## Crop Diversification Projects

Robert L. Myers

There are a number of programs that can potentially support work on crop diversification or adding value to crops. Many of these are described in the publication "A resource guide to federal programs in sustainable agriculture and forestry," published by the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program and the Michael Fields Institute in 1998. This publication describes over 50 federal programs that can provide funding or technical assistance for projects in value-added agriculture or other aspects of sustainable agriculture. The publication is available free from ATTRA (phone 800-346-9140), or can be viewed on their website ([www.attra.org](http://www.attra.org)).

Among the programs to consider for funding support of crop diversification is the USDA SARE program, administered through the CSREES. This program, which has been funded at about \$11.5 million annually in recent years offers three types of grants. The majority of the funds are available through the SARE research and education grants, which are typically 2–3 year projects of \$30,000 to \$200,000. Universities, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies are eligible for both these grants, and the SARE professional development grants, which are somewhat smaller awards (<\$100,000) aimed at providing professional development to extension staff and NRCS personnel. The third SARE program is designed to directly fund individual farmers or teams of farmers. They can apply, using a simple form, for up to \$5000 in grant aid to carry out an on-farm study, education program, or marketing project. All of the SARE programs are reviewed and administered on a regional basis. Projects on new crop development, on marketing, or on agroforestry would all be appropriate for proposals or ideas to SARE. Additional information can be obtained from the national SARE office (phone 202-720-5203) or website ([www.sare.org](http://www.sare.org)).

Another federal grants program that can potentially provide competitive funds for crop diversification is the USDA-CSREES National Research Initiative (NRI). The NRI encompasses grant programs on several topics, the most relevant being the agricultural systems grant program. Awards in the ag systems NRI grant program have typically been in the \$100,000 to \$250,000 range, with awards being made once per year. Universities, non-profit organizations, and government researchers are eligible to apply. Guidelines for this program can be obtained from the USDA-CSREES website ([www.reeusda.gov](http://www.reeusda.gov)). That same website also covers other competitive grant programs, including the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program, which can help fund certain types of value-adding projects. Information on funding programs available from other USDA agencies, including the Alternative Agriculture Research Commercialization (AARC) program, can be obtained from the resource guide described above, or through links from the main USDA website ([www.usda.gov](http://www.usda.gov)).

A few private foundations have funded diversification projects as part of programs on sustainable agriculture, but unfortunately, support from this sector has been declining in the last few years. For some states, a better source of support has been through the state department of agriculture. Several states now fund grant programs, either for individual farmers, or for organizations and universities to apply to, that include the opportunity to fund new crops or value-added agriculture projects.

Beginning in 2000, a new source of funding for new crop development may be available through USDA. A new national initiative, the Thomas Jefferson Initiative for Crop Diversification, was authorized by Congress as part of the 1998 Agricultural Research, Education, and Extension Reauthorization Act. Appropriations are currently being sought, and if obtained, would first be available as part of the fiscal year 2000 budget. This funding would provide support for regional crop diversification centers at universities, for competitive grants on new crops, and for a national coordinating center. More information on the status of this program can be obtained from the Jefferson Institute (phone 573-449-3518).

Technical information on new crops is available from several sources. The best on-line source is the Purdue University NewCROP website ([www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop](http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop)). Other information resources include the Alternative Farming Systems Information Center at the National Agricultural Library (phone 301-504-6559, website [www.nal.usda.gov/afsic](http://www.nal.usda.gov/afsic)), and the Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA) center, (phone 800-346-9140, website [www.attra.org](http://www.attra.org)).