

LEGISLATIVE

PRIORITIES

Many of the things that enhance our quality of life can be traced back to a seed someone planted. The food we eat, clothes we wear, the fuel that powers our cars – all these things and more start with a seed in the ground.

Founded in 1883, the American Seed Trade Association (ASTA) represents over 700 companies involved in seed production, plant breeding and related industries in North America. ASTA's broad membership offers varieties from alfalfa to zucchini and all production types including conventional, organic and biotech.

The following Legislative Priorities outline ASTA's positions on some of the most pressing issues facing the industry that will impact our ability to continue improving seed in the years ahead.

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A diverse array of genetic resources are the building blocks to better seed.

■ USDA-Agricultural Research Service National Plant Germplasm System

Seed researchers need a broad array of parent material, also known as plant genetic resources, from all corners of the globe to produce plant varieties for the diverse needs of farmers, consumers, horticulture and conservation. Such materials can be found in the USDA's National Plant Germplasm System (NPGS) which is housed within USDA's Agricultural Research Service. It collects unique plant germplasm from around the world and provides access for plant breeders in the U.S. and globally. However, the NPGS is not all encompassing due in part to limited funding.

The NPGS is currently funded at approximately \$44 million. This amount is insufficient to maintain and distribute the collections to U.S. researchers who are developing varieties for conventional and organic farmers and other landscape uses.

ASTA Position:

- Increase funding for the NPGS so that it can better fulfill its mission.

■ USDA-Agricultural Research Service Germplasm Enhancement of Maize

The Germplasm Enhancement of Maize (GEM) program within the funding for the ARS NPGS focuses on adapting exotic corn germplasm for use in the U.S. and on identifying useful genetics in exotic landraces to develop new hybrids. Currently, U.S. corn production is based on predominantly two races of maize from more than 250 New World races. This limited genetic diversity renders the U.S. corn crop, and therefore, the global food supply, more vulnerable to attack by new diseases. GEM materials can play an important role in fighting new diseases in the U.S. and globally, such as the catastrophic Maize Lethal Necrosis which is causing significant crop losses in Africa and Late Wilt, a very devastating disease in Egypt, which has now been reported in Spain.

GEM is a model public-private partnership between the federal government, universities, and companies of all sizes making significant research contributions and facilitating development of future researchers. ASTA supports an increase in GEM funding for both increased research and operations costs and the need to establish consistent winter nurseries for seed increases and regeneration.

ASTA Position:

- Increase funding of the Germplasm Enhancement of Maize from 1.6 million to \$2.7 million.

■ International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

The seed industry has long supported ratification of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture that creates a specialized, global system for the management and exchange of plant genetic resources from international gene banks. Without ratification, the U.S. is missing opportunities to protect its national interests. The U.S. signed the International Treaty in 2002 but Senate ratification is still pending. No other U.S. laws would need to be changed after ratification. Right now is a pivotal time as countries that have been involved in the implementation and commercial implications of the Treaty are discussing ways to improve its functionality.

ASTA Position:

- ASTA is calling on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to hold a hearing on the Treaty as soon as possible, and for the full Senate to ratify the Treaty shortly thereafter.

■ Innovation in Plant Breeding

Plant breeders have always strived to provide solutions for disease and pest resistance, increase plant tolerance to environmental stresses, achieve higher yields, and meet consumer expectations. Today, plant breeders are able to meet these goals more precisely and efficiently than ever before. The continuous advancement in the understanding of plant genomes provides new opportunities to meet the challenges facing agriculture today and in the future.

In February 2016 USDA published for public comment in the Federal Register a Notice of Intent (NOI) as a first step in its process of revising biotechnology regulations. The NOI proposes a new "working" definition of "biotechnology" and outlines four proposed regulatory alternatives. The proposed biotechnology definition in the NOI is very broad and would include most of the newer innovations in plant breeding. These regulatory revisions will have an impact on farmers' access to needed technologies and the global movement of a wide range of crops for years to come.

ASTA Position:

- Government policies should be predictable and science- and risk-based to promote innovation and advancements in breeding.
- Plant varieties developed through the latest breeding methods should not be regulated differently if they are similar to or indistinguishable from varieties that could be produced through earlier breeding methods.
- Government policies should be harmonized to avoid creating trade barriers and disrupting markets.

Seeds play an important role in preserving, rehabilitating and reclaiming fragile lands, and maintaining habitat for wild species.

■ USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service Plant Material Centers

The network of 25 Plant Material Centers across the country seek out and test plants and plant technologies that restore and sustain healthy natural regional ecosystems. A key function of the centers is to evaluate plants for conservation traits and to make these materials available to commercial growers who provide plant materials to the public.

The materials developed by the Plant Material Centers are critical to many USDA goals including improving soil health, increasing pollinator and wildlife habitat and expanding the availability of new cover crop solutions. Nationwide, 500 of the 700 plant material centers' releases are currently under commercial production.

ASTA Position

- The USDA-NRCS Plant Material Centers should be fully-funded at \$14.5 million.

■ DOI-Bureau of Land Management

For several decades, ASTA members have successfully supplied native seeds to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for post fire rehabilitation and other reclamation projects spanning millions of acres. Last year the Department of Interior released a National Seed Strategy emphasizing substantial near and long term investment in the research and implementation of highly specialized, locally-sourced seed as the foundation for reclamation projects. \$5 million was included in the Department of Interior Bureau of Land Management Wildlife Management budget for this purpose.

ASTA is meeting with BLM regularly to emphasize that while the industry is committed to supporting these goals and objectives in a constructive manner, this model proves problematic when presented with the commercial realities of carrying and supplying native seed quantities necessary to service the BLM in large-scale emergency (wildfire) situations. In short, if the BLM solely relies on the Strategy's approach, it could result in tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of acres not being reseeded, thereby, putting them at unnecessary risk of highly destructive erosion as well as further expansion of invasive weeds such as cheatgrass.

ASTA Position:

- Congressional oversight on implementation of the National Seed Strategy is needed.

■ USDA Conservation Programs

ASTA advocates for investments in flexible and efficient conservation programs that provide producers the financial and technical assistance needed to conserve our nation's most precious resource. Working lands conservation is an important element for sustainable growth of agriculture. Significant use of cover crops in production agriculture is also one of the most promising practices to address both the stewardship of our soils and nutrient reduction in our environment.

ASTA Position:

- Continue to invest in effective conservation programs through the USDA's Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service.

■ Pollinator Health

Pollinators are vital in seed and agriculture production, as well as general ecosystem health. Ensuring their wellbeing is a priority as recognized in the recently released national pollinator strategy. There is concern about the decline in the overall health of honey bee colonies, and experts agree that bee health is affected by numerous factors. Singling out pesticides as the main cause of colony health decline is misguided and not warranted based on the latest research. ASTA is pleased to be a founding partner of the National Pollinator Garden Network which is encouraging Americans to plant one million gardens for pollinators.

ASTA Position:

- Close collaboration between the USDA, Department of Interior and the seed industry on pollinator strategies is needed.
- Reject neonicotinoid pesticide bans.



■ National Labeling Standard

ASTA is part of a coalition of over 600 companies and organizations urging Congress to quickly pass federal legislation to address the proliferation of state labeling initiatives for food made with GMO ingredients and seeds that have transgenic traits. A patchwork of mandatory state labeling regulations would only serve to mislead and confuse consumers and raise the price of groceries for American families.

ASTA Position:

- ASTA supports S. 2609 to create a uniform, national solution and prohibit a patchwork of mandatory labels on foods and seeds.

■ Trans Pacific Partnership

In 2014, U.S. agriculture exports reached a record \$152.5 billion. Seed exports are valued at over \$1.25 billion annually. The Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) includes strong intellectual property protections – a fundamental priority for the seed industry, given the fact that creation of new plant varieties requires up to 15 years of research and millions of dollars of financial investment. The TPP also includes strong measures that will help ensure that our partners use science and risk analysis as a foundation for sanitary and phytosanitary requirements for imports. Lastly, the TPP marks the first time that biotechnology has been included in a trade agreement in such detail-- an important step in harmonizing international approval standards and ensuring market access for new products.

ASTA Position:

- ASTA urges Congress to pass the TPP and move an aggressive trade agenda so the U.S. can compete on a more level global playing field.

