

Regional IPM centers face dire outlook

The Obama administration wants earth-friendly farming, more locally grown produce, more sustainably grown crops and agriculture with a smaller carbon footprint.

Yet you have to wonder about the rationale behind eliminating funding for regional Integrated Pest Management centers throughout the country. That's just what the U.S. Department of Agriculture has proposed in its draft Fiscal Year 2010-2011 draft budget.

The approximately \$4 million in funding for the four centers comes from what's called "406 Integrated Programs." The draft budget moved \$43 million in funding from 406 to the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative, but it didn't move the IPM Regional Centers with it.

The centers have enough funds to operate this year. But unless the money is somehow restored, the centers will probably have to disband in the future.

No doubt you've been touched by some of the regional center's research in one form or another over the years. If you think their work is worth continuing, let your Congressional representatives know how important it is to restore funding.

The four regional centers were created under the Food Quality Protection Act in 1999 as a link between the Environmental Protection Agency and the USDA.

The centers act as clearinghouses for funding a multitude of programs, both on local and regional levels.

The Cucurbit Downy Mildew Forecast network, which is housed at North Carolina State University in Raleigh, is one example of a project that receives funding from the regional centers. Growers can log onto the forecast Web site to find out the risk of the devastating disease developing nearby. A new component allows users to set up text alerts or custom e-mails to alert them as the disease nears their operations.

The IPM programs aren't limited to agriculture, either. They include teaching school districts how to use IPM to reduce students' pesticide exposure and instructing golf course superintendents how to use less fertilizer and pesticides while still maintaining lush putting surfaces.

The centers work with other governmental agencies, land-grant colleges, non-profit groups, private industry, and urban and rural residents to promote more intelligent use of pesticides.

The regional IPM centers, for example, have teamed with the Department of Housing and Urban Development to develop curriculum to fight cockroaches, bedbugs, and rats and mice in government housing projects. The goal is to prevent these vermin from entering in the first place.

There's a side benefit, too. Children who live in these projects experience fewer asthma symptoms since cockroaches have been linked to that malady.

So far, 12 training sessions have been conducted. "It's exciting to see that it's really catching on," says Carrie Koplinka-Loehr, a co-director of the Northeast Regional IPM Center in Ithaca, N.Y.

Let's hope governmental leaders catch the excitement and continue to fund these programs.



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