

Ag Research Money Vital Part of Farm Bill

JEFF KAROUB, Associated Press



In this June 23, 2012 photo, Michigan State University professor of entomology Rufus Isaacs, left, talks to visitors at Bee-Palooza event in East Lansing, Mich. When President Barack Obama comes to East Lansing on Friday to sign the Farm Bill it will put attention on how research schools such as Michigan State University will be one of the big beneficiaries of the nearly \$100 billion-a-year measure — even if the millions it represents is comparatively small. And scientists are breathing a sigh of relief that funding will continue flowing, along with money for new efforts, after years of political wrangling. (AP Photo/Lansing State Journal, Robert Killips)

DETROIT (AP) — A group of scientists at Michigan State University huddled around a computer screen earlier this week — not poring over scientific data but watching a webcast of the U.S. Senate.

Among them was Rufus Isaacs, an entomologist who leads a team of U.S. and Canadian scientists working to enhance bee pollination of crops. Isaacs was anxious to see if the Senate would approve the [long-delayed farm bill](#) [1], and with it continue the \$8.6 million federal grant critical to his pollen project's survival. The Senate passed the legislation and Congress sent it to President Barack Obama, who is expected to sign the bill Friday on Isaacs' campus in East Lansing.

"It was a great relief and celebration in my lab," Isaacs said of the rare moment when pollen took a backseat to politics. "It's been a long wait for this."

The nearly [\\$100 billion-a-year federal farm bill](#) [2], passed after 2 ½ years of legislative wrangling, does two main things: Almost 80 percent of the money goes to food stamps for the needy, and around 15 percent is designated for farm subsidies and crop insurance subsidies. The pledge of hundreds of millions of dollars for agricultural research is a relative drop in the bucket, but it's pumping money into universities across the country, particularly for advanced agricultural research.

Obama's visit to Michigan State is a nod to the primary role a fellow Democrat, Michigan U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow, chairwoman of the Senate's Agriculture

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Committee, played in authoring the bill and getting it passed.

But Tom Coon, director of the university's extension program, also said the signing is appropriate in a state where agriculture is the second-largest industry, behind only manufacturing, and at a school founded in 1855 as the Agricultural College of the State of Michigan.

It's not clear exactly how much is going to universities, since much of the five-year farm bill's budget represents money authorized to be spent but not yet appropriated in the annual budgeting process. And other funding will come in the form of competitive grants that must be matched by the private sector.

Still, experts say, it appears to represent an overall increase to public research schools. All of the research funding from the last farm bill continues and grows in some areas, such as specialty crop research, including work on citrus diseases.

Another addition is \$200 million to create the Foundation for Food Agriculture Research. The money for the nonprofit organization is guaranteed but also has to be matched through private investment. The aim of the foundation is to boost cooperation between industry, academia and private foundations, and research will focus on safe, efficient and sustainable food production, innovations to boost the economy and fight global hunger.

Ian Maw, vice president for food, agriculture and natural resources with the Washington, D.C.-based Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities, said most of his advocacy organization's priorities were incorporated into the bill.

"Bottom line, I think it's a good bill and we're glad it's finally done," Maw said. "It was a long and torturous trip to come to this point."

The bill's mere passage might be the best news of all to the university researchers, many of whom found themselves in limbo as the legislation foundered. For instance, the pollen project led by Michigan State's Isaacs lost its funding when the farm bill passed in 2007 expired at the end of 2012.

Congress voted to extend the bill for one year in January 2013, but new projects in the original bill with mandatory funding weren't authorized, and "if it's not authorized, Congress can't spend the money," said Coon, the extension program director.

Coon said several university departments "patched together" money to maintain the work of Isaac's team, which is studying what growers can do about pollinating crops in the wake of collapsing bee colonies.

"We had to step in and fill that gap, but we don't have the money to keep doing that," Coon said. "That was just an idiosyncrasy of the way they extended the farm bill."

Isaacs said that the [farm bill funding](#) [3] provides "the fuel that keeps his project

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rolling on," and that getting a presidential seal of approval at his university provides the ultimate resolution and satisfaction.

"We're really looking forward to Friday," he said. "It's a great day — it's finally getting signed."

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