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AGRICULTURE

Florida farmers may receive windfall

Farmers would benefit from a bill that includes a boost for the kind of crops that are plentiful in Florida.

By Lesley Clark

lclark@MiamiHerald.com

WASHINGTON --

The fruit and vegetable crops that make up the bulk of Florida's nearly \$7 billion agriculture industry could get a significant boost under the federal farm bill now being hashed out in the House, a beaming group of Florida lobbyists told the state's congressional delegation Wednesday.

Traditionally, farmers who grow wheat, corn, rice and cotton have reaped the vast majority of federal subsidies.

But producers of the smaller "specialty crops" -- which make up the bulk of the agriculture business in states such as California and Florida -- teamed up to wield more political muscle.

The result: An estimated \$2 billion in the House bill earmarked for citrus, tomatoes, watermelons, snap beans and other crops.

The bill has yet to be heard by the Senate.

"Florida for years has had to stand in line and beg for scraps and we end up getting in the cross-hairs of the others," said Rep. Adam Putnam, a Republican whose Bartow-area district includes orange groves and strawberry fields. "This really is historic for specialty crops. The substance of this bill is good for Florida."

ROUNDABOUT HELP

Little of the money would come as a direct subsidy to farmers. Instead, fruit and vegetable producers would get help with marketing, federally financed research and increased purchasing by the federal government.

For example, a program that supplies a "fruit and vegetable snack" to students would be expanded to all 50 states -- growing the market for the specialty crops.

"They started pulling together about two years ago, telling lawmakers 'We need more in the farm bill,'" Leslie Palmer-Boxold, director of federal-state relations for the Florida

Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, said of the specialty crop producers. "This has been a huge priority for us."

The House version would also set aside \$215 million for research on specialty crops -- most of which would be done by state universities.

"Cautiously, it's a win for Florida," said Rep. Tim Mahoney, D-Palm Beach Gardens, the sole Florida member of the House Agriculture Committee, which this week is revising the bill and included the specialty crop dollars to gain supporters. "Specialty crops have not been privy to the farm bill."

The bill would also set aside about \$200 million for research on pest and diseases and requires the U.S. Department of Agriculture to identify potential offshore threats.

'VITALLY IMPORTANT'

Casey Welch, director of congressional affairs for Florida Citrus Mutual, said the research dollars for pests and diseases would be "vitaly important" for an industry that has been battered by freezes, citrus canker and now citrus greening.

The bill also includes a boost to the state's sugar industry. Under the bill, Mexican sugar entering the country as a result of NAFTA would be directed into the production of ethanol. Mahoney said American sugar cane growers were afraid the Mexican sugar could depress the price of sugar.