



JB PRITZKER, GOVERNOR · JERRY COSTELLO II, DIRECTOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 5, 2026

CONTACT:
Lori.Harlan@illinois.gov

IDOA ANNOUNCES SPECIALTY CROP BLOCK GRANT FUNDING AVAILABLE

Illinois to prioritize projects that benefit beginning farmers, nutrition and health outcomes, sustainability and conservation

SPRINGFIELD, IL – The Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA) will distribute more than \$796,000 over the next three years to expand access to fresh, locally grown produce and boost the competitiveness of the state’s specialty crop industry. This funding is made possible through the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant Program.

An application for grant funding will be available this week on the Illinois Department of Agriculture website and must be returned to the Department by noon on June 5, 2026. The program will run from September 30, 2026 through September 29, 2029.

Eligible applicants include non-profit organizations, local and government entities, trade and commodity associations, public and private colleges/universities. Illinois funding priorities include projects that benefit beginning farmers and first-time specialty crop producers (a beginning farmer is an individual or entity that has not operated a farm or ranch for more than 10 years and substantially participates in the operation), projects with educational programming to enhance knowledge and consumption of specialty crops, projects connecting specialty crops with nutrition and health outcomes, including food safety, projects that prioritize sustainability and conservation.

“These grant funds help ensure that Illinois producers—especially small, beginning, and historically underserved farmers—have the opportunity to grow and succeed,” said **Jerry Costello II, Director of the Illinois Department of Agriculture**. “Our goal is to strengthen local food systems, expand access to fresh, healthy products, and drive innovation in Illinois’ specialty crop industry.”

To encourage further expansion of this industry, and to take full advantage of the allocated federal funds, the Department invites the development of projects pertaining to the following issues affecting the specialty crop industry:

- Enhancing food safety.
- Improving the capacity of all entities in the specialty crop distribution chain to comply with the requirements of the Food Safety Modernization Act, for example, by developing “Good Agricultural Practices,” “Good Handling Practices,” “Good Manufacturing Practices,” and in cost-share arrangements for funding audits of such systems for small farmers, packers and processors.
- Investing in specialty crop research, including research to focus on conservation and environmental outcomes.
- Supporting the growth of organic specialty crops.
- Developing new and improved seed varieties and specialty crops.
- Improving pest and disease control.
- Increasing child and adult nutrition knowledge and consumption of specialty crops.
- Improving efficiency and reducing costs of distribution systems.

Projects that benefit a particular commercial product or provide a profit to a single organization, institution, or individual are ineligible. Farmers’ markets, roadside stands and community-sponsored agriculture programs should consider submitting proposals to the USDA’s Farmers’ Market and Local Food Promotion Program.

USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service defines specialty crops as “fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits and horticulture and nursery crops (including floriculture).” There are more than 3,200 producers devoting more than 83,000 acres of Illinois farmland to specialty crops production, creating nearly \$500 million in annual sales for Illinois farmers. Nationally, Illinois ranks first for its pumpkin and horseradish production and ranks in the top ten for the production of asparagus, cauliflower, fresh-cut herbs, peas, mustard greens and lima beans.

Additional information about the program can be found online at the Department’s website and/or by contacting AGR.ISCBG@illinois.gov.

###

Commented [KJ1]: Jackie confirming stats with USDA NASS