Science Societies

U.S. Sod Checkoff proposal seeks to ‘bring grass to life’

By Casey Reynolds

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Chances are by now you may have heard of the U.S. Sod Checkoff initiative that is in the early stages of promotion and consideration, but if not, that's ok too. There is plenty of time to explore it ahead of the upcoming referendum that is months or more away. Chances also are that checkoff-funded advertisements have impacted your buying choices in some way or another. From the ever-popular "Got Milk?" campaign through "Pork. The Other White Meat" and "Cotton: The Fabric of Our Lives," these campaigns are possible in part because of nationwide checkoffs. The U.S. Sod Checkoff program's tagline "Bring Grass to Life" could be just as impactful by not only encouraging consumers to bring grass to their lives, but also by funding important scientific research to bring our industry's story to life.

The goal of any checkoff program is to increase product demand, expand markets, fund consumer and scientific research, and to fight regulations, building codes, local ordinances, and consumer attitudes that do not align with the uses, science, and value behind agricultural products. A U.S. Sod Checkoff has been discussed at least as far back as 1996, and the idea is nothing new to other agricultural and specialty crops. There are currently 22 checkoff programs, formally called research and promotion programs, and they did not get created quickly. The path to a national checkoff is purposefully long with a number of checks and balances to ensure that everyone in the industry is represented fairly and has a chance to provide input.

In 2017, representatives from the U.S. sod industry began exploring checkoff programs in detail and have spent the last four years developing a potential checkoff program for the industry to consider and vote on. A formation committee made up of 14 sod producers from throughout the U.S. wrote and submitted a draft order in late 2020, and it is currently under review at USDA. The proposal creates a framework whereby a board of 13 sod producers would hire and oversee staff to run the estimated $14

million annual program. These sod producers would be nominated by other sod producers and would serve three-year rotating terms on a board of directors where five sod producers would come from southern states, four from northern states, and four from transition zone states. This board structure was proposed based on a thorough review of annual U.S sod production, farms, and value in order to create equitable representation to all regions.

Increased Funding for Research, Promotion

The estimated annual budget of $14 million would come from an assessment of one-tenth of a penny per square foot of sod sold and harvested each year. This proposed rate is less than one-half of 1% of the sale price of sod per square foot. Some producers say it is a small enough amount that they would likely just pay it out of their operating budget, whereas other sod producers, particularly larger ones, say they will simply add it to their invoice, collect it from their customers, and then submit it quarterly to the checkoff board. Many of the associations who represent those customers, such as the National Association of Landscape Professionals, Sports Field Managers Association, and others have signed on to support the program as they understand the need for large-scale research and promotion at the local and national level.

What could the turfgrass industry, particularly its university researchers, do with $14 million or more every year? Wow, just imagine. If passed, the U.S. Sod Checkoff would create what is likely the largest single, annually recurring research funding source in the world that is devoted solely to the turfgrass industry. A set percentage of money would fund research in the state in which the sod is produced, and the remainder would fund research through a competitive grant proposal process administered each year through the national checkoff.

Next Steps

So what's next between now and the upcoming referendum? While we don't know the exact timeline, we do know the process. There will be a 60-day public comment period opening soon in the U.S. Federal Register, followed by a review period, a notification of the vote, and then the voting period. If passed by a majority of sod producers, the industry would nominate producers to the board, seat the board, and then get off and running soon after.

If you have any specific questions or see opportunities to discuss this with sod producers in your state or region, please reach out to me at Send Message. If you want to stay up to date with the latest information on the proposed checkoff program, sign up for notifications, or read the proposal in its entirety, please visit **https://sodcheckoff.org/resources/**.



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