CRB’s involvement will add value and focus to Federal HLB funds.
For the cause of citrus pest and disease research, recent federal appropriations and the Farm Bill have unleashed “an embarrassment of riches.” These are the words of California Citrus Mutual’s Joel Nelsen. The three major citrus producing states, by way of the “Three Mutuals,” coordinated their efforts to great effect as the legislative process unfolded. In the truest sense, securing the funds took an Act of Congress. Now for the really hard part: spending the money wisely in a manner that gets results.

The Citrus Research Board is positioned to play a central role in this process. Whether formally as a board, or by individuals serving on various federal advisory committees, CRB members and staff will be called upon by federal granting agencies to provide the California perspective.

Because CRB’s long-time mission has been to foster, promote and fund sound science in the name of California growers, our federal partners will be interested in CRB’s viewpoints early on in the call for proposals stage. CRB’s experience with generating proposals and awarding citrus research has given the board an appreciation of the importance of forming best-in-class researcher groups around specific challenges. A recent example of CRB’s track record in building teams, profiled in the Winter edition of Citrograph, is the eight interdisciplinary labs CRB brought together to test various early HLB detection methods at the UC Davis Containment Facility.

Most importantly, CRB will no doubt play an active role in providing critiques of the federal results, as well as perspectives on technology transfer strategies that will be meaningful to growers. Our Research Development and Implementation Committee is gaining more experience in this area with every funding cycle, and it will help feed perspectives to the USDA Secretary when it feels that the federal projects duplicate, over-promise, under-deliver, or when those projects are on target.

I already have had the pleasure of working with USDA’s Dr. Mary Palm (see “A big hand for Dr. Palm” on page 40) in my capacity as an appointee to the newly-created HLB Multi-Agency Coordinating (MAC) Group. The funding decisions yet to be made to expend $21 million are not easy, given the Congressional mandate that such expenditures should show positive results in the field by late 2015. Out of the gate, the consensus is that California should ramp up its biocontrol efforts to slow the spread of ACP in areas where sprays are impossible, while Florida should be focused on short-term antimicrobial and thermal therapy approaches that might lend hope to keeping the remaining infected trees productive.

Even if the funds were not on the table, I see the seeds of progress that make me believe that the Secretary’s formation of the HLB MAC Group will be able to make a difference in the level of focus our federal partners will invest. For instance, a representative of the EPA has joined the group and is learning of the dire threat that is HLB, which will help inform that agency’s future regulatory decisions. The Risk Management Agency also has been brought into the group to aid in its determination of whether an insurance product that would be affordable and meaningful to California and Texas producers can be developed while the disease is not yet widespread in those states.

I am hopeful the intra- and inter-agency communication engendered by the HLB MAC Group can only help in ultimately addressing its namesake cause.

Ken Keck is president of the Citrus Research Board.