Immokalee agricultural center gets $2 million of $5 million sought in state budget

By LAURA LAYDEN

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IMMOKALEE — The Southwest Florida Research and Education Center in Immokalee could collect $2 million from the largest budget passed in Florida’s history.

That’s less than half the money growers and their supporters fought for this session, but they’re not complaining.

“We are very thrilled to get what we did get,” said Dallas Townsend, a former livestock agent in Southwest Florida. “We are not going to be fussing about it.”

Townsend is one of the advocates behind a revived regional agricultural council that lobbied for $4.9 million in state money to restore programs, staff and faculty, and to expand the research center’s academic campus off State Road 29.

Spending bills passed by the state House and Senate in April didn’t include special appropriations for the center, but the final budget passed by the Legislature earlier this month has enough money in it to cover the cost of critical maintenance and possibly some new construction.

“Hopefully, we’ll also be able to do some new construction,” said Calvin Arnold, the center’s director. “We need three new laboratories. We need additional dormitory space for graduate students from the main campus in Gainesville, and we need renovation of some of our current labs and research areas.”

The center for agricultural research is tied to the University of Florida-IFAS. Over the years, it has lost faculty, staff and research programs to budget cuts. At one time, the center had 12 faculty members doing research, and now there are seven.

It wasn’t long ago that it looked as if the university would close the center. The center hasn’t received any special appropriations in years, and it was nearly downgraded to a demonstration center, which would have meant no researchers of its own.

Growers fought for $1.2 million in recurring money for faculty and staff, $1.2 million for critical maintenance and $2.5 million for new space, including a 6,000-square-foot addition to the main office and lab.

“We are still very excited about receiving the funds,” Arnold said. “It’s going to help us do some things during the next year that have been deferred for a long time.”
Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples, a member of the House Appropriations Committee, said he was happy to see the $2 million approved, which he feels will "certainly go a long way."

The Legislature didn't approve any recurring dollars for the center, meaning there's no money budgeted for new employees.

“We just have to go back next year and try to get the recurring dollars so we can hire the research staff we really need,” Townsend said.

Arnold said he knows the growers’ fight will continue, not just for the money needed to hire more employees, but for a wish list of construction projects.

The center’s researchers have been involved in a variety of research projects, including developing new ways to fight greening, which would become a bigger focus with more money. Greening, a tree-killing bacterial disease, threatens to destroy Florida's citrus industry.

With the importance of citrus in Southwest Florida and the state, Arnold also was happy to see the Legislature support a list of the industry’s priorities this session.

One-time appropriations include $3.5 million for citrus research grants, with a focus on greening; $2 million for a state-run germplasm center; $500,000 to support a Citrus Health Management Area program targeted at greening; $500,000 for new variety development research, and $500,000 for the Florida Department of Citrus to support economic and market research.

Some of the citrus research money is expected to land in Immokalee at the UF/IFAS center, where faculty will compete for it.

Arnold knows the budget isn’t final until Gov. Rick Scott signs off on it, so it’s wait-and-see.

“It's all subject to the governor's veto pen,” he said. “But we are just trying to think positive.”

__ Staff writer Jenna Buzzacco-Foerster contributed to this story. 