For Immediate Release

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The IR-4 Project: Promoting Effective Weed Control for Food, Flowers and Seasonal Favorites

LAWRENCE, Kansas – December 10, 2009 – Hundreds of government officials, growers, agricultural researchers and extension personnel gathered recently to make decisions that will impact the quality and quantity of the fruits and vegetables on our tables and the ornamental plants that beautify our landscapes.

They were determining 2010-2011 research priorities for the Interregional Research Project Number 4 (IR-4), an organization launched more than four decades ago by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. IR-4 is responsible for conducting residue studies and investigating the safety and effectiveness of new, reduced-risk herbicides, insecticides and fungicides that can help growers of specialty crops successfully manage pests and improve yields.

“Specialty crops” include hundreds of fruits, vegetables, nuts, herbs, spices, flowers, shrubs and trees that bring diversity to our diet and color to our homes and gardens. Among them are seasonal favorites such as Christmas trees, poinsettias and holly, and even the nuts, berries and sugar used in holiday treats.

“IR-4 not only benefits crop producers, but also our nation’s consumers,” says Lee Van Wychen, PhD, science policy director for the Weed Science Society of America. “The public has a vested interest in environmental protection, food safety and affordability, and IR-4 addresses all three.”

Funding for IR-4 comes from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), state agricultural experiment stations and private industry. “Studies show that IR-4 is a sound investment that is paying enormous returns,” says Jerry Baron, PhD, executive director of the IR-4 Project.

Research conducted by Michigan State University’s Center for Economic Analysis found that the IR-4 Food Program’s annual budget of about $15 million made an $8 billion contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In a second study, researchers found that the IR-4 Ornamental Horticulture Program contributed $1.1 billion to the GDP on an investment of $1.4 million.

"To date, IR-4 has been instrumental in the approval of more than 20,000 chemical and biological uses to protect specialty crops," Van Wychen says. "As a result, farmers have a broader and more effective range of choices for managing weeds and other pests."

One example of IR-4's success is sugar beets, a source of sugar for holiday treats. Growers have traditionally had a limited arsenal of herbicides for weed control in sugar beets because the plants are susceptible to injury. One product that works well is ethofumesate, an herbicide that controls broadleaf and grassy weeds. Many growers were unable to use ethofumesate, though, because they followed their sugar beet crop with wheat. The herbicide's label required a 16- to 18-month wait before wheat could be planted in a treated field. IR-4 stepped in to conduct field trials that proved wheat could be safely planted much sooner without injury or unacceptable residues.

Another example involves poinsettias, which have become a prized holiday tradition. Throughout their growing cycle, poinsettia plants are susceptible to insects and diseases, including whiteflies, powdery mildews and root rots. IR-4 has worked with researchers to identify products that can protect poinsettia plants without leaving an unsightly residue or damaging their showy leaves.

"Registering a pesticide can be a long, expensive and complicated process," Van Wychen says. "IR-4 research provides required information that allows many herbicides, fungicides and insecticides to be registered for use on specialty crops."

IR-4 is headquartered at Rutgers University, with laboratories and field research sites in 36 states and Puerto Rico. Regional offices are based at the University of California, Cornell University, University of Florida and Michigan State University. For more information on the IR-4 Project, visit the organization's website at www.IR4.rutgers.edu.

About the Weed Science Society of America

The Weed Science Society of America, a nonprofit professional society, was founded in 1956 to encourage and promote the development of knowledge concerning weeds and their impact on the environment. The Weed Science Society of America promotes research, education and extension outreach activities related to weeds, provides science-based information to the public and policy makers, fosters awareness of weeds and their impact on managed and natural ecosystems, and promotes cooperation among weed science organizations across the nation and around the world. For more information, visit www.wssa.net.

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SIDEBAR:

A Few Fast Facts about the Pesticide Registration Process

- Federal law requires that all pesticides distributed in the U.S. be registered by the Environmental Protection Agency.

- The EPA evaluates extensive research data on each product to ensure it can be used safely as proposed – without threat to human health or to the environment.

- Product developers may be required to conduct more than 140 studies before their product is approved for use; the process takes years.

- For pesticides used on large-acreage crops such as corn, wheat and soybeans, the cost of the registration process is recovered through high-volume sales.

- The registration process can be cost-prohibitive for pesticides used on smaller-acreage crops with a lower sales volume. The government-funded IR-4 Project helps to reduce that financial barrier by conducting vital research on new, lower-risk products that have the potential to protect crops and improve yields.