

10 named THRIVE Accelerator winners

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(Photo: Jay Dunn/The Salinas Californian)

The winners of this year's THRIVE Accelerator Program in Salinas were announced on Tuesday evening at a reception at the Taylor Building, which officially kicked off this year's program.

THRIVE AgTech, which runs the program, is investing \$1 million in this year's 10 winners. Winning companies (see bios below) receive \$50,000 in cash and a program/mentorship and coaching valued at \$50,000.

Participants are a geographically diverse group with four from California, one from Ohio, another from New Jersey, and the remaining based in Brazil, Ireland, Israel and Italy.

The program starts with an eight-week boot camp which combines classroom and online training, field tours and meetings with growers in Salinas Valley. On Wednesday, the agenda includes visits to Taylor Farms, Driscoll's Berries, and Hahn Winery.

Winners also have the use of the Western Growers Center for Innovation & Technology the agtech incubator in Salinas, and access to mentorship and coaching during the two-month period. At the end of the program, the companies showcase their products at the [Forbes AgTech Summit, which will be held on June 28-29 \(/story/news/local/2016/10/26/forbes-ag-tech-summit-round-three/92786912/\)](#) in downtown Salinas.

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The third THRIVE Accelerator program kicked off with introductions on Tuesday morning. (Photo: Amy Wu)

John Hartnett, the CEO of SVG Partners, the Los Gatos-based consulting firm that runs the THRIVE AgTech programs, said there were 150 applicants this year from 30 countries, including 40 from California and three from Salinas.

This year's application pool included a rise in the number of women led companies from countries such as Brazil, China, India. Hartnett said there were more technologies focused on the consumer food marketplace and indoor agriculture environments.

While there were a high number of applicants in previous years, Hartnett said the program structure has changed this year with THRIVE AgTech expanding its programs.

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Barbara Thompson from Well Fargo speaks with Josh Hartnett of SVG Partners at the THRIVE Accelerator Seed Camp reception on Tuesday at the Western Growers Center for Innovation & Technology in Salinas. (Photo: Jay Dunn/The Salinas Californian)

New programs include the [Open Innovation "Top 50" program \(/story/news/2017/01/18/big-data-robotics-lead-thrive-top-50/96699206/\)](#), which focuses on more established agtech companies, and the [Young Innovators Challenge \(/story/news/2017/03/31/young-tech-entrepreneurs-make-pitches/99897284/\)](#) to encourage budding agtech entrepreneurs.

AgTech may be a small and niche sector globally, but many of its supporters say that it is promising since it combines agriculture and technology both major global economic drivers.

At the same time, it seeks to solve significant challenges that the agriculture industry continues to face worldwide namely water and labor [shortages. \(/story/news/2017/02/02/agtech-facing-labor-storage-challenge/97422846/\)](#)

Attendees of Tuesday evening's event included Salinas Mayor Joe Gunter, Hartnell College's President Willard Lewallen, and many of THRIVE's growing number of partners.

Key partners include the city of Salinas, Taylor Farms, Western Growers, Wells Fargo, Verizon and Land O' Lakes. Others include Driscoll's Berries, Yamaha, Panasonic, JV Smith, Coco-Cola and Samsung.

The big picture

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Eric Smith, visiting fellow at Western Growers, and Jessica Bollinger of Arable enjoy the THRIVE Accelerator Seed Camp reception on Tuesday at the Western Growers Center for Innovation & Technology in Salinas. (Photo: Jay Dunn/The Salinas Californian)

THRIVE AgTech is part of the city of Salinas' strategy to grow its agtech footprint, not just regionally but globally.

City leaders assert that agtech will boost economic development, create jobs and a skilled workforce, and in doing rebrand a city that while on the economic rebound, has been challenged with gang violence, homelessness and a lack of affordable housing.

Those who support the city in its efforts to push agtech point to Salinas' advantages.

Agriculture is already tremendous here, a \$9 billion industry in the Salinas Valley alone. The city is close to Silicon Valley, a roughly 65-mile drive to San Jose.

The "agtech ecosystem," that Salinas City Manager Ray Corpuz Jr. often refers to, involves creating a base for agtech companies and developing a knowledge-based workforce.

At Tuesday morning's session Andy Myrick the city's economic development manager welcomed the winners to Salinas and urged them to get to know the city better.

Myrick pointed to the breadth and depth of the agriculture industry, and the opportunities that came with the rapid changes in society and technology.

"Our future is tied to what agriculture does," he said.

He noted there was a "wave coming" and the city wanted to embrace what was coming.

The city's commitment to agtech includes investing in the Forbes AgTech Summit, retaining SVG Partners and Hartnett to build agtech, sponsoring THRIVE programs and partnering with the Western Growers Association. For the past several years it has also hired DCI Marketing a national firm to sell the Salinas agtech story to national and international media.

"We want you to stay," said Myrick to the companies. "Hopefully you will like what you see."

Investment opportunities

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Sensory analyst Henry Young prepares berries for a taste test at at Driscoll's Cassin Ranch in Watsonville. The event was part of Planting the Seeds for the Future, a three-day Silicon Valley Forum agricultural technology tour that included Salinas. (Photo: Jay Dunn/The Salinas Californian)

Some of the new batch of agtech startups by end up in the Western Growers Center for Innovation & Technology, which houses many former THRIVE winners. Success stories include [Trace Genomics \(/story/news/2017/02/16/challenges-and-opportunities-diane-wu-and-poomima-parameswaran/97983584/\)](#), which has raised at least \$5 million in seed funding to date and Nuritas, an Irish-based company that saw an injection of investment from Bono of U2.

"Typically we are fortunate enough where some companies that have participated become residents in the center it has served as a feeder," said Dennis Donohue head of the Western Growers Center for Innovation & Technology, adding that the center has a goal of having 50 companies by end of 2017.

"During the THRIVE program, they are welcome to use the center and the resources. They become part of the community." The Center for Innovation & Technology is one of a small number of agtech incubators in the U.S. other notable ones include Illumina and Village Capital.

From another vantage, entrepreneurs are well-aware that agtech may be nascent but is promising. There are a growing number of investors, from traditional agriculture companies such as Taylor Farms to wireless companies like Verizon keen on investing in the space.

AgTech is part of a spectrum of areas including the “Internet of things solutions,” and smart communication solutions that Verizon Ventures, a subsidiary of Verizon Wireless the large cell phone provider. Verizon Ventures invests anywhere from \$500,000 to \$1 million into companies with the goal of turning “startups into strategic assets.”

Daniel Chiu head of portfolio development at Verizon Ventures said the company started looking at agriculture a year ago.

“We noticed a trend where we saw investment growth,” he said. Verizon is especially interested in technology that tackles water management in vineyards.

George Kellerman, Yamaha motor ventures, said the company invests anywhere from \$250,000 to \$2 million into agstart ups and works directly with growers. Over the past year it made four investments, two ag related.

Before this new cohort of agtech companies, companies presented their challenges but also opportunities.

Vic Smith the CEO and President of JV Smith Companies with 22,000 acres in Salinas, Yuma Ariz., Moreios, Mexico and Center, Colo., said he’s on the lookout for precision technology that to fit a certain number of plants in each acre of land.

“We want one acre to have 35,000 plants, we need that kind of precision,” he said. Smith gave the example of how a new auto-thinning machine tackles 1,200 acres, replacing the need of roughly 32 workers. On his wish list is also drone technology that analyzes data.

With new technologies “we can have the potential to increase yield 20 to 25%,” Smith said.

Connecting the Valleys

In interviews, Hartnett has readily referred to the goal of connecting Salinas Valley with Silicon Valley.

To be sure, THRIVE has been used as a platform to showcase Salinas and its agriculture industry. This is a significant draw to entrepreneurs – especially those traditionally in the tech sector - who are keen to connect directly with their customer base, the growers and farmers.

Bruce Caldwell founder and CEO of 3Bar Biologics Inc. based in Columbus, Ohio, one of the winners said he applied to the incubator to gain “access” to what he considers one of the most important agriculture markets in the country.

Caldwell launched 3Bar after six years of working for Miracle-Gro. He saw an opportunity to focus on biologics and development soil with beneficial microbes for growers.

“This is the entry point,” he said of the potential and vast customer base in Salinas Valley.

Xuemei Germaine the CEO of Ireland-based MicroGen Biotech, another winner this year, said she was confident the accelerator would take the company to the next level.

“We can get to partners and get the technology to the field,” she said.

Here are the 10 winners of the 2017 THRIVE Accelerator Program

[Arable \(http://www.arable.com/\)](http://www.arable.com/)

Headquartered: Princeton, New Jersey

Arable enables agricultural enterprises with real-time continuous visibility and predictive analytics of crop growth, harvest timing, yield, and quality based on in-field Arable Mark measurement.

[Agrosmart \(https://www.agrosmart.com.br/en/\)](https://www.agrosmart.com.br/en/)

Headquartered: Campinas, Brazil

Targeting the LatAm market, Agrosmart monitors environmental conditions in real time to empower growers to make better decisions and achieve more productive and sustainable agriculture.

[AgShift \(https://www.agshift.com/\)](https://www.agshift.com/)

Headquartered: Santa Clara, CA

Blending machine learning with computer vision with the mission to design a fully transparent and digitized food system.

* Note: [AgShift \(https://www.agshift.com/\)](https://www.agshift.com/) was previously profiled under a special-series The Salinas Californian ran on minority women entrepreneurs in agtech

Deeplook (<http://deeplook.io/>)

Headquartered: San Francisco, CA

Deeplook builds robots that work autonomously in fields, can distinguish between various types of plants and growth stages, and can mechanically act on targeted plants through proprietary algorithms in different fields of Artificial Intelligence such as Computer Vision, Autonomous Vehicle Control, and Reinforcement Learning.

EZ-Lab (<http://www.ezlab.it/>)

Headquartered: Podavo, Italy

EZ-Lab is a digital hub to manage, certificate and share agri-information, which integrates every type of

automatic information coming from a company's informative system, with the purpose of eliminating the operation of data insertion by farms and the whole agribusiness production chain.

FarmDog (<http://farmdog.ag/>)

Headquartered: Tel Aviv, Israel

Farm Dog changes the way growers choose, use, and purchase pest and disease treatments. Treatment efficacy reviews, regional alerts, and variable rate treatment application provide growers with a new toolkit to manage their fields.

MicroGen Biotech (<http://www.microgenbiotech.com/>)

Headquartered: Carlow, Ireland

Microgen utilizes patented isolation and high-throughput screening methods to isolate functional, high-performance microbiomes for application in agricultural crop production and environmental remediation.

Tortuga Agricultural Technologies (<http://www.tortugaagtech.com/>)

Headquartered: Los Gatos, CA

Tortuga AgTech builds Digital Horticulture facilities, which take the most advanced greenhouse growing methods and wrap them around powerful technology like robotics, automation, and precision data analytics and machine learning.

UAV-IQ (<http://www.uaviq.farm/>)

Headquartered: Los Angeles, CA

UAV-IQ is a full service data management company that leverages cutting-edge remote sensing and drone technologies for agriculture clients.

3Bar Biologics (<http://www.3barbiologics.com/>)

Headquartered: Columbus, Ohio

3Bar Biologics is dedicated to applying disruptive technologies to create ecologically

Source: SVG Partners

Infobox

AgTech season is here in Salinas and it comes with a growing number of conferences. Here are some conferences or recent conferences where there has been a Salinas connection.

- THRIVE Young Innovators Challenge March 31
- Silicon Valley Forum's The Seeds of Our Future April 3 – 6
- Winners of this year's THRIVE Accelerator announced - April 11
- [Salinas Valley Ag Tech Summit \(http://sv-ag-summit.com/\)](http://sv-ag-summit.com/), April 12 8:30 a.m. – 5 p.m.
- [Silicon Valley AgTech Conference \(https://www.svagtech.org/wp/\)](https://www.svagtech.org/wp/), May 5, 2017
- [Forbes AgTech Summit \(https://www.forbes.com/forbes-live/event/agtech-summit\)](https://www.forbes.com/forbes-live/event/agtech-summit) – June 28-29, 2017