

Greenhouse technology takes step ahead in Niagara

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A robotic mushroom harvester goes to work as local dignitaries look on during the unveiling of the new collaborative greenhouse technology centre at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre Friday. (Supplied Photo)

More flavourful tomatoes, more profitable packaging and robotic harvesters are among the agricultural innovations being created in Vineland.

The new collaborative greenhouse technology centre at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre was unveiled Friday.

During the official opening of the facility, built to develop and commercialize innovative horticultural and greenhouse technologies, the provincial and federal

governments announced respective \$7.2-million and \$5.76-million contributions to the project.

"The greenhouse industry in Ontario is a billion-dollar industry and one that is very technology intensive," said centre CEO Jim Brandle.

Work at the facility is meant to give Ontario companies an edge in the competitive global market by reducing labour and production costs while producing safe, healthy foods in a controlled environment.

"The investment's about helping to position them in an even better way to be the kind of world leaders they already are," Brandle said.

The unique facility, nearly an acre in size, replicates commercial conditions "so the work we do can be immediately relevant to those greenhouses," he said.

"What goes on inside is all the things you need to do to differentiate, to drive down cost and to be more competitive. Things like tomatoes with enhanced flavour that are different and better than those of our competitors, like smart watering systems that allow us to produce more greenhouse crops with less water. It speaks to sustainability, to cost."

The research also looks into packaging and shipping products in more efficient ways to increase profitability, and development of crops that are more resilient to Ontario's climate.

Despite the announcements Friday, the facility has been operational since December. Including construction jobs as well as those created at the facility, the initiative is expected to create 125 new full-time jobs by 2019.

Brandle said Niagara, and Vineland in particular, is the ideal location for an investment of this nature.

"The greenhouse industry in Niagara is big and successful," he said, adding the area is "really our laboratory."

"We don't have to reach too far to have industry people to work with. They're all around us."

He believes the Town of Lincoln "has the ambition to be the centre of excellence for innovation in horticulture in Canada."

This latest development will hopefully have industry eyes from across the globe taking notice of Niagara, he added.

"I think it's another bold step toward prosperity in Niagara," Regional Chairman Alan Caslin said of the innovative space that is nearly twice the size of any other research greenhouse in Canada.

Work being done at the centre will be "far reaching," he said, and is expected to influence global technology and practices.

"This is more than just an investment locally. This is commercialization of new technologies and what they will do in transforming the food and farm industry. This is something that will be used not only in Niagara, but all of Ontario, all of Canada, all over the world."

St. Catharines MP Chris Bittle feels the investment in the Vineland facility will "bring a lot of value to the agricultural sector."

While people may associate innovation with the automotive and high-tech industries, the facility, he said, has proven "that's not where innovation stops."

"Vineland has been at the forefront of agricultural innovation for the last 10 years and they've been doing some outstanding work and it's being noticed."

Staff have developed a robotic mushroom harvester that can pick, size and sort the delicate produce, a feat Bittle was impressed by during his tour of the facility Friday.

"They're really putting their knowledge into practice."

<http://www.stcatharinesstandard.ca/2016/06/03/greenhouse-innovations-advanced-in-niagara>

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