

## NEWS RELEASE

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### South-East England agritech, food and drink sectors secure £18m boost

A project to strengthen the competitiveness of Britain's horticulture, food and drink industries has been awarded £18m of government funding.

The Growing Kent & Medway initiative is one of seven national projects that will drive innovation-led growth and support areas of R&D strength thanks to government funding provided through UK Research and Innovation's flagship Strength in Places Fund. It will build upon more than a century of strategic and applied horticultural research undertaken at NIAB EMR in East Malling, Kent.

Growing Kent & Medway will stimulate research, innovation and enterprise to boost growth in this critical sector for the UK. It will promote the adoption of the latest horticultural technologies, plant growing techniques and the development of new and exciting crops to boost food production and economic growth, including the construction of new science facilities.

Led by horticultural and agricultural research institution NIAB EMR, the project brings together universities and leading innovators in the industry, and will establish Kent and Medway as a world-leading region for the climate-smart production and processing of high-value, nutrient-rich foods and plant-based products.

Announcing the funding, Business Secretary Alok Sharma said: "Today's announcement will ensure some of our country's most promising R&D projects get the investment they need to take off and thrive.

"Working with the private sector our world-class universities, we're backing new and innovative ideas that will create jobs and boost skills in every part of the UK for years to come."

The £18m funding decision project further cements the area as a national and international hub for innovation.

Professor Mario Caccamo, Managing Director of NIAB EMR, added: "Growing Kent & Medway can now get to work to consolidate this part of the UK as the leading region for the production and processing of high-value foods. The timing of this support is particularly significant as we look to emerge from the Covid-19 crisis, and address some of the most pressing challenges faced by the agriculture sector.

"It would not have been possible to successfully reach the final stage of this very competitive scheme without our partners, the support of the Kent and Medway Councils and our local MPs, who have collectively recognised the significance of what the excellent scientific and research programmes can do for the regional economy.

"We will drive inclusive wealth creation so that untapped human capital can contribute to, and share in the region's prosperity."

Christian Brodie, Chairman of the South East Local Enterprise Partnership, which backed the bid to government, said: "Our area already delivers 40% of high-value horticulture in the UK. Growing Kent & Medway will drive innovation and productivity, meaning we can now expand the sector, strengthen supply chains and existing businesses, and create sustainable new ones."

The Growing Kent & Medway project brings together a world-class consortium of businesses and academic institutions, including APS Produce, Berry Gardens Growers, Chapel Down, Gusbourne Estate, Richard Hochfeld Group, Thanet Earth, Worldwide Fruit, Geku Automation, Smurfit Kappa, the Natural Resources Institute (NRI)/University of Greenwich, University of Kent, and team at NIAB EMR.

The project has received the backing of the South East Local Enterprise Partnership, the Kent & Medway Economic Partnership, local councils and Locate in Kent.

**Additional supportive comments:**

**Tom Tugendhat, MP for Tonbridge & Malling**, said: “I am delighted that the Government’s commitment to supporting nationally important industries and strengthening ties between academia, research and business is demonstrated by its multi million-pound investment in NIAB East Malling Research. This will transform the work they do and helps promote all that the village has to offer.”

**Cllr Nicolas Heslop, Leader of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council**, said: “The Borough Council is absolutely delighted that this consortium’s bid to the Strength in Places Fund has been successful. It is a fantastic reward for all the hard work that partners have undertaken over a period of many months, and it will really give a significant shot in the arm to the horticultural sector in Kent.

“The fact that NIAB EMR are the Lead Partner for this project is a fine illustration of the drive and commitment that they have to make the East Malling Research Station site a world leader with state-of-the-art facilities. As a strategic partner, we will continue to campaign for further investment into this site, especially Local Growth Funding, which would help deliver an energy centre and new greenhouses to meet the high standard needed for research purposes.”

**Geoff Miles, Chairman of the Kent and Medway Economic Partnership (KMEP)**, said: “Research, development and innovation is critical in underpinning productivity growth. A key factor in the bid’s success was undoubtedly the ability of NIAB EMR to bring together a wide consortium of partners with different skills to work towards a common goal.

“The current pandemic has shown how much every citizen relies on the UK’s food and drink industry. Alongside the wonderful work of the NHS and caring professions, COVID-19 has exposed how vital local food production is, from the farmers in their fields, to the seasonal agriculture workers, to the delivery supply chains, and to the grocery shops.

“The Growing Kent and Medway project will deliver an uplift in the economy of Kent & Medway through inclusive and innovation-led industry growth.”

**Professor Jane Harrington, Vice Chancellor of the University of Greenwich**, said, “I am delighted that the skills and expertise of our Natural Resources Institute and Faculty of Engineering and Science are being applied to the horticulture and food industries to drive economic growth in Kent and Medway. We are always incredibly enthused by any project that brings investment and growth to our vital local communities.”

**Carole Barron, Director of Innovation and Enterprise (KIE) at the University of Kent**, said: “This is a huge boost to enable further research capacity and drive innovation within the sector. The University of Kent looks forward to collaborating further with partners in a joint effort to strengthen the regional economy.”

**ENDS**

Photo of NIAB EMR's Chief Executive Professor Mario Caccamo

