

North East innovator Wootzano joins project to combat food picking labour shortages

Robotics firm Wootzano is part of a project that aims to tackle the lack of labour in the UK horticulture industry using technology.

As part of 'Agri-OpenCore', the County Durham-based company is contributing its know-how to part of the £9.13m programme that aims to develop an open development platform – including software and hardware – for robotic crop harvesting. It is hoped the platform will open the door to the creation of commercial robotic systems using tomatoes and strawberries as test cases.

At the moment there is no robotic harvesting system that can match the speed of human picking but Wootzano says its fruit and vegetable packaging system called Avarai has matched human costs for packing fresh produce. The understanding is set to be applied to Agri-OpenCore which is being led by APS Produce – one of the UK's leading suppliers of British tomatoes to the high street.

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The three-year Agri-OpenCore project is part of DEFRA's Farming Innovation Programme which also includes efforts to create an autonomous system to change cows' bedding and a more environmentally-friendly approach to potato cultivation. APS, Wootzano and project partners Dogtooth Technologies, University of Lincoln, and Xihelm, have received £3.8m to carry out the work.

Dr Atif Syed, CEO of Wootzano Ltd, said: "The Wootzano team,

together with growers, academia and the agri-robotics industry, is working on Agri-OpenCore, a project targeting an open development platform for robotic systems. The platform will facilitate standardised access to the core robotic software and hardware components enabling rapid adoption by the industry and academia. The Wootzano team will work on the end-user packing case for vine tomatoes using our commercial Avarai system as the base product.

“The Agri-OpenCore is unprecedented for bringing together strong robotics companies in the UK to create such a platform which will reduce the development time for future robotics businesses.”

Farming Minister Mark Spencer said: “It’s important that we fund projects like these – and those still to come in future rounds – as we support farmers to deliver sustainable food production and protect the environment. Innovation, research and development will help keep the sector at the cutting edge of technology as we look into the future.”

Katrina Hayter, interim executive director of Healthy Living & Agriculture at Innovate UK, added: “These projects have all demonstrated not only an innovative solution to a real-life, on-farm problem, but also the value of partnerships and collaboration between different sector experts. For novel technology to truly succeed, it needs the input of the farmers themselves for the day-to-day realities of its use.

“We’re really pleased that these partnerships have this idea at their core, and we now look forward to working with them as they develop their solutions further and bring the benefits to life.”

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