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Strawberry venture aims high for funds

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Jamie Gray

Farming technology company 26 Seasons will seek \$5.5 million in a Series A funding round next week aimed at advancing its plans for its vertical farming operation at Foxton and to explore opportunities in Southeast Asia.

The company, co-founded by current Deleat Group chief executive and former Landcorp chief executive Steve Carden, aims to grow and sell premium strawberries on a commercial scale in the off-season.

It has just released its first crop of locally grown and spray-free strawberries in one of the wettest winters on record, one that has seen many outdoor crops fail.

"No one has been able to crack what we think we are on the verge of cracking – to be able to provide strawberries year-round at a viable yield per plant," chief executive Grant Leach told the *Herald*.

The company uses hydroponics to grow strawberries indoors in five-layer stacks which can reach an average 3.5 metres in height.

Leach says 26 Seasons' strawberries are sustainably grown in a former industrial site converted into a productive indoor vertical farm that mimics perfect strawberry-growing conditions.

Leach said indoor vertical farming is attracting attention globally for its ability to sustainably grow food anywhere while eliminating external factors such as seasons, climate, severe weather and global events that threaten crops and disrupt food supply chains.

The company has released its first crop to select retailers in one of the wettest winters on record.

At Foxton, 26 Seasons has a 1350sq m industrial site capable of producing a million punnets of strawberries annually.

The controlled indoor environment removes external factors like weather, seasonality, pests and disease and mimics perfect strawberry-growing conditions 24 hours a day.

The company began in 2017 with an indoor vertical farm in a former Wellington nightclub and expanded last year to include an microgreens – young seedlings of edible vegetables and herbs – in a converted warehouse in Penrose.

Leach says 26 Seasons strawberries are grown under a proprietary, high-tech lighting system in vertically stacked beds.

Natural predators are introduced to control any pests and bees are used to pollinate the flowers.

Water is recycled with just a fraction used compared with outdoor farms and because there is no soil, there is no erosion or nutrient leaching.

The capital raise is to support its growth plans, including expanding its footprint in New Zealand through a second indoor vertical strawberry farm, and entering the Southeast Asian market where there is a known demand for premium strawberries year-round.

It has a pilot programme planned in Singapore, and is looking to establish a 100,000-plus plant capacity indoor vertical farm in Southeast Asia, a region where high humidity makes strawberries tricky to grow outdoors.

The company says that unlike other Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA) operations, 26 Seasons' is comparatively modest in terms of capital investment required and provides excellent returns in a relatively short period of time.

Beyond microgreens and strawberries, 26 Seasons is already working with the Crown research institute Plant & Food and T&G Global's VentureFruit to research new varieties.



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**Co-founder
Matthew Keltie in
the 26 Seasons
vertical farm site in
Foxton.**