



29 AUG, 2022

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Otago Daily Times, Dunedin

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WELLINGTON: Farming technology company 26 Seasons will seek \$5.5 million in a Series A funding round this week aimed at advancing its plans for its vertical farming operation in 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 in which many outdoor crops have failed.

“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 said.

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

Mr Leach said indoor vertical farming was attracting attention globally for its ability to sustainably grow food anywhere while eliminating external factors such as the effect of seasons, climate, severe weather and global events that threatened crops and disrupted 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 a year.

The controlled indoor environment removes external factors such as weather, seasonality, pests and diseases 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 microgreens in a converted warehouse in Penrose.

Mr Leach said 26 Seasons strawberries were grown under a proprietary, high-tech lighting system in vertically stacked beds.

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

The amount of water used was a fraction of that of outdoor farms and because there was no soil, there was no erosion or nutrient leaching. The water was recycled.

The capital raising was to support 26 Seasons growth plans, including expansion in New Zealand through a second indoor vertical strawberry farm, and entering the Southeast Asian market.

A pilot programme was planned in Singapore and it was looking to establish a 100,000-plus plant indoor vertical farm in Southeast Asia, where high humidity made it tricky to grow strawberries outdoors. — *The New Zealand Herald*