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**PRESS RELEASE**

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**Fruitful AI tool launches to market following £2.8m backing**

A cutting-edge new digital forecasting tool to maximise planning and profitability for soft fruit growers will launch to market in 2024 thanks to £2.8m capital raised from private investors, Ceres Agritech and Innovate UK through its investor partnership programme.

FruitCast, which has been trialled on leading soft fruit farms in the UK over the last two years, has been created in response to the demand from growers to more precisely forecast fruit growth development to help plan labour and market supply and protect margins.

FruitCast CEO, Richard Williamson, formerly Managing Director of Dyson Farming and a consultant in bold strategic change, said:

*“Raising this capital is testament to the developer Raymond Martin and the team who have created a cutting-edge tool that is immensely valuable to growers. It could be a gamechanger for an industry plagued by challenges that are persistently squeezing margins.*

*“The AI capability is driven by one of the largest databases in the world, which gives it a firm foundation for accurate forecasting ahead of other competitors. This combined with the depth of understanding of practical agriculture and proven capability has made FruitCast attractive to agritech investors in what is a competitive and noisy marketplace*.”

Traditionally yield forecasting is based on skilled workers counting plants and multiplying up to predict quantity and harvest dates. FruitCast uses a moving camera to take thousands of photographs to measure individual fruit numbers, weight and the maturity of millions of berries per day.

Chief Technical Officer, Dr Raymond Martin, developed FruitCast on the back of his PhD on optimising soft fruit processes, when growers asked him not to leave his research “on the shelf”. He says yield forecasting is the holy grail for soft fruit growers:

*“It’s a time sensitive crop, and too much fruit in any week means waste and loss, and too little, you lose business.  We’re delighted to have attracted the funding and industry support to bring FruitCast to launch. We want all growers to be able to precisely forecast their season to give them the leverage to take back the power in managing their costs and customer contracts.”*

The technology, which delivers predictions back through a user-friendly interface so production managers can allocate labour and market sales for up to six weeks in advance, is being trialled at field-scale with two of the UK’s leading soft fruit growers and processors, W B Chambers and Place UK. It’s the success of these trials and response from growers that has stimulated the substantial investment.

Citing labour costs and availability, input inflation, weather variations, longer seasonality, smarter shopping during a cost-of-living crisis and competitive imports, Place UK Production Manager Dan Yordanov says soft fruit growers need as much arsenal as possible:

“*Planning our labour needs and availability for our customers is wholly dependent on accurate estimation. There’s a lot of calculation in forecasting, it takes a lot of time, a large amount of input from experienced staff and is currently subject to human error. This is a real challenge for the industry. I’m excited to see FruitCast come to market. It is more advanced than others we’ve seen, but it’s also based on a valuable combination of agricultural knowledge and technology. There’s plenty of very advanced AI out there, but the team at FruitCast understand what we need it to do rather than what it can do.”*

Every year, the UK produces 120,000 tonnes of strawberries from approximately 4700ha, with a value of £659m at retail. Labour is 60% of a crop’s production cost so using it effectively is vital, he adds:

“*We are not looking to replace people. Automation goes hand-in-hand with the skills of workers on site and allows us to use our varied resources when and where they are most needed for greatest efficiency and our business’ sustainability.”*

Initial £520,000 funding in 2022 from Ceres Agritech, which finances commercial agri-tech projects from its university partners, allowed FruitCast to develop the tool and build a prestigious team of research scientists and industry experts led by CEO, Richard Williamson and Dr Martin. Richard Williamson has held key positions at two of the UK’s largest farming businesses, Velcourt and recently as Managing Director of Dyson Farming. A consultant for ambitious strategic change, he brings with him extensive industry experience and insight, as well as experience in raising equity for innovation.

Recent investment of over £1.1m to take Fruitcast to launch has come again from Ceres Agritech and Innovate UK in addition to private investors. Louise Sutherland from Ceres Agritech said:

“*FruitCast has huge potential to make transformational change in the industry. Predicting the timing and yield of strawberries is critical but extremely difficult to do accurately resulting in significant lost sales. Precise forecasting will help to increase growers’ annual margins. We are delighted to see that a Ceres Agritech-backed technology is going to market.”*

FruitCast will be a subscription system. Development will continue over the next six months to become commercially available for early-access in the 2024 growing season, with the opportunity to build on it for other crops including other soft-fruits, top-fruit, brassicas and salads. To find out more and keep up to date see [https://fruitcast.co.uk](http://www.fruitcast.co.uk/).

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**Editors notes**

* FruitCast [www.fruitcast.co.uk](http://www.fruitcast.co.uk/)

FruitCast helps soft fruit growers get more accurate yield forecasts to improve labour management and shift commercial power back into their hands through unique AI-enabled data analytics and yield forecasting. Minimally invasive but designed for maximum impact, it non-destructively measures individual fruit numbers, weight, and maturity of millions of berries per day. The image recording is more rapid and extensive than human counts, and quick to analyse and predict, the app has saved the intensive time and effort of manual forecasting. Combined with other data sources, Fruitcast’s algorithms can predict yield up to six weeks ahead through a grower-friendly interface.

* Ceres Agritech [www.ceresagritech.org](http://www.ceresagritech.org/)

Led by Cambridge Enterprise, the commercialisation office of the University of Cambridge, CeresAgritech was funded by Research England to commercialise innovative agri-tech based on university research in the East of England from its partners University of East Anglia, University of Hertfordshire, University of Lincoln, and University of Reading, as well as NIAB, Rothamsted Research, and the John Innes Centre.