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Hartnell AgTech Summit Critical to Farmers' Futures

Our agricultural roots run deep here in the Salinas Valley. This week, however, farmers, growers, and innovators will meet to discuss the future of agriculture.

On March 26 – 27, more than 1,000 producers, businesses, and innovators, will meet for the sixth annual Hartnell AgTech Summit here in Salinas.

The focus of the event is to equip growers with technology they can use, today.

Eric Schwartz, CEO of United Vegetable Growers Cooperative has been involved with the Hartnell AgTech Summit for three years now. He says it's critical to helping farmers survive the economic and policy shifts ahead.

"Farmers' biggest problems are water, rent, and labor, but the number one is labor," Eric said. "How do you get the crops out of the ground with less labor?"

Lots of innovators talk about automated harvesting machines that can work the long hours harvesting requires. But Eric points out, that technology is years away.

"What do you do between now and when that technology is perfected in 20 years?" Eric said. "The farmer will be out of business."

The Hartnell Summit is a chance for farmers to share knowledge and expertise and hear from experts about boots-on-the-ground technology right now that could help them stay in business, longer.

One surprising example? The Monterey County Sheriff's department has a booth at the summit. What does the Sheriff's department know about AgTech? A sticky gel, it turns out.

One of the issues farmers face day-to-day is machinery theft. Showing up to work and finding a tractor gone can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, a loss some farmers can't afford. The sheriff's department has pioneered a gel-like substance that farmers can coat equipment with. This gel can't be scrubbed off or removed, so when machinery does go missing, law enforcement look for the tell-tale gel to help make arrests and recover stolen property.

This year, the summit will feature a keynote address from IBM, about a technology called blockchain. Blockchain may prevent massive produce recalls that can put farmers out of business. Keeping track of which field different leaves of lettuce came from, can protect farmers and consumers, alike. Not only will farmers be able to learn from the

keynote speaker, they will also be able to schedule one-on-one meetings with IBM representatives to discuss specific applications of blockchain technology.

I'm proud of the Hartnell AgTech Summit. I helped found it many years ago, and never would have imagined that one day it would grow to 1,000 plus attendees sharing information and solutions. The future of the Salinas Valley is already brighter for the technologies and collaborations ahead this week.

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