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By Carl Collen

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Florida researchers seek production options



A new US\$3m grant will fund a four-year research project to find more places to grow produce

A new US\$3m federal grant given to scientists with the University of Florida's (UF) Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences has been awarded so that they can lead a four-year research project to find more places to grow fresh produce.

The grant, announced on 19 July, comes from the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, a branch of the US Department of Agriculture, with the project headed by Senthod Asseng, a UE/IFAS professor of agricultural and biological engineering and scientist David Gustafson, of the International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) Research Foundation.

It comes at a time when UF researchers are sounding a warning bell that fresh produce may be hard to come by in the future, with scientists citing changes in our climate, loss of fresh water and competition for resources as major threats in farmers' ability to increase production of fruits and

"Through this type of collaborative research, we discover the scientific answers that help solve world hunger problems," said Jack Payne, UF senior vice-president for agriculture and natural resources. "Knowing where and how to grow crops goes a long way to feeding as many people as possible while conserving our environment."

To try to deal with the production conundrum, Asseng, Gustafson and a team of leading scientists from the International Food Policy Research Institute, University of Arkansas, University of Illinois, Washington State University and the World Agricultural Economic and Environmental Services will use crop, environmental, economic and climate modelling to predict current and future impacts on yield.

They will also study the quality of selected fruit and vegetable crops in states where they are currently grown and identify future locations that will

allow for continued or potentially increased production.

Additionally, the researchers will investigate places that have sufficient water to grow fruits and vegetables, ultimately utilising climate data to see where such produce can be grown in the future.

"The project will explore if other regions like the southeast, including Florida, or the Pacific Northwest, could produce some of the fruits and vegetables that are getting harder to produce in California," Asseng said. The difficulty arises from less water and an overall warming climate, he said.

"The potential for improving the overall sustainability and environmental profile of handling, storing, packaging and market access activities will be studied," Asseng added.

The team of researchers involved in the project will combine economic and crop

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vegetables.

models to determine current and future prices and production costs of crops such as carrots, green beans, oranges, potatoes, spinach, strawberries, sweetcorn and tomatoes.

Previous research in this area has focused on grain crops such as wheat, corn, rice and soybeans, which are generally grown without irrigation.

“Beginning in 2014, the ILSI Research Foundation identified the importance of improving the sustainability of fruit and vegetable supply chains, from producers all the way to retailers and consumers,” Gustafson said. “Recognising our commitment to improving nutrition and health through cross-disciplinary research, we are very pleased that

the US Department of Agriculture has now affirmed the importance of this critical issue by awarding this new grant.”

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