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By Fred Searle

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Fieldwork Robotics wins Covid-19 funding



Fieldwork Robotics' raspberry picking arm

Tech firm behind robotic harvester wins extra government funding as demand rises for its technology amid deepening labour shortages

Fieldwork Robotics has been awarded an £84,000 continuity grant to accelerate the development of its raspberry picking robots during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The tech company is initially focused on developing robots to harvest raspberries, which are more delicate and more easily damaged than other soft fruits, and grow on bushes with complex foliage and berry distribution.

In addition, Fieldwork has also progressed in developing further applications of the technology to harvest other fruit and vegetables.

The funding from Innovate UK, the UK government's innovation agency, will be used to support the tech firm's plans to expand its team and develop facilities amid growing interest in its technology from producers. Labour shortages have been exacerbated by Covid-19 due to its impact on people movement internationally.

"Fieldwork Robotics is addressing the long-standing problems soft fruit and vegetable growers have faced in recruiting enough human labour to harvest their crops," said chief executive Rui Andres.

"Covid-19 has only made these problems worse. We are very grateful to Innovate UK and the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund for their continued support."

Back in April 2019, Fieldwork Robotics announced it had won a £547,250 Innovate UK Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund grant to accelerate the development of its technology.

The company has since enjoyed strong progress. It has completed field trials with some of the largest soft fruit growers in the UK; raised £320,000 through an initial equity fund raise in January 2020; and announced a collaboration with Bosch in July 2020.

The Bosch partnership is aimed at optimising the robot's arms developing

software to reduce cost and increase picking speed as the company pushes for full-scale commercial production.

Frontier IP holds a 26.9 per cent equity stake in the Fieldwork business, which is a spinout company at the University of Plymouth.

Fieldwork was incorporated to develop and commercialise the work of Dr Martin Stoelen, who splits his work between the University of Plymouth, where he lectures in robotics and leads the Soft and Adaptive Robotics lab, and as an associate professor at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences.

Dr Stoelen has also led projects to develop a cauliflower harvesting robot system and a tomato gripper.

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