

Monterey Bay Economic Partnership Helps Secure Millions in Funding to Boost AgTech Innovation and Workforce Development

State Investments Will Accelerate a Rapidly Expanding Sector That Will Create Good-Paying Jobs and Drive Economic Growth Across the Monterey Bay Region

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This funding will accelerate the transition of innovative research into practical, scalable technologies”

*Tahra Goraya, Monterey Bay Economic Partnership
President and CEO*

(MBEP) is helping to support agriculture technology (AgTech) innovation and workforce development, as part of a larger vision laid out for California and the Central Coast. MBEP, a regional economic development organization, is a co-founder and co-convenor for both Monterey Bay Tech Hub and Uplift Central Coast which helped facilitate multiple grants for the region. The funds are part of the California Jobs First Initiative from the Governor's Office supporting the statewide economic blueprint which awarded \$80 million

in statewide funding. (AgTech refers to innovations and technologies applied to the agricultural sector to enhance farming practices, improve efficiency, and address global food challenges encompassing a wide range of solutions including precision agriculture, robotics, artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and yield forecasting tools to optimize resource use, increase crop yields, and create more sustainable farming systems.)

MBEP has been at the heart of these efforts as regional convener and co-founder of Uplift Central Coast, a six-county coalition working to define and implement a collaborative investment plan and shape the economies of the Central Coast to advance economic mobility and clean-energy jobs in the region. MBEP co-led the development of a region-wide community-driven economic development plan with REACH and EDC. AgTech is among the target sectors identified as opportunity industries positioned to deliver quality job creation, particularly accessible to those with less than a four-year degree.

UC Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR) received \$15.1 million in its first Jobs First funding round, which is part of a larger \$28.6 million award for projects related to California's agricultural sector. MBEP served as the regional partner and advocate. Among the recent AgTech investments for the tri-county region:

—MBEP secured funding to accelerate AgTech innovation, specifically to coordinate and lead regional involvement in the Farm Robotics Challenge. This is a student competition tackling real-world agricultural problems and empowering them to spearhead technological innovation in agriculture using AI, automation, and robotics and develop in-demand job skills. The funding will allow for an expansion of the program to the secondary school level, creating new pathways to higher education and careers in agriculture and AgTech innovation.

—Monterey Bay Tech Hub, cofounded by MBEP, UCSC, and DART, secured a \$2.21 million California Jobs First grant supporting Drones Uplifting California Communities (DUCC), a newly created initiative at UC Santa Cruz that will build the pipeline to future-facing, clean-energy jobs. A “train-the-trainer” program run by UCSC’s CITRIS Initiative for Drone Education and Research (CIDER) program and the Monterey Bay Tech Hub, DUCC will prepare high school and community college educators to train future drone pilots and equip them to incorporate drones into their existing classes, while supporting students with FAA licensing and entrepreneurship support. And by supporting teachers and instructors across the state, the DUCC aims to reach more than 2,000 students over two years, preparing a skilled workforce for living-wage careers in precision agriculture, infrastructure, logistics, and environmental monitoring.

Drones hold the key to more than agricultural innovation: They have the potential to transform communities with the promise of clean-energy, good-paying jobs.

According to CITRIS Initiative for Drone Education and Research, drone pilots typically earn \$45 per hour with opportunities in various fields, including agriculture, infrastructure inspection, tourism, public safety, cinematography, and more. With a current shortage of FAA-licensed drone pilots and growth estimates of a \$50 billion industry and over 500 million jobs by 2030, the future looks very promising for those skilled in drone operation.

A third grant was secured by Hartnell College as part of F3 (Farms Food Future) Initiative, which will expand the AgTEC certificate program at three community colleges in California. Hartnell College is an MBEP member.

As the Salad Bowl of the World, the region leads the nation in the production of leafy greens and fresh produce, but faces increasing supply challenges, labor shortages, climate-related pressures, and global competition. The rapidly evolving agricultural sector bears little resemblance to what most people still think of farming, as automation and technology continue to transform the way our food supply is grown and harvested.

To remain competitive, our region needs innovation that can keep pace with demands, and a workforce that can adapt to — and drive — technological change.

“By strengthening the partnerships between universities, farms, and agricultural businesses on the Central Coast, this funding will accelerate the transition of innovative research into practical,

scalable technologies, supporting our state's climate goals, moving one of the region's most significant industries into the future while ensuring economic resilience for our region," said Monterey Bay Economic Partnership (MBEP) President & CEO Tahra Goraya.

These awards build on MBEP's leadership in shaping and advancing regional economic development strategies that identify AgTech as a strategic opportunity for California's Central Coast:

- The state-approved Central Coast Precision Manufacturing Activation Plan
- The state-approved Central Coast Advanced Air Mobility Activation Plan
- [Uplift Central Coast Coalition/California Jobs First Economic Blueprint](#) identifies AAM as a priority target sector likely to spur growth, innovation, and access to good-paying jobs over the next decade.
- [The Regions Rise Together Investment Blueprint](#) 1.0 and 2.0 highlights key priority areas and identifies areas of investment for interested public and private partners.

About Monterey Bay Economic Partnership (MBEP): Monterey Bay Economic Partnership (MBEP) is a regional member-supported nonprofit organization consisting of public, private, and civic entities located throughout the counties of Monterey, San Benito, and Santa Cruz. Founded in 2015, our mission is to improve the economic health and quality of life in the region.

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