Enthusiast about ag-tech fund, boot camp and Bill Marler

Dennis Taylor, The Salinas Californian  7:56 a.m. POT May 4, 2015

Major breakthroughs are going to happen in ag-tech. And they are going to happen here in Salinas. The new venture fund I wrote about Thursday will only but ensure that.

I covered venture capital investments in Silicon Valley for a decade before coming here, and I am witness to the power investment funds have in both attracting important ideas and then scaling them up into a company that is producing products that will benefit growers in big ways.

The new Western Growers fund, which will be managed by Silicon Valley Venture Partners, is initially going to top $4 million, but as it matures and returns are earned as funded companies are sold or sell their shares to the public, Western Growers Chief Executive Tom Nassif said the plan is to grow it to $100 million.

A review committee is already looking at possible investments, Nassif told me as we met Thursday with two of his key executives at the National Steinbeck Center. An old axiom in Silicon Valley is that problems only create opportunities for innovation. The ag sector has lots of challenges, water chief among them.

Areas that technology innovation can address in the future are more efficient water use, plant breeding, labor-saving devices and equipment, increased yields, and food safety. Then, of course, there are future challenges that aren't on the radar yet, like the need to make radical changes because of global warming.

With the world population expected to hit 10 billion by 2050, we need to produce more food on less acreage. The only answer for that is new technology.

Gardening boot camp

The University of California Cooperative Extension's Master Gardeners of Monterey Bay is holding its 8th Annual Home Gardening Boot Camp, Saturday, June 6, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Cabrillo College Horticulture Facility in Aptos.

The boot camp is a full day of seminar-style gardening-related classes taught by expert instructors. There will be three 90-minute sessions with an opportunity to select from six classes in each session.

Some of the new classes reflect this year’s theme, “Gardening in Our Changing Climate.” Cabrillo College’s Meteorology Department instructor, Dendre Scholair will be teaching "Microclimates in your Garden."

There will be a one-hour lunch on-site, or bring your own sack lunch. The Cabrillo College Horticulture Department student-propagated plants will be available for purchase during lunch. The registration fee is $55 for the day. To request a need-based discount, email bootcamp@ucmg.org. Proceeds from Boot Camp are shared with the Cabrillo College Horticulture Program.

Advance registration is required. Registration opened Friday on a first-come, first-served basis and closes June 3, 2015. Go to http://ornmg.ucmg.edu for event registration information. Call the UC Master Gardeners of Monterey Bay hotline at (831) 793-8607 if you do not have Internet access.

Bill Marler coming to Salinas

Bill Marler of Marler Clark, LLP, who has sued a number of agri-businesses in the Salinas Valley for food-borne illnesses, will be speaking in Salinas on May 8 at the Western Food Safety Summit at Hartnell College.

Marler is a seasoned speaker on subjects such as foodborne illness, related legislation, and surrounding issues. He has testified before Congress as well as State Legislatures. He is a frequent author of articles related to foodborne illness in food safety journals and magazines as well as on his personal blog, www.marlerblog.com.

Bill also founded Food Safety News (www.foodsafetynews.com) as a one-stop resource for global food safety news and information.

The Western Food Safety Summit brings together all levels of the agricultural workforce and support services to California’s Central Coast for two days of intensive training on the most current Food Safety issues and concerns for fresh fruits and vegetables.

Marler will speak from 3:20 p.m. to 4:10 p.m. at the main campus on the main stage in Building K. Hartnell College is located at 411 Central Ave., Salinas.

Tossed Greens appears Sunday online and Monday in the newspaper. Follow Dennis Taylor @taylor_salnews.