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Indoor Ag-Con Insight

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You can pack a lot into two-and-a-half days if you really work at it, and that's just what happened at this year's Indoor Ag-Con conference and trade show at Caesar's Forum in Las Vegas.

From a pre-show workshop on auditing for food safety that came with CEU credits to a full two-day schedule of panels, a robust trade show floor and networking, this show turned it up this year. I would call the mood surrounding indoor food production "cautiously optimistic," a term I heard at least a couple of times during the event.



According to Event Director Suzanne Pruitt, the attracted more than 1,500 attendees from 49 states and U.S. territories, along with 31 other countries. On top of that, nearly 150 visitors came from the co-located National Grocers Association event. On the show floor, there was an increase in exhibitors to 207 companies in 287 booths this year. All told, it's the largest Indoor Ag-Con to date, which prompted a move to a different facility next year to accommodate the growth: March 11-12, 2025 at the Westgate Las Vegas.

"Every year our speakers, exhibitors and attendees from across the country and globe look forward to Indoor Ag-Con as it brings together our industry as a community to hold important discussions on timely topics and show off what's new in indoor agriculture," said Brian Sullivan, CEO, Indoor Ag-Con. "This year we experienced record exhibitor growth and attracted companies and attendees from 35 countries to our global event. Next year, we are moving to a new location providing more expo and meeting space as we continue to grow with this ever-evolving industry."

Focusing on Unit Economics

Little Leaf Farms Founder and CEO Paul Sellew kicked off the event with his keynote, where he addressed a couple of key factors that are driving the success of his leafy greens greenhouse business. For one, he started small at the original Devens, Massachusetts greenhouse, with 1 hectare (or 2.47 acres) to learn “what we didn’t know” about growing leafy greens local to the market. From there he built a team to begin the process of scaling up, as well as began building a customer base. “I’m going to reference this topic about the product, because I just don’t think we hear enough about that in shows like this,” he said, adding they get emails daily from end consumers.



He focused on the unit economics and growing a consistent, quality product that would delight customers at retail. “We’ve been able to demonstrate CEA viability,” he said, citing more than \$100 million in sales with 47% of the market share of CEA-grown leafy greens (and additions on to the Devens location and a new, multi-phase location in McAdoo, Pennsylvania, that will total 30 acres). “We don’t consider ourselves really anymore a CEA company. We’re a pre-packaged

salad company. We’re driving category growth at our retailers.”

With pride, he noted they have never lost a crop in nine years of growing, and have never had a recall, thanks to an intense focus on food safety and keying in on the plant science aspect of growing leafy greens.

What can others take from his message? It’s time to focus on the cost of production. “The only way we’re going to be successful is an intense focus on day-to-day execution,” he said. The narrative needs to change, too, he added. The West Coast field-grown model is *not* broken, contrary to what many on the CEA side say, so indoor growers must focus on providing better quality, longer-lasting products and focus on unit economics to provide crop-level profitability to be able to secure funding from cheaper, more reliable sources like commercial banking institutions.

“I’m a wild optimist this is going to happen,” he added about the growth of the indoor segment. “Let’s do it the right way.”

Pictured: Keynote speaker Paul Sellew, founder and CEO of Little Leaf Farms, speaks to a standing-room crowd at this year’s Indoor Ag-Con.