insideGROWER

INSIDER

10/30/2026

University of Illinois Opens a New CEA Research Facility

Dr. Jake Holley

The University of Illinois announced the opening of a new Controlled Environment Agriculture (CEA) facility within its College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental Studies, marking a significant investment in research and workforce development for indoor crop production. The facility is designed to support applied research that bridges academic inquiry and real-world commercial challenges facing the CEA industry.

Leading the effort is Dr. James Santiago, a newly appointed assistant professor who brings extensive industry experience to the university setting. Prior to joining the University of Illinois, Dr. Santiago served as head of Research & Development at Soli Organic. His background positions him uniquely to translate industry needs into focused, practical research questions.

Drawing directly from his time at Soli Organic, Dr. Santiago plans to examine many of the operational and biological challenges he encountered while working in commercial production systems. His research philosophy emphasizes outcomes that are immediately translatable and readily adoptable by growers.

The CEA facility was established using Hatch funding, underscoring the role of federal support in advancing agricultural innovation and enabling universities to build infrastructure that supports both research and extension. With this new facility and leadership, the University of Illinois is positioning itself as a contributor to the next generation of applied CEA research and talent development. **IG**