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New platform launched to drive innovation and collaboration in the agri-food sector



NTU president Subra Suresh (back row, left) and Trade and Industry Minister Gan Kim Yong (back row, centre) at the launch of Singapore Agri-food Innovation Lab in NTU on Nov 24, 2021. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM



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SINGAPORE - A platform to drive innovation and collaboration among companies in the agri-food sector and to bring more developments from the lab to market was launched on Wednesday (Nov 24).

The Singapore Agri-Food Innovation Lab (Sail), jointly set up by the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in collaboration with Enterprise Singapore (ESG), will seed partnerships between corporate partners, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), start-ups, research institutes and institutes of higher learning.

NTU president Subra Suresh said at the launch that Sail's research and development (R&D) capabilities will be backed by expertise from NTU's Food Science and Technology (FST) programme and the Nanyang Business School, along with an interdisciplinary team of professors with specialised knowledge in areas such as food-tech, agri-tech and microbiology.

Minister for Trade and Industry Gan Kim Yong, who officiated at the launch of the platform at NTU, said that Sail will take current R&D initiatives further by addressing the innovation needs of players in Singapore's agricultural industry.

He noted that the platform has identified four areas of focus: sustainability, agri-food productivity and quality, digitalisation of business operations, and product R&D.

"These focus areas address the immediate needs of agri-food players and the capabilities of our local agri-food solution providers," added Mr Gan.

Sail has onboarded 22 industry partners including Bunge, a global agri-commodities merchant which has sought to leverage Singapore's "robust R&D ecosystem" to develop plant-based protein solutions for Asian consumers, Mr Gan said.

"Through Sail, Bunge is working with NTU's Food Science and Technology programme, and exploring a collaboration with local food-tech start-up, Float Foods, to investigate plant-based product solutions," he added.

Bunge is looking to work with Float Foods, which focuses on making a plant-based egg substitute, to explore how the texture and taste of its egg product could be further improved.

Sail engages with corporate partners to understand and analyse the key problems faced by companies, and from there, comes up with a range of possible solutions, said the platform's co-director Boh Wai Fong, deputy dean of Nanyang Business School.

"We then help them to scout for potential partners, and then link them up to see how they can cooperate further," said Professor Boh.



Researchers using plant-based protein, which replaces the egg component, to make plant-based mayonnaise in a Food Science and Technology lab in NTU on Nov 24, 2021. ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Aside from working with corporations, Sail could potentially bring more research innovations to the market.

Sail also aims to commercialise research innovations.



A researcher holding a sample of plant-based protein (left), which replaces the egg component in the making of a plant-based mayonnaise (right). ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

One example involves a plant-based mayonnaise created by FST, where the egg ingredient is replaced with plant-based protein powder, which is made from a food processing side-stream that has high nutritional value.

Professor William Chen, director of both the FST programme and Sail, said he hopes to find a suitable company through the Sail platform to scale up production and eventually market the mayonnaise.

"In addition, NTU's expertise in plant-based ingredients and our knowledge on the entire value chain for food innovation from lab to market can also be helpful insights for companies looking to innovate," he added.

One of Prof Chen's innovations is a probiotic ice cube that can be added to drinks to improve one's gut health. It was jointly developed with ice supplier Uni-Tat Ice and Marketing and commercialised earlier this year.

Mr Lee Pak Sing, ESG's assistant chief executive, said: "As an international trading hub for agri-commodities players and with a growing agri-food tech sector, Singapore is well placed to support the growing demand for agri-food innovation.

Sail will add to Singapore's capacity for innovation in this emerging area.

"Companies can partner with Sail to anchor their innovation and sustainability activities in Singapore. It will also be a platform for local SMEs and start-ups to explore opportunities to test-bed and scale their innovative solutions beyond Singapore."

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