

Irrigation sensor tech startup to expand into Europe, U.S.

The co-founder of a Chile-based startup that provides technology connecting irrigation sensors to the internet is to expand to Europe and the U.S. over the coming months.

LESS Industries co-founder Sebastian Cerone said sensors to monitor the soil in farms already existed, but the company had now developed a way of viewing the information and make changes to irrigation from anywhere.

He told Fresh Fruit Portal not only could fruit and vegetable farmers make big savings on water and energy, but they could also improve the quality of their produce by giving trees and plants exactly how much water they needed.

“After working with farmers for a long time we realized they irrigate always following a scale – the same days each week – regardless of the weather,” he said.

“So we have provided them with this tool so they can see what’s going on in the soil from their smart phone or computer. They can pick a level when they to receive an alert for too much or too little water, and when they receive this alert they can start or stop irrigating.”

He said a recent trial at a major apple producer in southern Chile had found almost 300,000 liters (79,251 gallons) of water can be saved per hectare each month, representing a 15-20% saving.

The low cost of the technology meant farmers could recuperate their investment in less than six months, he added.

The entity was first established in Argentina three years ago, later moving over the Andes to Chile where it gained financial support from major Latin American accelerator Start-Up Chile.

It has also started operating in Kenya and more recently Peru.

Cerone said the sensors used by LESS Industries were developed by a North American company more than three decades ago.

“Usually the farmer uses this sensor and goes to the place on the farm where they have the sensor to take the measurement manually,” he said.

“We have technology to recover information from the sensor and send it over the internet without human intervention.

“It processes the data to understand what’s happening and sends alerts to farmers. In that way we make the process more efficient.”

Certain crops like avocados were often sensitive to too much water and so this technology could help improve quality, he explained.

The system is currently being used on flower production in Kenya, wine grapes in Argentina, apples, tree nuts and berries in Chile, and it is set to be used on tropical fruits in Peru.

However, Cerone noted it could be used for any horticultural crop.

As for future plans, he said there was an expansion to Europe in the works, which would likely be followed by North America.

“In the next three to six months we are going to start operations in Europe. We are also looking to apply to a program similar to Start-Up Chile in Puerto Rico. If we succeed our idea is to start operating in the U.S.,” he said.

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