

Venture conference winner has high-tech idea for farms

By Scott Hammers / *The Bulletin*

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For Corvallis engineer Larry Plotkin, two weeks of sleepless nights refining his presentation for the Bend Venture Conference paid off Friday at the Tower Theatre in downtown Bend.

Plotkin's company, Precision Plant Systems, beat out four other contending companies in the competition for the conference's estimated \$120,000 investment prize, the largest in the event's six-year history.

"I really did not expect what happened," Plotkin said shortly after the announcement.

Precision Plant Systems is developing a hand-held device to help farmers measure and map the health of their crops. The device is synchronized to meters that measure soil salinity, pH and compaction, leaf greenness, nitrogen, and water content and the sugar content of the actual crop. The information is transferred to a map using GPS technology, Plotkin said, providing farmers with a comprehensive overview of what's happening in their fields, allowing them to make better decisions.

"What's going to sell this is that they maximize their quality, their yields and profits," Plotkin said. "And a side benefit of that is it will reduce chemical usage."

Bruce Juhola, the managing member of the conference's investment LLC and head of the 16-member judging panel, said the panel's decision was tougher this year than at any of the prior five years.

The other four finalists included Moonshadow Mobile, which has developed a system simplifying the creation of iPhone applications; Second Porch, an online tool for managing second-home rentals; Site9, a Web-based program allowing the collaborative construction of Web sites; and ADASA, which produces a device that writes to the microchip memory of radio frequency identification tags.

ADASA was selected as a finalist in a "wild card" competition Friday afternoon, where representatives of eight companies gave two-minute presentations to the audience in a bid to join the four other finalists preselected by the investors that make up the judging panel. Three Central Oregon companies made unsuccessful pitches during the wild card competition.



Rob Kerr The Bulletin

Precision Plant Systems President Larry Plotkin reacts Friday evening, after his company was announced as the winner of the Bend Venture Conference.

Juhola said all five companies gave great presentations to the judging panel, but members were particularly impressed by the management team at Precision Plant Systems, and the potential applications of the company's product.

"A few of the members of the (panel) have a background in farming in one respect or another," Juhola said. "They were looking at the solution as possible users, and they thought, this is neat. We could use this."

Plotkin said his company's product all but came about by accident. The company had developed a hand-held scanner to measure the water and chlorophyll content of leaves, but growers who saw demonstrations of the scanner were more impressed by the way the device could record precisely when and where the measurements were taken.

"They said, 'We need that. We'd use that every day,'" Plotkin said.

Plotkin said the prize will make a big difference in the future of the company, which up until now has survived primarily on grants from local government and academic sources.

Precision Plant Systems will not receive the investment prize immediately, but instead will be required to undergo a due diligence review by the fund's investors.

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