

Agtech startup Agragene relocates from San Diego to St. Louis, bringing with it thousands of fruit flies

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Bryan Witherbee, CEO of Agragene
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By [Nathan Rubbelke](#) - St. Louis Inno editor

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[Stephanie Gamez](#) packed some unusual luggage as she prepared last year to make a cross country drive from San Diego to St. Louis. She brought with her hundreds of thousands of flies.

Flies are typically baggage Gamez brings on a trip, but they were a “precious” belonging in this case. They were part of effort to relocate agriculture technology startup Agragene, a developer of technology that sterilizes flies for pest control, to St. Louis.

Transporting the flies created unique challenges for Gamez, a senior scientist with Agragene, as she drove to St. Louis. Chilly weather during an overnight stop at a hotel in New Mexico necessitated extra precautions.

“It was so cold, I remember, and I was afraid about the flies because they need to be at a temperature around 70 degrees,” she said. “It was like 40 degrees out there and we were so tired, but we were like, ‘we have to move the flies into the hotel room.’”

But nearly a year later, the relocation effort is proving to have been worth it. Since relocating to St. Louis in April 2022, Agragene — a company that once toyed with closing up shop — has added to its team and raised new financing as it works to advance its pest control technology into farmers’ fields.

Finding a home

Launched in 2017, Agragene has a focus on creating technology that helps growers reduce their use of chemical pesticides. It developed what it called “Precision Guided Sterile Insect Technology” that’s designed to sterilize male insects. The insects are then put in crop fields to mate with female pests. Because of the sterilization, no offspring is produced, helping to control the insect population that could damage crops. The company is initially targeting its technology with spotted wing drosophila, a fly that infests fruit crops.

Agragene caught the attention of venture investor Ospraie Ag Science LLC, which [led early funding rounds for the company](#). But as it built out operations, Agragene fell behind on its development timeline, said Ospraie Senior Agricultural Partner [Carl Casale](#). Casale, an Agragene board member and former chief financial officer at Monsanto, said that left three options for the company: Have investors pour more money into it to speed up development, shut down operations, or relocate its headquarters to a market more cost-friendly and aligned to its operations.

After internal review of its intellectual property and a third-party evaluation of its operations, Agragene opted for relocation.

“The conclusion was this technology is really, really good and we need to go about trying to perfect it differently than you’ve done so far,” Casale said.

That led Casale to call his old Monsanto colleague [Martha Schlicher](#), currently an executive in residence with BioSTL’s startup arm BioGenerator, to ask for help in moving the company to St. Louis. Casale said St. Louis made an obvious home for Agragene because of the region’s talent base in agriculture and its proximity to other agtech companies. Agragene operates out of the Helix Biotech Incubator, home to other promising startups like Solis Agrosiences and Impetus Agriculture.

“In San Diego, we were kind of on an island. We just didn’t have the pool of talent we could have in St. Louis,” Casale said.

Schlicher connected Agragene with [Bryan Witherbee](#), who has become its CEO. Witherbee is also a Monsanto ex-pat and formerly led now-defunct biotechnology startup Adarza Biosystems Inc.

Expansion mode

Aragene has expanded operations since moving to St. Louis. Gamez and Witherbee were its only full-time employees when it established operations here. It now has four full-time employees and eight total, including part-time positions.

It’s currently continuing research and development efforts to expand testing of its technology as works toward commercialization. That includes collaborating with U.S. Department of Agriculture scientist [Jana Lee](#).

“Part of this is really building the data case for us to be able to go forward toward commercialization,” Witherbee said.

The startup recently closed on \$2 million in financing led by BioGenerator. It has raised \$7.2 million since its founding. Witherbee said Agragene’s burn-rate, a measure of how quickly it spends its funding, is one-third of what it was while based in San Diego.

Witherbee said the new funding will support its ongoing research, testing and regulatory efforts. He said the company is ready to begin open fielding tests, but that starting that effort will depend on receiving the necessary permits from the USDA.

In addition to BioGenerator, Ospraie Ag Science also invested in the recent financing for Agragene, with Casale saying the firm is pleased with how the relocation effort has turned out.

"If I hadn't known Martha and if (not for) BioGenerator and the St. Louis agtech support system, Agragene wouldn't exist today," Casale said. "There's nobody else I could have picked up the phone and called and said 'can you find someone to help me move a company.' It just wouldn't have happened."

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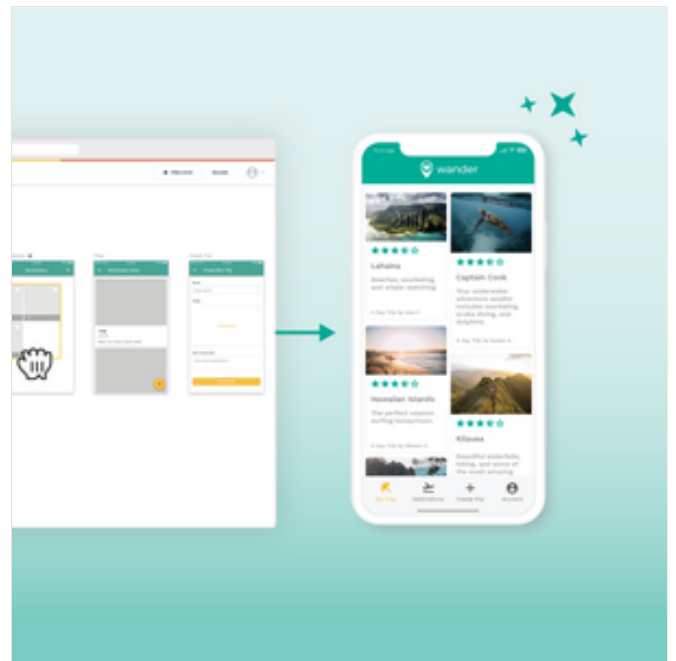
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