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Mississippi State University turns focus to hidden economics of sweet potatoes

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Mississippi State University (MSU) is advancing its commitment to specialty crop innovation with the development of a new $1.6 million sweet potato storage research facility at the Pontotoc Ridge-Flatwoods Branch Experiment Station. The initiative is designed to address one of the industry's most persistent challengesâ??post-harvest losses that diminish both crop quality and grower returns.

Announced during a recent producer engagement meeting, the facility will serve as a dedicated hub for research into storage and curing practices, with the objective of improving yield retention, product quality, and long-term marketability of sweet potatoes. Given that sweet potatoes are routinely stored for several months following harvest, even marginal improvements in storage efficiency can generate significant economic benefits for producers.

Speaking on the development, Cory Gallo, Associate Director of the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station (MAFES), underscored the importance of strengthening post-harvest management systems as a critical component of improving overall production outcomes.

Located approximately 30 miles north of Vardamanâ??widely recognised as the â??Sweet Potato Capital of the Worldâ? â??the Pontotoc Ridge-Flatwoods Branch Experiment Station occupies a unique position within Mississippi State University's agricultural research network. It is the only MAFES facility dedicated specifically to sweet potato research and serves as one of six Clean Plant Centers within the U.S. National Clean Plant Network for sweet potatoes, supplying virus-tested planting material to growers across the country.

The station has also played a pivotal role in advancing clean-plant technologies through initiatives such as the MSU-led CleanSEED Project, a $4.8 million programme funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and launched in 2022 to strengthen disease-free propagation systems.

The investment comes at a strategically important time for the industry. Mississippi remains the second-largest sweet potato-producing state in the United States, trailing only North Carolina. The national sweet potato industry is valued at approximately $110 million annually and continues to experience growing demand from both domestic and export markets.

While sweet potatoes are not typically associated with high fertiliser inputs compared with major row crops, the new facility complements a broader portfolio of research activities underway at Pontotoc. Current programmes encompass fertiliser management, weed control, irrigation strategies, cover cropping systems, and agronomic research across crops including corn, soybean, cotton, and specialty horticultural commodities.

University officials have not yet disclosed a timeline for commissioning the facility, nor have they provided details regarding funding sources or anticipated staffing requirements. However, construction activities are currently underway at the Pontotoc station.

The project reflects a growing recognition across the agricultural sector that innovation in post-harvest infrastructure can be as critical to profitability as advancements in crop genetics or field-level agronomy. By focusing on storage efficiency and quality preservation, Mississippi State University aims to strengthen the competitiveness and resilience of one of the regionâ??s most economically significant specialty crops.