



## *Sustainable Farming for Our Future*

**Vincent Kimura, Smart Yields**

**Hawaii**

Born in Honolulu, Vincent Kimura grew up listening to his grandfather's stories. He'd been a risk-taker, who had pursued his own romantic version of the American dream. After a major earthquake in Tokyo, he left everyone and everything in Japan to join his uncle on the Hawaiian island of Kauai. There he would find work in the sugarcane fields. The work was hard and the days were hot. But as tough as the work was, the land provided, as it does for those who respect it. Soon, he'd realize his dream of owning and operating his own business.

Vincent's father had a similar drive to see the world. And so he moved the family back to Asia for a new life and a better path. Growing up, Vincent experienced the worlds of Hong Kong, Beijing, and Malaysia, and learned to appreciate the beauty of each. But wherever he was, he always remembered his grandfather's stories of working in the sugarcane fields. He felt a pull toward the tradition of working the land. And so he decided early on in life that he was going to pursue his own daring dream. He was going to go against the cultural tide of fast money. He wanted to heal the broken patterns that the world—especially the world of agriculture—had fallen into. He decided to dedicate his life to protecting the environment, and the small farmers who've always known how to care for it.

Vincent made the necessary sacrifices, and moved to the mainland United States. He wanted to learn everything he could, so his first step was to earn his bachelor's degree in environmental science at Oregon State University. After graduation, he worked first at the Pacific Basin Economic Council, then at the accounting firm KPMG, and finally at the Institute for Triple Helix Innovation, where he able to see how academia, industry, and government can work together for social and economic advancement. He studied innovative approaches to sustainability around the world. Gradually, with guidance from his mentors Bernice Glenn and Robert Lees, Vincent was ready to make his mark in the world of sustainable farming.

Since then, over the years he has built multiple green businesses to help small farmers. Inovi Green develops alternatives to toxic indoor cleaning products. AgriGro's line of green products adds beneficial microbes to the agricultural cycle. And his most impactful venture, Smart Yields (SY), gives farmers access to up-to-date data on their land through the use of a mobile app that provides real-time monitoring and analytics of their crops. With this powerful information, small and mid-sized farmers can plan ahead and achieve a greater degree of precision in their agricultural practices. This high level of precision means less waste, lower costs, and a more sustainable cycle.

But as a data man, Vincent knows just how unsustainable our current agricultural systems are. "Small farmers are struggling," he says, quoting the most recent USDA data. "Since 1997, we've lost nearly 200,000 farms, over 50 million acres of land. And 100,000 of those farms have been lost in just the last seven years." Vincent is especially concerned that the number of family-owned farms has fallen by 170,000, while corporation-owned farms have increased by 26,000.

Vincent listens to farmers share their concerns; and they believe this rapid change should be seen as a warning. More big agribusiness adds up to increased financial pressures on small farmers. When farmers are struggling to survive against the power of agribusiness, it affects whole communities. Prices drop. The "little guy" can't compete. Corporations don't need to buy local, so they don't. Money generated from the land doesn't stay in the community. Local shops are no longer supported, so they suffer too.

A small farmer struggling is a sign of an unsustainable community. Small farmers, who are on the front line of climate change, are just not prepared to face its threats. A system with less diversity. Fewer viewpoints. Lost traditional, local knowledge. And this unsustainable cycle is repeating itself in small rural farming towns across the United States. It is a serious threat to our country's food security.

Vincent is committed to helping repair this endangered cycle all over the world. Thanks to SY, small farmers now have access to the same technology as big corporations, at their fingertips. This makes for healthier, more competitive, and more productive farms.

Vincent first tested SY's advanced technology in Colorado in 2017. Steve Ela is a fourth-generation family farmer there who has 80 acres of orchards. SY's app allows him to micromanage his fruit trees, which is critical, especially when unpredictable bouts of freezing weather hit. "Climate change is going to shake up what we know as normal," says Steve. "Every year adds another data point." But, he adds, there is strength in numbers; when all farmers in the community pool their data, their region is stronger.

Edward Tufts, another Colorado farmer, has a 500-acre organic orchard in the Rocky Mountains. Thanks to SY, his business, Leroux Creek Foods, was able to save a crop of Honeycrisp apples during a late frost. "It can cost \$500 an acre to heat an orchard through the frost season" he explains. "This system, which I can easily monitor on my phone, reduces my expenses by allowing me to operate more efficiently." For Edward, this savings was in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But the impact of SY goes far beyond dollars and cents. It makes the farming cycle more sustainable every step of the way. This technology has made such a positive impact in the world of sustainability that it was accepted in the first round of the Vatican's inaugural accelerator program, called the Laudato Si' Challenge. "When the Vatican officially recognized that climate change is real, it sent a unifying message around the globe," Vincent says. "As business leaders, we can't put profit first. We have to respond with what's best for future generations. This is the way Indigenous peoples lived...I've really redefined my perspective as a CEO. The journey isn't about the next billion dollars. There are larger things at play."

What Vincent really likes to talk about is bridge-building through mentorship, education, and professional development training. "I've always been a problem solver," he says. "It is part of my personality. I'm always looking for better, faster, more efficient ways of doing things. And that goes for mentorship, which has been core to my ethos. So I ask myself, what are we not taught about when we are embarking on an entrepreneurial journey?"

Some of the most valuable lessons Vincent learned along his own journey he learned by getting involved with local civic groups. "Right out of college, I went into Rotary Youth Leadership training. There, I learned how to manage insecurities and ego. Every journey can be fraught with mental health challenges. Burnout. Depression. Countless other things. Entrepreneurs need to understand this early on. When they see the signs of these things, they should take a step back," he says. "We need to be taught about these things to be able to recognize them."

Vincent has found that this wisdom is rare in the world of farming. "Nowadays, farmers are really struggling with mental health issues," he says. Increased pressures—very long days, unpredictable weather, delinquent loans, rising debts, bankruptcies—has farmers fearing they will lose everything, including their family's hard-earned legacy. Suicides are at the highest level in decades. "We need to change our perspective and talk about these things without judgment," Vincent says. "No matter where you are, you aren't alone. There's a tribe of people out there who can support you." Vincent finds that getting his hands in the soil is the best therapy. Growing vegetables is being used to treat PTSD in veterans, and others. "Once someone feels that connection to the earth, there's a pathway to healing," he says.

Vincent believes that if we act quickly, with some structural changes we can reestablish a healthy, sustainable approach to agriculture—and to our whole way of life. There are models to learn from all over the world, he says, and mentions innovative field design in the Netherlands as an example. Then he adds, "In Hawaii we can learn from our native systems. Years ago Hawaii fed over a million people from local, sustainable farms: now, we import 85-90 percent of our food. We need to support people in renewing our farms. We need to get back to those tried and true models of living. The knowledge is out there. And we can do it. We just need to pull together."

*Agriculture is the most healthful, most useful and most noble employment of man.*

George Washington

**Call to Action:** Buy local. Get your hands in the dirt. Support small farmers. Learn more about Vincent here:

<https://www.hawaiibusiness.com/20-for-20-vincent-kimura/>

Visit <https://smartyields.com> or <https://www.agrigro.com>

Stone Soup Leadership Institute

[www.stonesoupleadership.org](http://www.stonesoupleadership.org)

[www.soup4youngworld.com](http://www.soup4youngworld.com)