HUMMUS, THE INCREASINGLY POPULAR FOOD made from garbanzo beans, captivates Americans’ tastebuds enough to take a bite out of salsa’s dominance as a snack food, creating an important opportunity for Idaho agriculture.

Palouse growers, who have made the hills of northern Idaho and eastern Washington a major producer of peas, lentils, and garbanzos, took note as rising prices signaled healthy market demand for garbanzos. Genesee-based Pacific Northwest (PNW) Farmers Cooperative, among others, saw the opportunity to build their businesses by meeting the needs of companies ranging from startups to Fortune 200-class food product makers.

The cooperative called on University of Idaho Extension food processing specialist Jeff Kronenberg, the Boise-based member of the CALS’ and Washington State University’s School of Food Science. PNW Co-op needed help gaining certifications assuring that its garbanzos meet client requirements, said Bill Newbry, its Genesee CEO. He estimates hiring a private consultant would have cost $250,000. The company invested a fraction of that for help from Kronenberg and TechHelp, part of the university’s Caldwell Complex. “My hat’s off to Jeff,” Newbry said. “The guy’s been around, and he knows what to do. And if he doesn’t, he has contacts from his years in the industry.”

The result: “He saved us money, and he made us money,” Newbry said. PNW sales increased more than $3 million above the $10 million in trade it kept by upgrading its systems. Boosting food safety efforts helped PNW create 6 new jobs above the 10 it kept by meeting market safety demands. Kronenberg also helped PNW avoid spending $5 million in unnecessary investments while rolling up cost savings to underwrite $1.8 million in productive plant equipment.

Kronenberg’s work is brokered through TechHelp, an effort of the University of Idaho, Boise State University, and Idaho State University. TechHelp responds to Idaho companies’ needs to make their facilities better meet market demands. From 2005 to 2010, Idaho food companies report that TechHelp assistance created 192 jobs and generated a positive impact of nearly $106 million.

TechHelp specialists statewide focus on various manufacturing sectors. They combine strong business backgrounds with higher education. Kronenberg says his 28 years in the food industry, including time with FritoLay and J.R. Simplot Co., plus a dozen years with UI Extension, helps him “help businesses navigate changing government regulations and market requirements.”

MINDING BUSINESS—Idaho co-op ups profits, jobs thanks to TechHelp and UI Extension

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CALS incubators help grow Idaho wineries

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Idaho’s fledgling wine industry, up from 11 to 44 wineries since 2002, continues to get help from the UI College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

Newest aids are four wine bays at the UI Caldwell Complex equipped with the right water, drains, 3-phase power, and temperature control needed by start-up wineries whose owners can’t yet afford their own places to de-stem, crush grapes, then ferment and bottle wines.

“Since our bays opened in 2008, Davis Creek Cellars and Fujinshin Family Cellars have already outgrown our bays and moved to their own nearby locations,” said James Toomey, director of UI’s Caldwell Business Incubator. Current tenant Vale Winery produced more than 14,000 bottles of wine in 2011, a number of them winning local and regional awards, and he’s helping several newer start-ups.

“It’s 7 to 10 years before winemakers start making money because winemaking is so capital intensive,” says Vale owner John Danielson. “We need the kind of help this incubator provides.” He also credits UI scientists and the nearby UI Parma Research and Extension Center with help “for decades by testing different varieties and by helping us fight ongoing crop threats like leaf roll virus.”

New in 2011, UI Caldwell partnered with Treasure Valley Community College, providing space and technical advice for a viticulture program taught by Martin Fujinshin, who had 11 students last year. “Now we have 19.”

Toomey and the TVCC work with area winemakers and the Caldwell Economic Development Council to promote agro-tourism to wineries in the 13-mile area connecting Caldwell to Marsing.

TO ENRICH LIFE THROUGH DIVERSITY THE UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY/AFFIRMATIVE ACTION EMPLOYER AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION.

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