



## DAY 1 | Tuesday, April 15<sup>th</sup>

**Pre-Event Tour: Peoria NEXT Innovation Center** 10:30 a.m. – Noon

Host: Chris Youngmark, Director, Peoria NEXT

**Event Welcome at Distillery Labs** 1:00 p.m. – 1:15 p.m.

Speakers: Ron Kindred, Chairman, Illinois Soybean Association  
Jeannette Tamayo, Interim Executive Director, Illinois Innovation Network  
Doug Cruitt, Executive Director, Distillery Labs

**Introduction to Illinois Soybean Association** 1:15 p.m. – 1:30 p.m.

Speaker: Todd Main, Director, Market Development, Illinois Soybean Association

**The Innovation Imperative** 1:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Speaker: Steve Pitstick, District 2 Director; Former Chairman, Illinois Soybean Association Board of Directors

**State of R&D and Innovation** 2:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

Speakers: Barry McGraw, Founder and Chief Laboratory Officer, Airable Research Lab, Delaware OH  
Dr. Bret Chisholm, Research Leader, Plant Polymer Research Unit, USDA-ARS National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research (NCAUR), Peoria

**Roundtable: Industry Interests** 3:00 p.m. – 3:45 p.m.

Panel Host: Victoria Harmon, Founder and CEO, VL Harmon Advisors  
Panelists: Aaron Amstutz, Chief Scientist, NFW, Peoria  
John Andersen, President and Founder, Greenleaf Advisors LLC, Chicago  
Patrick Killian, CEO, Viridis Chemical, Peoria

**Roundtable: State of Play in R&D** 3:45 p.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Panel Host: Badri Narasimhan, Venture Advisor, Soy Innovation Center; Founder, Profit Darwin LLC  
Panelists: Dr. David Demirjian, Midwest Bioprocessing Center; President and CEO, zuChem, Inc.  
Jennifer Fuller, Project Manager, JMM Projects LLC, St. Louis MO  
Dusty McKinnon, Founder and CEO, Better Fibre Technologies, Vancouver, Canada  
Dr. Mahdi Vaezi, Associate Professor, Engineering Technology, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb IL

**Dinner at Creve Coeur Club of Peoria** 6:00 p.m.

Welcome: John Lumpe, CEO, Illinois Soybean Association

## DAY 2 | Wednesday, April 16<sup>th</sup>

**Continental Breakfast and Networking at Distillery Labs** 8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.

**Roundtable: Views from the Investor Community** 9:00 a.m. – 9:45 a.m.

Panel Host: Badri Narasimhan, Venture Advisor, Soy Innovation Center; Founder, Profit Darwin LLC  
Panelists: Drew Beard, Associate, Serra Ventures, Chicago  
Dr. Michael O'Toole, Investor and Retired Cardiologist; Member, Chicago ArchAngels  
Jim Schultz, Chairman and Founder, Open Prairie Ventures, Effingham IL  
Donna Yuen, Venture Capital Program Manager, Illinois DCEO

## DAY 2, continued | Wednesday, April 16<sup>th</sup>

**Roundtable: Central Illinois Innovation Corridor** 9:45 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

Panel Host: Peter Creticos, President and Executive Director, Institute for Work and the Economy, Chicago

Panelists: Doug Cruitt, Executive Director, Distillery Labs

Chris Setti, CEO, Greater Peoria Economic Development Council

Dr. Harriett Steinbach, Director, Innovation and Strategic Partnerships, Illinois State University, Normal IL

Chris Youngmark, Director, Peoria NEXT Innovation Center

**Soy Innovation Center's SpringBoard Challenge** 10:45 a.m. – 11:15 a.m.

Speaker: Todd Main, Director, Market Development, Illinois Soybean Association

**Building A Sustainable Ag-Product Innovation Ecosystem** 11:15 a.m. – Noon

**Post-Event Tour: USDA-ARS National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research** 1:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.

Host: Dr. Steven Cermak, Acting Director, NCAUR; Research Lead, Bio-Oils Research Unit

## SPEAKERS



**Dr. Bret Chisholm** is the Research Leader for the Plant Polymer Research Unit at USDA's National Center for Agricultural Utilization Research. Bret has thirty years of experience in the area of polymer material research and development and has worked in industry, academia, and the federal government. He has authored over 200 publications and is an inventor on 45 patents.



**Doug Cruitt** is the Executive Director of Distillery Labs, a nationally recognized Innovation Hub in Peoria, Illinois. A seasoned founder and business leader, he has launched multiple startups and held senior roles in strategy and operations across companies of all sizes. A third-generation Eagle Scout dedicated to community service, he serves on the Illinois Innovation Network Council, co-chairs its Entrepreneurship Committee, and sits on the international advisory board for SXSW Pitch. Doug is also a sought-after speaker on innovation, leadership, and entrepreneurship.



**Brady Holst** is the Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) Market Development Committee Chairman, an At-Large Director, and a representative for ISA's Soy Innovation Center. Brady farms corn, soybeans, and wheat around Augusta, Illinois. Prior to working on the farm full time, he was a design engineer at an ag-technology company after graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



**Ron Kindred** from Atlanta, Illinois, is Chairman of the Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) and is a member of the Government Relations, Finance, Governance and Personnel Committees. Ron is also a representative for the American Soybean Association, Illinois Farmers Council, and ISA's Soy Innovation Center. He farms with his wife, Jayne, and son Jay, raising soybeans and corn. Ron is a previous ISA Director, having served the association for thirteen years, including time as Vice President, Secretary and Legislative Chairman. He is also a past Chairman of Illinois Soybean Growers (ISG) SoyPac and a Soy Advocate for ISG's Voice for Soy program. He is active with Illinois Farm Bureau and has served as President of East Lincoln Farmers Grain Co-op and Atlanta Township Trustee.

## **SPEAKERS, continued**



**John Lumpe** is the Chief Executive Officer for the Illinois Soybean Association (ISA). Having previously served as Senior Vice President of FLM Harvest, and Executive Director of the Ohio Soybean Association, Ohio Soybean Council, and the Ohio Soybean Council Foundation, John brings more than 30 years of experience in association management, public relations, strategic planning, communications and market development.

In his role as CEO, John is responsible for leading the state's soybean checkoff and membership programs and upholding ISA's commitment to driving profitability and global competitive positioning of Illinois soy. John's efforts are in the service of expanding opportunities for Illinois' soybean farmers through promotion, education, outreach, and advocating for farm policies that ensure a successful, sustainable future for Illinois agriculture. John and his wife Lisa reside in Bloomington, Illinois, and have two sons, Jack and Henry.



**Todd Main** joined the Illinois Soybean Association (ISA) as Director of Market Development in July 2022. In his role, Todd oversees the ISA Lombard location and develops new strategies in support of ISA's goals in trade, animal agriculture, transportation and logistics, new uses for soy, biodiesel, human nutrition, and others. Todd also monitors opportunities to increase the market share of soy in existing and new markets.

Todd has more than 20 years of experience in leading initiatives to develop support for sustainable public policies. He is a trusted policy advisor to leaders in business, non-profits, governments, and foundations as well as candidates for public office. He served as a strategic advisor to top executives on environmental, transportation and renewable energy policy including the Governor of Illinois, other state cabinet members, and federal agency officials. Previously, he was chief of staff for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources with primary responsibility for agency operations.



**Barry McGraw** joined the Ohio Soybean Council (OSC) in 2013 and is responsible for leading OSC's soy bio-based research and commercialization program. Under his leadership, OSC won seven R&D 100 Awards in seven years and reached a milestone in royalty payments from licensing soy bio-based technologies. In 2019, Barry recognized an opportunity for OSC to capitalize on these successes by establishing its own research laboratory. With the Council's blessing, Barry founded Airable Research Lab, a business line of OSC, where he leads a team of chemists and material scientist in conceptualizing, researching, and developing soy-based materials. Before joining OSC, Barry spent 15 years at Battelle, where he worked in program management, engineering, and marketing. He played a key role on Battelle's bio-based materials team, working in development and commercialization of technologies. Barry also worked on Battelle's national security team in technology areas such as critical infrastructure, environmental challenges, information systems, and defense technology.



**Steve Pitstick** represents District 2 and is a member of the ISA Soybean Production Committee. Steve produces corn and soybeans near Maple Park, Illinois. He holds an associate degree from Kishwaukee Community College and has been active previously with the Kane County Farmland Protection Commission, Kaneland Sports Boosters, Kane County Farm Bureau and his church. Steve has also participated in the Illinois Ag Leadership Program, Illinois Ag Leadership Foundation, Agriculture Leaders of Tomorrow and served as a Soy Ambassador. He currently also works as an advisor to startup ag tech companies.



**Jeannette Tamayo** is the Associate Vice President for Workforce Development and Community Engagement Office of the Vice-President for Economic Development and Innovation at the University of Illinois System, which includes the University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, University of Illinois Chicago, and University of Illinois Springfield. She joined the University of Illinois System to advise on inclusive economic development, equitable workforce development, and economic resiliency and recovery. Jeannette serves as the Director of the Illinois Innovation Network (IIN), a structured collaborative of public universities and their partners that provides economic development and technical support to the state. She also co-leads the IIN Education and Workforce Development Committee to develop new workforce industry focused programs.

Jeannette holds a Juris Doctor degree from DePaul University College of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Illinois Chicago.

## PANELISTS

**Aaron Amstutz** is a passionate material scientist and serial innovator redefining circular design. As NFW’s chief scientist, his favorite days are spent in the lab —getting dirty, and pursuing the next breakthrough. With nearly two decades at Caterpillar designing new materials and exploring patents, he brings a wealth of practical experience and knowledge to NFW’s technical team.

Named IPOEF Inventor of the Year, Aaron specializes in tailoring the morphology of polymeric materials through novel formulations and groundbreaking processing methods. He pushes the performance and aesthetic envelope for MIRUM® and the rest of NFW’s breakthrough material platforms. With a deep belief in the importance of non-toxic, bio-neutral materials, he is excellent at imagining categorically new approaches to material science and encouraging those around him to think outside the box. Aaron is married and has four adult children and lives out in the country, enjoying nature (and house projects).

**John Andersen** founded and leads Greenleaf Advisors, a sustainability advisory firm bridging capital, business, science, and policy to address societal challenges with sustainable solutions, and Greenleaf Communities, a nonprofit that applies research to sustainable practices and policies protecting land, water, material, energy, and climate resources. Greenleaf has helped to grow early stage companies into leaders with engagement across sectors including agriculture. He is Executive Manager of Intelligent Generation, which optimizes solar and energy storage at facilities advancing a networked clean energy grid, and advises Earth Knowledge, a planetary intelligence platform that informs corporations, investors, and governments on climate and nature risk to act in their best interests. He helped build LaSalle Partners into a global real estate company – Jones Lang LaSalle (JLL) – and directed The Nature Conservancy’s Great Lakes Program. John holds an AB in Economics from Brown University and MBA from Harvard Business School.

**Drew Beard** is an Associate at Serra Ventures, an early-stage venture capital firm investing in AgTech and FoodTech companies driving innovation across the food and agriculture value chain. At Serra, Drew focuses on sourcing and evaluating new investments and partnering with founders to help build and scale their businesses.

Before joining Serra, Drew built a strong foundation in financial analysis and business strategy through experience serving private equity, venture capital, and agribusiness clients. Drew earned a bachelor’s degree in Agricultural and Consumer Economics and a Master of Accounting Science (MAS) from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Outside of the office, he is a pilot and certified flight instructor, combining his passion for aviation with a love of continuous learning and challenge.

**Peter Creticos** is President and Executive Director of the Institute for Work and the Economy, a national Chicago-based policy collaborative in workforce and economic development. He founded the Institute in 2000 to continue a career in government, policy research and practice, and higher education. The Institute’s mission is to serve as a conduit for innovative workforce strategies and policies that foster economic security, equity, and opportunity for all workers.

**Doug Cruitt** is the Executive Director of Distillery Labs, a nationally recognized Innovation Hub in Peoria, Illinois. A seasoned founder and business leader, he has launched multiple startups and held senior roles in strategy and operations across companies of all sizes. A third-generation Eagle Scout dedicated to community service, he serves on the Illinois Innovation Network Council, co-chairs its Entrepreneurship Committee, and sits on the international advisory board for SXSW Pitch. Doug is also a sought-after speaker on innovation, leadership, and entrepreneurship.

**Dr. David Demirjian** is a serial entrepreneur who is co-founder and President of the Midwest Bioprocessing Center, a bioprocess company developing bio-based ingredients for human health and personal care, and co-founder and CEO of zuChem, Inc, which focuses on the commercialization of its bio-based process for xylitol. Prior to this, Dr. Demirjian co-founded ThermoGen, Inc. (1987), a bioprocessing company for the pharmaceutical and food industries, and served as President until its acquisition by Medichem Life Sciences, a pharmaceutical CRO (2000). He then served as VP of Technology Strategy for Medichem and helped lead its IPO in 2000. Dr. Demirjian is a previous winner of the Research Director’s Association of Chicago “Entrepreneur of the Year Award” (1997) and recipient of the U.S. SBA “Tibbets Award” for successful commercialization of technology developed under the Federal SBIR grant program. He holds a Ph.D. in Genetics from The University of Chicago and a B.S.A. from the University of Michigan.

## **PANELISTS, continued**

**Jennifer Fuller** is a Project Manager and Team Leader at JMM Projects, LLC, where she merges art, design, and engineering to deliver alternative solutions in absorbent hygiene. With a background rooted in art glass and creative fabrication, Jennifer is known for her ability to bring visionary concepts to life through cross-disciplinary collaboration and problem-solving.

Jennifer is currently leading the development of a soy-based absorbent hygiene product, applying her inventive mindset and strategic approach to create sustainable alternatives in the personal care space.

**Victoria Harmon** is a seasoned communicator and problem solver with expertise in the financial services and the clean and renewable energy sectors. As CEO and Founder of VL Harmon Advisors, she continues to play a valuable role in guiding and partnering with her mission-driven clients. From C-suite executives to project developers, to startups in climate technology and NGOs, among others, VL Harmon Advisors partners and works hand-in-hand with clients seeking to build and achieve their business, development and policy goals through integrated strategic communications and stakeholder management plans.

Before founding VL Harmon Advisors in 2021, Victoria served on New York State's clean energy and climate policy team, worked for Credit Suisse, Citigroup, and its former entities, Salomon Brothers and Salomon Smith Barney, and served as head of their Asia Pacific communications team based in Hong Kong. Victoria holds a JD from Georgetown University Law Center and a BA in Political Economy of Industrial Societies from the University of California, Berkeley.

**Patrick Killian** has been the President and CEO of Viridis Chemical since April 2024. Viridis Chemical aspires to be a fast-growing, industrial-scale manufacturer and marketer of chemical solvents and intermediates made from 100% renewable corn-based ethanol. Their first plant, a massive 120 million pound-per-year process that makes ethyl acetate solvent, is being relocated from Nebraska to Peoria to be closer to the raw material, the customers, and to have better logistics. The relocation will be complete by the end of 2025.

After studying chemical engineering, Patrick has spent his career in the chemical industry: 10 years in oil refining and petrochemical manufacturing and marketing at Sunoco, then 10 years leading global specialty chemicals and solvents businesses at Dow Chemical. For the last decade, he has been running or advising private-owned chemical businesses on strategy, acquisitions and turnarounds.

**Dusty McKinnon** is an innovation entrepreneur. His early career focused on the bench to demonstration phases of low-impact technologies in the energy sector, which included developing wastewater treatment systems for oil and gas and merging a vanadium battery technology with a public mining company. Dusty has spent the last decade focused on developing technologies and pilots for agricultural residue conversion for pulp and textile applications which include Agracell™ by Better Fibres and PLNTmatter by Ettitude. His interests lie in biomimicry and encouraging natural process through soil regeneration.

**Badri Narasimhan** is a successful serial entrepreneur who grew and sold the very first business he founded and has subsequently supported multiple ventures, including agtech, robotics, medical devices, and AI. Badri started AlertMD out of his bedroom to improve efficiency and profitability in the clinical setting. After growing it to serve over 27,000 users, including leading health systems listed in the top 25 nationwide, he successfully exited his healthcare IT business in a sale to EverCommerce (NSDQ: EVCM) in 2020. In addition to his many advisory and investment roles, Badri is a venture advisor to the Soy Innovation Center of the Illinois Soybean Association, assisting their efforts to "move the pile" by helping to bring multiple new soy-based products to market.

Badri earned two graduate degrees from Georgia Institute of Technology and MBA from Babson College. Prior to launching AlertMD, he held senior management roles in diverse companies spanning property and casualty insurance, web-based software, and retail. Badri lives in Naperville, Illinois, with his wife and their blended family of five kids, and a dog that can definitely use more training.

**Michael O'Toole, MD**, is Board Certified in Internal Medicine, Cardiology, Clinical Electrophysiology and Clinical Informatics. He led the team and co-developed a cardiology-specific electronic health records system. Since 1999, he has been active in optimizing patient safety and quality measures using point-of-care decision support. This has led to national recognition including Smithsonian Award for Innovative Healthcare Information Technology, Windows NT Innovator of the Year for Healthcare, AMGA awards for advanced disease management, patient safety and patient adherence. His team has incorporated and reported on cardiovascular performance measures and he was the co-principal investigator of Cardio-HIT, an AHRQ grant to measure and report cardiovascular quality measures. He has been on the faculty at Northwestern University's Masters in Medical Informatics program. He is an active early and seed stage investor/advisor and member of Chicago ArchAngels and Cantina Angels. Volunteer work includes medical mission trips and flight physician for Honor Flight Chicago trips.

## **PANELISTS, continued**

**Jim Schultz** founded Open Prairie as a private capital management company in 1999. He has led and overseen the management of five private equity funds with investments in innovative technologies spanning agriculture, advanced materials, medical devices, and information systems. Funds invested by Open Prairie have resulted in two successful IPO's and created over 5,000 jobs across 50+ portfolio investments. Presently, Jim serves on the board of directors or board of advisors of several Open Prairie fund portfolio companies, including: Vytelle, FreshFry, Artio Medical, IngredientWerks, Intelinair, Talam Bio, and Amplifi Vascular.

Jim is a fifth-generation Illinoisan, agribusiness entrepreneur, and private equity executive who grew up on the farmland that his great-great grandfather settled in central Illinois in the early 1800's. Like his ancestors, Jim has continued his family legacy in building businesses in rural America in agriculture, banking, medical devices, retail, telecom, printing, healthcare, construction, media, ag-tech and farmland. In his hometown of Effingham, Illinois, Jim developed and created in a bean field an office park, Network Centre, that has created over 1,500 professional jobs for college graduates seeking to remain in the east-central Illinois area. Jim currently lives in Effingham, Illinois, where he and his wife Laura raised their three sons.

**Chris Setti** is the CEO of the Greater Peoria Economic Development Council, a public-private organization that helps drive economic success in a five county region of Central Illinois. Chris joined the EDC in 2018 after a 12-year career with the City of Peoria where he served in a variety of roles including Director of Economic Development and Assistant City Manager. Prior to his work with the city, Chris spent 10 years working in social services in Chicago, Denver and Peoria. Chris has a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Notre Dame and a master's degree in public administration from the University of Colorado-Denver. Chris grew up in Southern California but has called Peoria his home since 2003.

**Harriett Steinbach** serves as the Director of Innovation and Strategic Partnerships at Illinois State University. As such, she is responsible for corporate research partnerships and all things Illinois Innovation Network including the development of a business incubator for McLean County. She is a life-long Illinoisan having attended Eureka College, Illinois State University, and most recently University of Illinois Springfield where she completed a doctorate in public administration studying the relationship between universities and their host communities.

**Dr. Mahdi Vaezi** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Engineering Technology and the Principal Scientist at WASTE Labs at Northern Illinois University. He earned his Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Alberta, Canada, in 2014, and was awarded the Canadian Society for Bioengineers Doctoral Dissertation Award in 2015 for his doctoral research.

Dr. Vaezi's current research focuses on sustainable material systems, particularly the development of bioplastics and the logistics of biomass utilization. He leads projects on longdistance biomass pipeline transportation and the synthesis of biodegradable composites using PLA, PHB, hemp fibers, and soy protein. Through WASTE Labs, he collaborates with industry and academic partners to create scalable, eco-friendly alternatives to conventional plastics.

**Chris Youngmark** is the Director of the Peoria NEXT Innovation Center, within the Turner Center for Entrepreneurship at Bradley University, where he fosters innovation and entrepreneurial growth through strategic partnerships, advanced technology initiatives, and collaborative business development. Chris joined the Turner Center in 2021 as a CARES ACT Program Manager and Community Navigator for the Illinois DCEO. He actively serves on committees focusing on regional economic development and agricultural sectors.

As a seasoned entrepreneur and two-time business startup founder, Chris leverages a diverse background in business management, department leadership in guest services, and construction project management spanning commercial, residential, and agricultural sectors. Chris' contributions also extend to public service, as a Fire Captain and first responder for the Deer Creek Fire Department and volunteer on the Tazewell County EMA's Search and Rescue team. He brings a dynamic blend of practical experience, inherent curiosities, entrepreneurial insight, and community-oriented leadership to all his endeavors.

**Donna Yuen** started her career in government with the City of Chicago Office of Mayor Richard M. Daley and has also held roles with the Cook County Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management, Chicago not-for-profit After School Matters and global consulting firm Oliver Wyman. Most recently, Donna was with 7wireVentures, an early-stage digital health venture capital firm in Chicago. In her current role as the Venture Capital Program Manager, she is responsible for managing the \$114M Illinois Innovation Venture Fund (INVENT) administered by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity.