GERMINATE BY HIPLAN

Tropical Agriculture, Aquaculture & Food Innovation

Agrifood Innovation Pitch Competition

Applicant Toolkit | Judging Criteria & Guidance

What judges look for, how applications are evaluated, and how to prepare a strong submission.

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Welcome from Germinate

Thank you for considering the Agrifood Innovation Pitch Competition. Germinate by HIplan is a statewide nonprofit working to build Hawai‘i's tropical agrifood and aquaculture innovation ecosystem. We exist to connect innovators with the markets, partners, and infrastructure that turn good ideas into operating ventures.

This document is your applicant toolkit. It explains exactly what judges will be evaluating, how the rubric is weighted, what good and weak responses look like for each criterion, and how to put your best submission forward. The same rubric applies in both the initial screening round and the live finals.

We publish this rubric in advance because we believe transparency produces better pitches, fairer judging, and stronger ventures. Use it as a working document. Pressure-test your submission against each criterion before you send it.

How the Competition Works

Two Rounds, One Rubric

Submissions move through two evaluation rounds. The judging rubric is identical in both rounds. What changes is the evidence judges have available.

Round 1 — Screening	Round 2 — Finals
Judges evaluate written application materials and any submitted video. Top-scoring applicants advance to the finals.	Finalists deliver a live pitch followed by judge Q&A. Same rubric, scored against the live performance and your responses under questioning.

Scoring at a Glance

Each judge scores your submission on seven criteria using a 1–10 scale. Criterion scores are multiplied by their weights and combined into a single composite score on a 0–100 scale. Multiple judges' composite scores are averaged to produce your overall score.

Composite = (Σ score × weight) ÷ 10

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How to Apply

Applying is free. There is no entry fee or membership requirement.

What You Submit

A self-recorded 5-minute video pitch. Use any online conferencing platform you already have access to such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, or any equivalent will work. Your 5-minue pitch and slides must address the seven rubric criteria in this document. Judges will be looking for each criterion; making them easy to find is part of the Communication & Pitch Quality score.

How You Submit

Upload your recorded video to the Agrifood Innovation Pitch Competition page at GerminateHawaii.com. You will receive a confirmation email within the screening deadline acknowledging receipt. If you do not receive confirmation, treat that as a sign your submission did not arrive. Contact us before the deadline rather than after.

What Happens Next

- **Screening.** Independent judges score every complete submission against the rubric in this document.
- **Finals invitation.** The top three scoring entries are invited to compete live.
- **Finals.** Held at the Hawaiʻi Agriculture Conference on November 10, 2026. Finalists deliver a live pitch followed by judge Q&A with the same rubric applied to live pitch.

Prizes are awarded to the top finishers at the conference.

The Judging Rubric

Seven criteria, weighted to reflect what matters most for early-stage agrifood ventures.

#	Criterion	Weight	Round 1 + 2
1	**Innovation:** How novel and differentiated is your solution?	**15%**	*Same rubric*
2	**Market Need:** Is there a real, validated problem with customers who will pay?	**20%**	*Same rubric*
3	**Value Creation:** What measurable value does your solution create, and for whom?	**15%**	*Same rubric*
4	**Business Model & Economic Viability:** Can this become an economically sustainable business?	**15%**	*Same rubric*
5	**Feasibility & Scalability:** Can you actually build this, and can it grow?	**15%**	*Same rubric*
6	**Team Capability:** Is this the right team to execute this specific venture?	**10%**	*Same rubric*
7	**Communication & Pitch Quality:** Can you make a clear, compelling case in the time and format provided?	**10%**	*Same rubric*
	TOTAL	**100%**	

The 1–10 Scoring Scale

Judges receive explicit calibration guidance to avoid score compression and use the full range of the scale. Here is what each band signals:

Score	What it means
9 – 10	Exemplary. Top ~5% of submissions in that criterion. Reserved for work that clearly outperforms peers.
7 – 8	Strong. Above average; meaningfully advances your candidacy.

Score	What it means
4 – 6	Adequate. Present and competent, but unremarkable.
1 – 3	Deficient. Substantially below expectations or missing critical elements.

Criteria in Detail

For each criterion: the core question, what judges look for, and the common pitfalls that pull scores down.

1. Innovation · 15% weight

Core question: *How novel and differentiated is your solution?*

What judges look for

- A clear articulation of what is genuinely new and what is borrowed, integrated, or recombined from existing approaches
- Defensibility: IP, proprietary know-how, data advantages, partnership lock-ins, or hard-won operational expertise
- An honest competitive landscape. For example, who else is solving this, and how is your approach different

Common pitfalls

- Claiming 'first of its kind' without acknowledging adjacent solutions
- Confusing novelty with value (something can be new and still not matter)
- No defensibility or easily copied solutions score lower regardless of cleverness

2. Market Need · 20% weight

Core question: *Is there a real, validated problem with customers who will pay?*

What judges look for

- Evidence the problem is acute, not theoretical. For example, customer interviews, letters of intent, paid pilots, waitlists
- Quantified pain: time lost, cost incurred, yield foregone, risk borne
- A clear definition of who the buyer is, who the user is, and how they overlap (or don't)

Common pitfalls

- Describing a problem in the abstract without naming specific customers experiencing it
- Solution-in-search-of-problem framing. For example, leading with the technology, not the pain
- Conflating 'people would benefit' with 'people will pay'

3. Value Creation · 15% weight

Core question: *What measurable value does your solution create, and for whom?*

What judges look for

- Quantified value across one or more dimensions: economic, environmental, social, nutritional, climate-resilience
- A clear value-capture mechanism. For example, how value flowing through the system reaches your revenue line
- Distribution of value: who benefits, by how much, and whether benefits compound or decay

Common pitfalls

- Listing benefits without quantification ('saves time', 'improves yield' with no numbers)
- Confusing gross value created with value captured by your business
- Ignoring stakeholders who lose value or bear new costs

4. Business Model & Economic Viability · 15% weight

Core question: *Can this become an economically sustainable business?*

What judges look for

- Clear unit economics: cost to acquire a customer, cost to serve, gross margin per unit
- Validated or testable pricing. Ideally with evidence of willingness to pay at that price
- A credible path to sustainable margins, not just topline growth

Common pitfalls

- Confusing technical feasibility with economic viability. For example, solutions that work but cannot achieve sustainable margins
- Optimistic margin assumptions with no benchmarking against comparable businesses
- Revenue projections without a corresponding view of cost structure

5. Feasibility & Scalability · 15% weight

Core question: *Can you actually build this, and can it grow?*

What judges look for

- Technical feasibility evidence: prototypes, pilots, validated assumptions, or credible plans to validate
- Honest articulation of remaining technical risk and how you intend to retire it
- A scaling pathway that names its real constraints such as capital, talent, regulation, supply, infrastructure

Common pitfalls

- Glossing over hard technical or operational risk by burying it in ecosystem language
- Assuming linear scale-up of pilot economics to commercial scale
- Treating regulatory or compliance pathways as afterthoughts

6. Team Capability · 10% weight

Core question: *Is this the right team to execute this specific venture?*

What judges look for

- Directly relevant experience such as domain expertise, prior operating roles, demonstrated execution
- Complementary skills across the functions this venture actually needs
- Self-awareness about gaps and a credible plan to close them

Common pitfalls

- Resumes that look strong in general but lack fit for this specific venture
- Pretending the team is complete when critical functions are missing
- Advisor lists used as a substitute for operating capability

7. Communication & Pitch Quality · 10% weight

Core question: *Can you make a clear, compelling case in the time and format provided?*

What judges look for

- A pitch structured so a non-expert can follow the thesis end-to-end
- Confident, direct handling of questions, including acknowledging what you do not yet know
- Materials (slides, written submission) that reinforce rather than duplicate what you say

Common pitfalls

- Front-loading the technology and burying the business
- Defensive or evasive responses during Q&A
- Slides that judges have to read which prevents them from listening to you

Preparing a Strong Submission

Before You Write

Read the rubric end-to-end. Then, for each of the seven criteria, write down the single strongest piece of evidence you have. If you cannot name evidence for a criterion, that is where to focus your prep, not where to write more confident content language.

Structure Your Application Around the Rubric

You do not need a section per criterion, but every criterion should be clearly addressable from your submission. Reviewers should not have to hunt for the answer to any of the seven core questions.

Evidence Beats Adjectives

Two examples of the same claim:

Weak (adjectives)	Strong (evidence)
"Farmers love our product."	*"12 of 15 pilot farmers renewed at full price; the 3 who did not cited [specific reason]."*
"The market is huge."	*"Hawaiʻi spends $X annually on imported [category]; we target the Y% addressable by local production."*
"We have a great team."	*"Our co-founder ran ops for [comparable operation] for 8 years and brings the supplier relationships we need to launch."*

Be Honest About Risk

Pitches that name their real risks score higher than pitches that hide them. Judges have seen the hard parts before. Naming risk credibly signals operating maturity; pretending it does not exist signals the opposite.

For the Live Finals

- Allocate your time to the criteria, not to your favorite slides. The Communication score reflects whether the thesis lands, not whether the deck is pretty.
- Plan for Q&A specifically. Judges score the live round on how you handle questions, not only how you deliver the planned pitch.

- Practice with someone who will push back. Friendly run-throughs do not prepare you for the actual room.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, say so and say what you would do to find out. Bluffing is visible and costly.
- Storytelling is essential, but must be rooted in reality or it will be a drain of energy, time and other resources like your bank account.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. How much does it cost?

A. Entry is completely free. Finalists are responsible for their own airfare and transportation to the Hawaiʻi Agriculture Conference in Waikoloa on Hawaiʻi Island. Finalists receive a complimentary conference registration pass for the day of the competition finals.

Q. Are the criteria weighted the same in the screening and finals?

A. Yes. The same seven criteria and the same weights apply in both rounds. What changes is the judging panel members, live pitch and Q&A in the finals.

Q. Will judges share their scores or written feedback with applicants?

A. Feedback is not required of the judging panel. If and when feedback is provided, it is calibrated against this rubric.

Q. Can we update our submission after we send it?

A. Updates are accepted up to the submission deadline. After the deadline, judges score what is on file.

Q. What if our venture is pre-revenue or pre-prototype?

A. Concept or early-stage ventures are welcome. The rubric does not require revenue or finished products, but it requires evidence calibrated to your stage. Strong pre-revenue submissions show validated problems, demonstrated learning, and credible plans to retire the next critical risk.

Q. Do you favor specific subsectors of agrifood?

A. No. The rubric is sector-neutral within tropical agriculture, aquaculture and food. Submissions are scored against the criteria, not against each other across the value chain or sectors.

Q. What happens if scores are close in the finals?

A. If two or more finalists' composite scores a tie, judges apply a rank-based tiebreaker based on scoring by criteria as listed in the rubric. In this case Innovation first, then Market Need and so on until one competitor has a higher score than the other(s).

Competition Logistics

Specific dates, prize details, eligibility requirements, and submission portals are published on the Germinate website.

Submission deadline	October 1, 2026 by 11:59 pm
Screening results notified	October 15, 2026 or sooner
Finals event	November 10, 2026 · Hawaiʻi Agriculture Conference, Waikoloa, Hawaiʻi Island
Questions	jason@germinatehawaii.com

We look forward to your submission.

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