



VIRGINIA SPACE GRANT CONSORTIUM

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Student Teams Compete in International Plant the Moon Challenge Competition, Helping NASA Return to the Moon

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HAMPTON, Virginia — Teams from schools, clubs, and other education organizations across five southeastern states and Puerto Rico recently completed experiments as part of the Plant the Moon Challenge Space Grant Regional Expansion Project. A total of 446 teams involving 4,483 students participated in an expanded version of the [Institute of Competition Sciences Plant the Moon Challenge](#) through a regional partnership of state Space Grant consortia led by the [Virginia Space Grant Consortium](#) and [funded by NASA](#).

The global science experiment and research competition challenges students to examine how vegetable crops can grow in lunar soil. Using lunar soil simulant from the University of Central Florida's CLASS Exolith Lab, the teams designed and conducted a set of experiments using the simulant to grow crops over eight weeks for a future long-duration mission. Students' research will help NASA scientists understand how to use lunar soil to provide nutritious crops for future missions to the Moon or Mars.

The NASA Space Grant Regional Expansion Project builds on the Plant the Moon Challenge by expanding the reach of the challenge to underserved and underrepresented STEM students in five partnering states: Virginia, [North Carolina](#), [South Carolina](#), [West Virginia](#), [Florida](#), and [Puerto Rico](#). VSGC and program partners are excited to work with the Institute of Competition Sciences to allow more students and educators to participate while covering the cost of regolith kits, adding a materials stipend for participating teachers, expanding professional development for educators, enhancing speakers and activities for participants, and providing experiential prizes in each state and at the regional level.

The Institute of Competition Sciences engaged a panel of NASA and industry scientists, program executives, and other dignitaries to determine Best in Show award winners from the region. Best Overall Middle School Team winner is "Manassas Park Middle" from Manassas Park Middle School in Manassas Park, Virginia led by educator Robyn Weatherholtz. Best Overall High School Team winner is "Aerospace 2: POTATO" from the Academy of Arts, Science, and Technology in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina led by educator Katie Thompson. Regional winners will be honored an awards ceremony at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, on June 20.

Awards were also announced for the following categories in each state for both the middle school and high school levels: Evaluation of Results, Growth, Experimental Design, and Innovation. For a full list of state winners please visit: vsgc.odu.edu/plantthemoon. Each state is planning an award ceremony and special science experience for its winners.

Educators praised the experience the challenge gave their students. "The Space Grant partnership really made it possible for multiple teachers in a school to do this and the kids got a really authentic research



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experience and that for them was amazing. They were so into it,” said Amy Goodyear, teacher at Heritage High School in Leesburg, Virginia. Belinda Henriques, teacher at Meadowbrook High School in Charles City County, Virginia notes, “We touch on experimental design, but this program is really excellent and gives them real life experience. This was a really good experience; the kids took ownership of it.”

The Plant the Moon Challenge Space Grant Regional Expansion Project will be offered again in the spring semesters of 2024 and 2025. For more information, contact: vsgc@odu.edu.



Regional Best Overall Middle School Team winners “Manassas Park Middle” from Manassas Park Middle School in Manassas Park, Virginia led by educator Robyn Weatherholtz.



Regional Best Overall High School Team winners “Aerospace 2: POTATO” from the Academy of Arts, Science, and Technology in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina led by educator Katie Thompson.