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Media Release

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

HAMPTON, Virginia —Teams from schools, clubs, and other education organizations across five southeastern states and Puerto Rico recently completed experiments that took home top international prizes as part of the Plant the Moon Challenge Space Grant Regional Expansion Project.

More than 360 teams involving more than 3,600 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 internationally and from the region. Project teams won all the international awards:

- Best Middle School in Experimental Design: Space Cadets from the Boy Scouts of America Troop 690 in Camuy, Puerto Rico, led by José Solis
- Best Middle School in Crop Growth: Power Rangers from Holy Trinity Episcopal Academy in Melbourne, Florida, led by Melissa Sleeper
- Best Middle School in Evaluation of Results: AVID Curiosity from Culbreth Middle School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, led by Sudzina Schut
- Best Middle School in Innovative Experiment: Creative Moon Lab Botanists from Creative Homeschoolers Inc. in Mayaguez, Puerto Rico, led by Micheline Braffett

- Best High School in Experimental Design: Purslane Gang from Heritage High School in Leesburg, Virginia, led by Amy Goodyear
- Best High School in Crop Growth: YAPPERS from Meadowbrook High School in North Chesterfield, Virginia, led by Belinda Henriques
- Best High School in Evaluation of Results: Astrotigers from Wirt County High School in Elizabeth, West Virginia, led by Callie Daugherty
- Best High School in Innovative Experiment: Jupiter Space Monkeys from Dorado Academy in Dorado, Puerto Rico, led by Veronica Ortiz

Regional winners, AVID Curiosity from Culbreth Middle School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina led by Sudzina Schut, and Tigers from Manuel Mendez Liciaga High School in San Sebastian, Puerto Rico, led by Brenda Rodriguez, will be honored an awards ceremony at Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida, on June 21.

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. "I am so proud of all my students who participated. They have all grown in their scientific ability and working together as a team to problem-solve challenges as they arise. I know they will continue to reap the benefits from this experience," said Amy Goodyear, teacher at Heritage High School in Leesburg, Virginia.

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