



## **California Milk Advisory Board Opens Applications for 2026 Real California Milk Excelerator With a Focus on Commercialization, Retail Growth and AI-Enabled Scaling**

*Dairy startup accelerator applications live through July 24, 2026 for next generation dairy innovators developing high-growth, value-added dairy products*

TRACY, Calif., June 10, 2026 /PRNewswire/ -- The California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB) and innovation consultancy, VentureFuel, today announced the launch of the 2026 Real California Milk Excelerator, one of the world's largest dairy innovation and startup acceleration programs. Now entering its eighth year, the program is evolving beyond traditional startup support to help founders accelerate commercialization, retail growth and business scale through a combination of industry expertise, strategic connections and AI-enabled sales and marketing tools.

The Real California Milk Excelerator is a dairy-focused startup accelerator and commercialization program that helps emerging food and beverage companies develop, launch and scale innovative dairy products. Created by the CMAB in 2019, the program provides mentorship, industry connections, retail access, commercialization support and funding opportunities for dairy startups.

Over the past eight years, the program has become a proven engine for dairy innovation and growth. More than 60 brands have participated, benefiting from over \$2.5 million in non-dilutive funding, 6.3 billion media impressions and connections to more than 100 industry executives spanning distribution, retail, manufacturing, venture capital and corporate innovation. These resources have helped participating companies increase visibility, secure strategic relationships and accelerate their path to commercialization.

Featuring both incubator and accelerator tracks, the Real California Milk Excelerator dairy innovation program supports emerging and growth-stage companies developing innovative, value-added dairy products. Cohort members receive support to move from product innovation to commercial success across categories including beverages, snacks, cultured dairy products,

cheese, butter, nutrition-focused foods, functional foods, frozen desserts, personal care and pet products made with dairy ingredients.

Since inception, the program has helped drive multi-million-dollar growth and retail expansion at national retailers including Whole Foods Market, Sprouts Farmers Market and Costco. The program's incubator track has expanded its reach by helping promising early-stage concepts gain the expertise, industry connections and resources needed to advance toward commercialization.

Building on that impact, and the success of alumni like Smearcase, Petit Pot and Cheese Bits, the 2026 program places increased emphasis on commercialization, retail readiness, investor access and AI-enabled growth strategies designed to help founders accelerate market adoption and scale more efficiently.

"California dairy has long been a catalyst for innovation. The Real California Milk Excelerator gives entrepreneurs innovating with dairy the opportunity to turn bold ideas into successful businesses," said Bob Carroll, CEO of the CMAB. "California dairy farmers produce more milk than any other state in the nation, making California uniquely positioned to help entrepreneurs bring innovative value-added dairy products to market. As the industry evolves, we're focused on helping founders develop great products and transform dairy innovation into scalable food and beverage businesses."

Selected companies will participate in a 10-week program combining mentorship, expert-led education and hands-on support from leaders across the dairy, food and retail ecosystems, with guidance spanning formulation, production, sales, marketing, retail strategy and commercialization.

As a key enhancement for 2026, participants will gain access to AI-enabled sales, marketing, consumer insights and retail intelligence tools that can help identify market opportunities, analyze consumer trends, optimize go-to-market strategies and improve commercialization decisions.

The incubator track supports early-stage startups interested in qualifying for the Real California Milk seal and building a foundation for commercial success. The accelerator track is designed for growth-stage companies already demonstrating traction and revenue, with programming focused on retail access, investor readiness and commercialization. Applicants will complete a single application, and finalists will be placed in the track that best aligns with their business stage, traction and growth objectives.

Accelerator track participants will receive stipends to support participation. The program culminates in an in-person California showcase where participants will sample products for industry leaders, partners and mentors. The accelerator cohort will also compete in a live pitch

competition, where up to four finalists will receive \$30,000 in marketing support and compete over the following 12 months to unlock an additional \$100,000 based on in-market performance.

"The most successful food startups today combine product innovation with data-driven commercialization," said Fred Schonenberg, Founder and CEO of VentureFuel. "By integrating AI tools, retail expertise and strategic industry connections, the Real California Milk Excelerator helps entrepreneurs accelerate growth and compete more effectively in the modern food marketplace."

The program's evolution comes amid ongoing protein-rich, nutrient-dense and functional foods trends. As consumer demand for high-protein foods, functional nutrition, gut health products, clean-label ingredients and GLP-1-compatible eating patterns continue, dairy's nutritional advantages are creating significant opportunities for value-added dairy-based innovation. Applications are open through July 24, 2026. Startups and entrepreneurs developing innovative dairy products made with at least 50% dairy are encouraged to apply.

Interested parties can apply, learn more about competition rules, key dates and the application process, and RSVP for an upcoming virtual information session at [RealCaMilkExcelerator.com](https://RealCaMilkExcelerator.com).

### **About Real California Milk/California Milk Advisory Board**

The California Milk Advisory Board (CMAB), an instrumentality of the California Department of Food and Agriculture, represents California's dairy farm families and promotes products made with Real California Milk. California is the nation's leading milk-producing state and a global leader in sustainable dairy farming, dairy innovation and value-added dairy product development.

Through consumer marketing, foodservice initiatives, retail partnerships, export programs and startup innovation platforms such as the Real California Milk Excelerator, CMAB works to increase demand for California dairy products across the United States and around the world. The organization supports innovation across categories including cheese, butter, cultured dairy products, dairy beverages, functional foods, nutrition products and other value-added dairy applications.

The Real California Milk seal identifies products made with milk from California dairy farm families, known for their commitment to sustainability, animal care and producing high-quality dairy ingredients and products. Learn more at [RealCaliforniaMilk.com](https://RealCaliforniaMilk.com), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#), [Tik Tok](#), [Instagram](#) and [Pinterest](#).

### **About VentureFuel:**

VentureFuel helps established organizations accelerate growth through strategic startup partnerships. Powered by its repeatable Innovation Engine™, VentureFuel identifies, validates,

and commercializes emerging technologies, transforming innovation into measurable business outcomes in months instead of years. The company has facilitated 100+ corporate-startup partnerships, unlocking more than \$1BN in enterprise value creation for clients. Learn more at [www.venturefuel.net](http://www.venturefuel.net) and listen to The VentureFuel Visionaries podcast wherever you get your podcasts.