

Regenerative Farming at the Crossroads

How to bridge the gap between corporate and farmer interests

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As farming's role in addressing the climate and biodiversity crises becomes more clearly understood – and accounted for – what role is there for the loose and uncertain term 'regenerative'? How can the gap be bridged between a 'bottom-up' movement that prides itself on its flexibility and adaptability, and the growing corporate and stakeholder 'top-down' demand for tangible, evidence-based results, and accompanying metrics?

Defining Regenerative

Since its launch in 2016, Groundswell, the two-day farming conference held at Lannock Manor Farm, Hertfordshire has provided a bellwether of the meaning, use and application of the term 'Regenerative'. Indeed, it is the Groundswell-branded '5 principles' that most farmers still associate with the concept. Despite the existence of these principles and 'Regenerative's' growing profile, it is telling that the theme of this year's event was *"what is regenerative agriculture"*. Seven years on and the concept remains fluid, as was highlighted by plant and soil consultant, Joel Williams, during the event's opening presentation:

"The term "regenerative" is still an open definition, allowing more people to connect. We are still learning and developing the concept but it all stems from soil regeneration, and whilst we often talk about it as an emerging topic, regenerative agriculture is something many are rediscovering, rather than something new on-farm."

For some farmers the term itself is unhelpful – many prefer *conservation agriculture, biological farming, farming in harmony with nature* or in some cases, *just mixed farming* to describe their approach. Others question whether Regenerative be founded in practices or outcomes? And what outcomes? Some farmers favour biodiversity, carbon, or maximising photosynthesis over soil health as a primary objective. And what should be excluded? All ploughing? Are inputs banned? And should there be a social justice aspect to Regenerative, as in related approaches like agroecology?

Growing corporate interest

Muddying the waters still further is the range of individuals and organisations who debate the topic - farmers, yes, but also researchers, politicians, retailers, and NGOs. Regenerative is now a farming philosophy, a corporate brand, and a campaigning slogan – all underpinned by distinct but not necessarily overlapping criteria.

The discussions at Groundswell also demonstrated how Regenerative has become a proxy – and a lightning rod - for wider discussions around farming's future, the overlap with net zero, and the real elephant in the room: **if farming is undergoing a nationwide transition towards delivering environmental benefits alongside food and drink, who is going to pay for it?**

To that end, it is noticeable how the debate around Regenerative's meaning – and application – sometimes comes with a pinch of resentment. One farmer referred to it as *"organic without the premium"*, implying customers can expect farmers to maintain a certain environmental standard, but won't pay extra for the more sustainable produce. This is especially relevant in the UK considering potentially ongoing food price inflation.

Which raises the role of business. Inside and outside Groundswell, corporate interest is growing. Pioneering businesses that include Nestlé, McCain, Kellogg's and G's Growers are trialling incentive schemes, research initiatives and pilot projects built around Regenerative. The term increasingly appears in corporate branding and advertising slogans, sometimes attached to a long-term sourcing target, but often missing a concrete definition.

Corporate interest – and investment in Regenerative – comes with baggage, however. These businesses may want to do the right thing, but they also need to be seen to do the right thing. Whether for ESG or long-term business resilience purposes, they face growing demands from investors, international standards (e.g. GHG Protocol) and customers to demonstrate tangible impact, and safeguard against accusations of greenwashing. For this they need data, consistent metrics, evidence, and proven outcomes – increasingly delivered within an externally validated structure.

Moving Forward

So how to square the circle? How to bridge the gap between a movement that has to be vibrant, innovative, flexible and sensitive of unique, local circumstances with the growing need for measurable, comparable decisions-grade data capable of pointing to evidence over time. Put bluntly, **innovation is needed for the movement to thrive, but an external structure might be needed to pay for it.**

One suggestion that was the subject of a panel discussion at Groundswell was the development of a Regenerative Standard, along the lines of that for organic. However, this was met with considerable resistance. What would be certified – outcomes? Practices? And how to balance a one-size-fits all approach with such a variance in soil type, geography and crop?

The answer lies in the term itself. Regenerative is about improving (and not merely sustaining) – the natural environment, and in particular soils, in a manner that returns them to the state they were in before conventional farming caused their decline. In other words, an outcome is at stake, and since outcomes will be specific to the starting point, as well as the location, crop, climate, and numerous other factors, a 'standard' implying universal rules of the road would be counterproductive. Particularly if it is seen to be 'captured' and used to serve a narrow corporate or crop interest.

The challenge with outcomes, however, is that outcomes imply evidence underpinned by measurement, and these come at a cost. This is where governments and corporates come in – the top-down influence that can unlock rather than stifle Regenerative's potential.

A Regenerative Framework:

To achieve this in a way that is beneficial for farmers, the supply chain and consumers, Regenerative needs to be understood as a Framework – one that is evolving, dynamic, can cope with variation, be adaptable to different crops, climates and landscapes, and inform policy. Working towards this will require:

- Establishment and roll out a suite of **Regenerative metrics** that can be used by farmers to consistently measure outcomes and benchmark against a baseline (starting point) as well as local circumstances (e.g. for soil we would recommend the AHDB soil health scorecard). Co-creation of appropriate metrics will ensure they serve both bottom-up and top-down needs, i.e. a focus on overall soil health, not simply soil carbon.
- Investment in the **evidence base** that underpins proposed regenerative interventions, particularly when several are implemented simultaneously as part of a holistic, mixed-farming systems change. A strong *a priori* evidence base builds confidence among all stakeholders that regenerative projects are worthy of investment – and the claims made around them.

- Creation of a platform to capture and share the results of **'informal' research** being undertaken daily around the country about the impact of regenerative projects – specifically the kind of small-scale, observed results shared by farmers at Groundswell that are dispersed and don't add up to more than the sum of their parts.
- Promotion of **peer-to-peer knowledge exchange** through an accessible Regenerative 'academy', which will include case studies of best practice, the results of government-funded trials and pilots, and corporate schemes with their hand-picked, champion grower partners.
- Investment in **modelling** – to support predictions about how the environment, in particular soils, will react under different interventions and in specific, localised circumstances. Accurate modelling will decrease the dependency on measurement and lower the costs for all stakeholders.
- Clarification of the rules around **data ownership** to ensure farmers maintain control over the facts and figures that illustrate change. Peace of mind about their legal status and confidence in levels of protection will encourage farmers to make this data more available – and help them monetise these figures where they have value to other players in the supply chain.
- **Incentivisation of measurement** through targeted subsidy schemes. This is particularly true for public subsidy schemes (SFI, ELM etc.) that should aim to unlock private finance by removing many of the up-front costs.

In combination these elements should establish a Framework that is flexible enough for Regenerative to thrive on the ground, but robust and credible enough to reassure customers and investors of a validated approach and verifiable outcomes. It will help distribute costs fairly among those that ultimately benefit and generate a transparent process for accountability – and credit for any outcomes achieved. Finally, it will be dynamic enough to embrace new science, new technology, new practices, and new policy priorities as they emerge over time.