



Regenerative Agriculture: What Should it Mean?

Expert panel & producer/community discussion session | November 2nd, 2023

Panelists

- ❖ **Leonard Diggs:** Pie Ranch Cascade Regenerator Program Managers and member of the California Department of Food and Agriculture's Environmental Farming Act Science Advisory Panel
- ❖ **Tommy Fenster:** PhD researcher studying agroecological intensification and ecosystem services with the Ecdysis Foundation and Dr. Amelie Gaudin's Agroecology Lab at UC Davis
- ❖ **Elizabeth Whitlow:** Executive Director of Regenerative Organic Alliance
- ❖ **Sara Tiffany:** Director of Ecological Farming at Community Alliance with Family Farmers

What is regenerative agriculture?

Regenerative agriculture is designed to improve and restore the health of agricultural land. These practices are not new; they have been employed by Indigenous peoples worldwide, including Native Americans, for thousands of years. Unlike "organic," there is currently no single definition of regenerative agriculture. Many farmers think of regenerative agriculture as an approach for making decisions – in other words, **a framework, not a checklist**. This systems approach makes regenerative agriculture **adaptive** to a range of contexts. However, it also makes it **challenging to define**. On the ground, farmers often start with one regenerative practice, such as composting or cover crops, and gradually develop a whole-farm approach over time. Some definitions of regenerative agriculture also include **human health and welfare** aspects such as fair treatment of farmworkers, thus involving an **ethical approach** as well.

Implementing regenerative agricultural practices can offer numerous benefits to farmers, ranchers, and their communities. Regeneratively managed farms and ranches are **more resilient to extreme weather**. For instance, a panelist shared that regeneratively managed crops survived two weeks without water when a farmer had to evacuate during a fire. Regeneratively managed soils absorb water more rapidly during flood conditions and remain cooler and more moist during extreme heat and drought compared to soil managed with non-regenerative practices. **Ecosystems also benefit** from regenerative agriculture. Several producers reported seeing songbirds on their property that they had not seen since their grandparents' time. Lastly, employing regenerative practices **makes farming more engaging and improves producers' quality of life**. Farmers and ranchers have found regenerative agriculture involves more creativity, innovation, and systems thinking when compared to conventional agriculture.

Definitions

Various organizations are developing their own definitions of "regenerative" to establish certifications. One such organization is the Regenerative Organic Alliance (ROA). ROA starts with organic certification as a prerequisite and then introduces additional considerations: soil health, animal welfare, and farmworker equity. This approach upholds the significance of organic certification to consumers while prioritizing a full range of regenerative practices. For instance, a producer cannot attain ROA's certification by only using no-till in their fields..

Other definitions of regenerative do not necessitate organic certification as a prerequisite. For example, Tommy Fenster's research identified nine practices commonly used in regenerative agriculture. Fenster found that using *any* 5 of the 9 activities enhances ecosystem services such as water infiltration and insect biodiversity. While organic farmers were more likely to meet this 5-activity threshold, not all who met it were organic, and not all organic farms met the threshold.

Currently, the California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) is taking the lead in developing a statewide definition of the term. In October 2022, the CDFA requested the Environmental Farming Act Science Advisory Panel, including Leonard Diggs, to assist them in defining regenerative agriculture. The panel provided CDFA with an initial basis for understanding, but [this process is ongoing](#). The first in a series of public listening sessions was on December 6th, 2023 and remaining sessions are posted on CDFA's website. As of December 2023, the definition has not been finalized.

Why is it important to define regenerative agriculture?

Despite the benefits, many farmers cannot afford to implement these practices without the necessary policy and market incentives. In order to craft policy and provide incentives that support regenerative agriculture, **we need to develop a clear definition that farmers, policy makers, and consumers can all agree on.** A clear definition plus a system for verification will:

- ❖ Provide access to premium prices and markets for farmers practicing regenerative methods
- ❖ Prevent “greenwashing,” which is the misleading use of terms like “regenerative” to advertise practices that with little to no meaningful differences from conventional production.
- ❖ Enable policies directing government subsidies and support to farmers and ranchers using regenerative agricultural practices with verifiable outcomes.

Panelists shared that getting funding flowing is critical to incentivize more producers to adopt these practices. They emphasized that systems should be in place to allow regenerative producers to profit from the ecosystem services they provide and noted that in many countries, farmers’ primary income is from government payments that reward management practices that support ecosystem services. Diggs shared insights from the Cascade Ranch Regenerator Program, which employs staff to manage regenerative practices. Without these incentives, farmers often can't afford such efforts.

Panelists shared that **shaping the narrative of what it means to be a regenerative producer is a constant practice.** There will always be attempts to co-opt these types of terms, which is why it is so important for producers who are truly committed to regenerative land stewardship to take a leading role in how these terms are defined, understood, and used.

Open questions about regenerative agriculture

- ❖ **How can the regenerative agriculture movement be more equitable and inclusive?** Many farmers and ranchers want to implement regenerative practices, yet numerous obstacles hinder this process. Issues such as insufficient funding for initial investments, insecure land tenure, and a lack of access to support in their preferred language are common barriers. Some of these barriers trace back to historical inequities and the intentional marginalization of certain communities. Additionally, there are farmers and ranchers who are unaware of regenerative agriculture or unfamiliar with the terminology associated with it, despite sharing the philosophy of land stewardship. Continuously raising awareness about these inequities and actively addressing them through the provision of resources and technical support is critical to fulfilling the full potential of the regenerative agriculture movement.
- ❖ **Should organic certification be part of the definition of “regenerative”?** Currently, only 6% of California farms are certified organic. Requiring producers to undergo the 3-year certification process could pose a barrier to farmers who would otherwise be motivated to adopt regenerative practices. However, not requiring organic certification could result in a less rigorous definition of regenerative. Depending on certification requirements, this leniency could permit the use of toxic herbicides like glyphosate and could undermine the progress that has been made in raising consumer awareness about the benefits of organically-produced foods.
- ❖ **Should regenerative management be implemented and measured on individual farms or ranches, or on a regional scale?** The positive impacts of regenerative management are often regional in scope, and collaboration among farmers in a region, with complementary practices, can be more effective than a competitive farm-by-farm approach. However, certifications typically operate on an individual farm or ranch basis, and organizing regional cooperation presents its own challenges.
- ❖ **Should regenerative agriculture be defined based on practices or on results?** The most exciting part of regenerative agriculture is the benefits it can achieve. However, measurements of these benefits, such as individual farms’ carbon emissions, are at the edge of current scientific practices. It can be much simpler to determine if a specific practice is being implemented or not. However, defining “regenerative” via a checklist of practices could undermine the adaptive, holistic nature of this management approach. Programs to support regional adoption of regenerative practices and “community based” food systems should be considered.