



2023 CAFF VIP Tour

Regenerative Agriculture: What Should it Mean?

Technical Expert & Producer Panels | November 3rd, 2023

Technical Expert 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 (CAFF)

Producer Panel

- ❖ **Sonya Perotti:** Owner of Coyote Family Farm, a 2.5 acre diversified farm in Pengrove, certified organic
- ❖ **Loren Poncia:** Owner of Stemple Creek Ranch, a regenerative certified organic ranch in Tomales; 4th generation rancher
- ❖ **Eric Sussman:** Winegrower and proprietor of Radio-Coteau Estate Vineyard and Farm, Demeter Certified Biodynamic



Defining regenerative agriculture

- ❖ Regenerative agriculture is designed to improve and restore the health of agricultural land.
- ❖ Practiced by Indigenous peoples around the world, including Native Americans, for thousands of years.
- ❖ Unlike "organic," there is currently no single legal definition of regenerative agriculture.
- ❖ Many farmers think of regenerative agriculture as a way of **responding to their land and being in a relationship with it**, "like **a dance with Mother Nature**," rather than "flashcard farming" where a producer just follows steps by rote.
- ❖ Some definitions include **economic and social equity** aspects (fair pay and treatment of farmworkers) and **animal welfare**.
- ❖ Panelists use a range of different regenerative practices on their land, such as:
 - ❖ *Making and applying compost*
 - ❖ *Planting hedgerows*
 - ❖ *Creating beneficial insect habitat*
 - ❖ *Crop rotation*
 - ❖ *Cover cropping*
 - ❖ *Minimizing tillage*
 - ❖ *Rotational grazing*
 - ❖ *No synthetic pesticide use*

What are the benefits of regenerative practices?

- ❖ **Resilience to flooding, drought and extreme temperatures** due to enhanced soil properties. More water stored in the soil, improved infiltration rates, and less erosion.
- ❖ Increased **diversity of wildlife** on farms and ranches; Poncia shared that he sees birds and insects now that he never saw as a child.
- ❖ **Reduced pest damage.**
- ❖ **Higher yields** with fewer inputs.
- ❖ Higher quality products with **greater nutrient density**.

How do producers feel about practice certifications, like regenerative and organic?

- ❖ If customers are aware of producers' regenerative practices through certification, it can allow access to new markets and premium prices.
- ❖ Perotti shared that she became certified organic three years ago to allow customers at the farmers market to recognize her practices.
- ❖ However, certifications can be a major burden as they can be expensive and time consuming, with significant paperwork that can be its own full-time job.
- ❖ Poncia, who maintains several other certifications in addition to organic, said that he has "certification fatigue." He said moving forward he may rely on social media to connect with his customers instead of certifications.

Why is it important to define regenerative agriculture?

- ❖ Many farmers cannot afford to implement regenerative agriculture without policy and market incentives to reward them.
- ❖ In order to craft policy and provide incentives that support regenerative agriculture, **a clear definition is needed that farmers, policy makers, and consumers can all agree on.**
- ❖ A definition that does not capture the principles of regenerative agriculture could result in regenerative agriculture being reduced to a checklist, encouraging producers to do the bare minimum. Panelists mentioned this is sometimes the case with organic production.
- ❖ A definition that is too broad could lead to greenwashing, where terms like "regenerative" are used to advertise practices that in reality have little to no meaningful differences from conventional production.
- ❖ Certifications help to show customers and policymakers what practices farmers are using but are only useful if they are based on a meaningful definition and verifiable practices.

What makes it challenging, and even problematic, to define regenerative agriculture?

- ❖ In practice, regenerative agriculture is based on **principles and values as well as being adaptive and context-specific** to factors such as location, microclimate, and cultural practices. These factors are hard to define in policy, which results in a more "one size fits all," checklist approach.
- ❖ Panelists urged that any definition should correlate with significant impacts and verifiable outcomes on **soil, human, and social health.** However, some outcomes, like a reduction of carbon emissions, are hard to measure at the farm level. In addition, measuring components is a reductionist approach and cannot demonstrate the true value of holistic, complex systems.
- ❖ **Should organic certification be a prerequisite for regenerative?** Whitlow shared that not requiring organic certification could mean a less rigorous definition of regenerative; for example, allowing use of toxic herbicides like glyphosate. She is concerned that a CDFA definition without organic as a starting point will undermine the progress that has been made in raising consumer awareness about the benefits of organically produced foods and could be used by some producers and companies as a "greenwashing" marking tool. Fenster shared that conversely, including organic certification could exclude producers who hold regenerative values but find the process of organic certification too expensive or time-consuming.
- ❖ It is critical for local producers to be leading these discussions, to avoid the definition being set by larger corporations who may not have the best interests of people or the planet in mind. There needs to be "hard lines."

What are the barriers to farmers adopting regenerative agriculture?

- ❖ Short leases and land access challenges make it hard for producers to invest in their land for the long term.
- ❖ Language barriers prevent equitable access to incentive programs and technical assistance for farmers.
- ❖ Expenses of initial transition and lack of technical support at the beginning and throughout the transition.
- ❖ Lack of business education available for farmers who want to do regenerative practices.
- ❖ Lack of a shared vocabulary; for example, producers from other countries may already be expert regenerative producers but not use the same terms to share their principles or describe their practices.
- ❖ Lack of a clear definition can hinder farmers' access to potential markets and make transitioning to regenerative less attractive. For example, definitions of terms like "sustainable" or "regenerative" are very fuzzy in the wine industry.
- ❖ Trying to engage in non-extractive practices while participating in a fundamentally extractive economy and industry; higher costs for labor and practices for regenerative.

How do producers do consumer outreach?

- ❖ Social media
- ❖ Agritourism
- ❖ Selling through a wholesaler like the FEED collaborative, who takes care of advertising
- ❖ Panelists shared they would love to see an effort like the “Got Milk?” campaign that advertises regenerative practices generally

Advice for policymakers:

- ❖ **Engage with producers, across as many agricultural communities as possible:** regenerative, conventional, novice, experienced, English speakers, non-English speakers.
- ❖ **Support access to land** for producers and reward landowners who provide access to regenerative producers.
- ❖ Ensure stacking of practices, while allowing flexibility for what practices are being used.
- ❖ **Keep things simple.** Local small and mid-size farms have faced an onslaught of challenges over the last few years and want to have time to focus on maintaining and improving their farming practices.
- ❖ Avoid the common tendency to make things easier for big companies and harder for small to midsize farms.
- ❖ **Reward existing and continued use of regenerative practices.** For example, The Healthy Soils Program, benefits first time users, but both experienced practitioners and early adopters should be rewarded.
- ❖ Provide assistance to producers to reach the definition of and continued compliance around “regenerative.” This is essential if a high bar is to be set and upheld.
- ❖ Make the lifestyle and livelihood of farmers sustainable to allow them to invest in these practices.

What are producers’ experiences with regulations and government assistance for regenerative agriculture?

- ❖ Producers emphasized the importance of payments for the services they provide outside of food production, sharing that ideally this should be a significant source of income.
- ❖ Several producer panelists had received support through government programs like EQIP, which allowed them to improve their infrastructure and invest in regenerative practices like tree planting.
- ❖ However, completing the required paperwork can be its own full-time job, and **many farmers find the whole system overwhelming.**
- ❖ Other regulations can also block producer strategies. For example, Beretta shared that he would like to produce his own compost or have tours on his farm to show customers his practices, but the regulatory requirements are too burdensome. For example, ADA bathrooms and tour permitting.
- ❖ Perotti shared that farmers are used to dealing with government agencies under duress and on an as-needed basis. For example, when a permit is required. This makes engaging with these programs stressful and psychologically draining on top of other factors.

