
*Scaling Regenerative Agriculture
Executive Roundtable Summary (Minneapolis/USA –September 13-14, 2023)*

Background

Regenerative agriculture is gaining widespread interest across food and agriculture value chains from business leaders attracted to natural climate solutions that deliver economic and environmental co-benefits. Leading companies have launched initiatives to encourage growers in their value chains to adopt regenerative practices.

A series of WEC executive roundtables on the subject identified growing optimism among stakeholders but also general agreement that current incentives are not sufficient, or sufficiently aligned, to drive scale. WEC, with support from UNEP, convened leaders in the food and agriculture sector in North America to determine whether and how greater collaboration in companies' incentive programs could help to drive scale in uptake of regenerative agriculture practices in key geographies and commodities. Participants from agribusiness, farmers, NGOs, and International Organizations shared information on their respective programs and explored the scope for collaboration. The event brought together 13 senior sustainability experts – four of them from global companies.

Participants

Host & partner:



- **Hilary French, UN Environment North America**
- **Jay Watson, General Mills**

Moderators

- **Bayer:** Monica McBride
- **Gulf of Maine Research Institute:** Glenn Prickett
- **The Nature Conservancy:** Kris Johnson

Speakers

- **Bayer:** Monica McBride
- **Bowling Agri Service:** Chip Bowling
- **Cargill:** Ryan Siroli
- **General Mills:** Jay Watson
- **Farm Credit Council:** Gary Matteson
- **Nine Steps Consulting:** Kari Cohen
- **Syngenta:** Liz Hunt
- **The Nature Conservancy:** Kris Johnson
- **UN Environment:** James Lomax

Key Points

1. **Regenerative Agriculture isn't anything new to large international food companies.** Many of them have experts who understand the opportunities, have excellent networks, and have tried to scale the sourcing from growers who use regenerative farming methods. They also have influence within their company, so this is not a question of seniority – however, more sustainable farming practices – including regenerative farming – are very hard to scale. Companies do pilot projects and some of them collaborate to some extent – it has not been enough to challenge conventional farming. At the same time, companies have different views on the value of regenerative agriculture, and not everybody is open to collaboration.
2. **International organizations such as UNEP may be in a position to enable the conditions for sustainable food systems** (agriculture, health, environment), by helping to align definitions, metrics, incentives, the creation of a market, etc. – in summary, by laying out a global framework for a food business that incorporates health and the environment and finds acceptance among growers, processing companies, retailers, and consumers. Further practical steps can be the coordination of funding programs, combatting contra-productive incentives for the farmers, and an easily digestible communication of the

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benefits of systems change to each participant in the value chain. Several experts in the value chain attended the roundtable to find common approaches.

3. **To drive internal support for regenerative agriculture and thus a more sustainable system**, companies tend to highlight regenerative farming's ability to store carbon emissions through increasing humus layers. The idea is that company goals to decarbonize may be reached, and investors may see reduced carbon risk in their investments. However, roundtable participants advised not to rely on a carbon strategy whose indicators are very difficult to verify and whose share of success is difficult to claim. After all, farmers sell to many customers. Roundtable participants referred to the so-called "carbon trap" that is sometimes driven by corporate accountability frameworks. These frameworks incentivise a focus on emission reduction, even when some reductions can't be verified solidly (e.g. in soils), and sometimes depend on assumptions and lead to "greenwashing" *. When concentrating on carbon, many other benefits that regenerative agriculture brings about and that can be measured may be forgotten.
4. **Soil Health is what farmers care about.** Roundtable participants advised that talking about soil health rather than regenerative agriculture is preferable when farmers are addressed. Although the latter is a farming practice to improve soil health and other benefits that investors and consumers want to stress (such as carbon storage, water retention, and biodiversity), farmers are concerned that their primary focus on sustained good yields can get lost. The term "regenerative agriculture" is business language, suitable to involve academics, and used by smart farmers such as [Gabe Brown](#), [Will Harris](#), and many others who want to reach the scientific community, customers, and government. Thus, while *regenerative agriculture* is one of the correct terms to be used for this more sustainable farming practice, it seems to be easier to attract farmers to join initiatives that address *soil health*.
5. **The market for commercializing sustainability is small.** Take the example of a well-known brand like Rainforest Alliance. Their product certifications have gotten only 14% of the market share. What does it take to change an agricultural system even in a region like Lake Erie with several of the largest companies willing to promote regenerative farming? Even these companies barely have the reach to make a difference with thousands of growers in the region. In that region, for instance, companies claim that they may be able to get 30% of farmers into regenerative agriculture – however, it will take 60% of farmers to make any real difference in the water quality of this watershed. And the potential is large: the Minnesota River alone, for instance, is one of the biggest loaders of nutrients into the Gulf of Mexico, meaning that the adoption of regenerative farming practices would have a huge impact along the entire Mississippi. These farmers need technical assistance as much as financial assistance. Who can do that work? Companies have experienced that there is not enough technical expertise to support the development of programs for more sustainable farming practices. Companies participating in the event mentioned that they provided external experts to help farmers. The bundling of farms has proven to be advantageous while absence of land ownership is another challenge.
6. **Getting to scale requires landscape approaches – with food involved sometimes referred to as "foodscape approaches" – to move beyond a project-by-project implementation of regenerative practices and still understand the local actors.** Roundtable participants found it difficult in the Minnesota River region for different reasons: local governments do not want a "Total Maximum Daily Load" ([EPA rule under the federal Clean Water Act](#)) for the river, farmers do not want to share information on yield, fields, profits, etc. In addition, it was claimed that other large emitters, such as consumers using fertilizers on home lawns, Water Treatment Plants, etc. did not participate, leading to disillusionment. And once corporates step forward and collaborate to solve a tough challenge, they often experience delays in the process that kill the momentum. As a result, companies question why

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they are investing resources in it: some move on, other collaborators get concerned. Given this complexity The Nature Conservancy has worked on [Foodscapes in various world regions](#), among them the Upper Mississippi Foodscape to find solutions how to drive the required change** Foodscapes are systems with multiple layers, living laboratories, where foodscape subjects share learnings on socioeconomic, agronomic, biophysical aspects.

WAYS TO ENGAGE ON FOODSCAPES



7. **Terms such as Regenerative Agriculture can help inspire collaborative action with value chain partners, investors, and governments.** The [U.S. Partnership for Climate Smart Communities](#), the [Regional Conservation Partnership Program \(RCP\)](#), and the [U.S. Inflation Reduction Act](#) provide money for climate-smart farming practices or biodiversity (found e.g. in regenerative agriculture), not for soil health per se. However, the result is similar, and thus different terms for similar goals can help to succeed. A great amount of money is available, provided by the above programs as well as the [Farm Credit System](#) (created by an act of Congress in 1916) and the [UNEP Fund Agri3](#). While growers in the U.S. have benefitted from the Farm Credit System for over 100 years and know it well, they can easily be overwhelmed by the many additional programs. Food companies with aspirations to source food more sustainably, and wanting to support farmers, are advised to review and structure funding opportunities for farmers in an easily digestible way and consider involving lead partners such as experienced NGOs like [The Nature Conservancy](#) or others.
8. **Longstanding programs such as Farm Credit and others are powerful and trusted among farmers, and thus the adoption of sustainable practices by the farmer may largely depend on them.** Farm Credit is a lending organization made up of 58 local Credit Associations owned by growers, who are collaboratively able to provide very good interest rates for farmers. This system is well established in the U.S. and since it is made by farmers for farmers, it finds the right language and does not command or suggest any requirements that may sound theoretical. Its staff are used to talking to farmers in a way that respects the integrity of the lender-borrow relationship as well as the dignity of farmers. Many Associations have decided to carefully promote sustainability practices, respecting farmers’ decisions to choose their own path to sustainable adoption that fits their resources, abilities and goals, and support for those paths. An example of how a Farm Credit Association “integrates sustainability into business models” is from [Farm Credit Services of America](#) (largest of the 58 local Farm Credit Associations):

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Meeting farmers where they are in their wish to produce more sustainably, Farm Credit Services of America shows examples of how other farmers have adopted sustainable practices to change socially acceptable norms, provide reference materials for technical support, and experiment with financial incentives—all while not offending the sensibilities of those farmers who are just starting their sustainability journeys. While leading the effort to adopt such a program, Farm Credit Services of America makes it available to all Farm Credit Associations nationwide. From an environmentalist point of view this process may be slow when speed is so important to combat climate change and biodiversity loss. On the other hand, it is known that a large system, once it moves, is more powerful than the most ambitious initiatives that never scale.

9. **Food companies and Agricultural Retailers have key roles in any transition to regenerative agriculture.** *Food companies, especially input providers, are trusted direct business partners and thus have access to farmers while they also have the technical knowledge about sustainable farming practices (especially if they have conservation agronomists on their teams), something that many retailers do not have, and that prevents them from talking directly to farmers about sustainable practices. Food companies may be able to bridge that silence and talk to retailers to build confidence and knowledge in the entire value chain. Retailers, on the other hand, with their knowledge of consumers’ preferences and their marketing power, can foster demand for regenerative products. Together they must develop a business model for regenerative agriculture beyond carbon.*

* “Greenwashing” is a new term expressing desires or intentions to be environmentally friendly without taking concrete action.

** Further reading: TNC, IIASA, Systemic (2021): *Foodscapes: Toward Food System Transition*.

Note: WEC Executive Roundtables are conducted under the Chatham House Rule.