

Project title: Understanding the emerging landscape of regenerative farming

Researcher / Research team: Richard Byrne, Antonia Mortimer, Annie Round, Will Graham and Tom Watson

Project overview:

The project sought to establish farmers understanding, as practitioners, of the term regenerative agriculture, their motivations for engaging with this practice, the drivers for that motivation, barriers and issues in adopting regenerative agriculture and where they obtained information regarding practice. This was achieved through a survey of some 200 active farmers and interviews with key informants in the sector.

Research outcomes:

The study established that within the sample there was not one agreed definition of regenerative agriculture rather it was a combination of core principles of good soil management combined with a wider desire to positively influence the environment. Indeed, it is possibly best to view regenerative agriculture as an onion model with, soil health at its core and layers of interest surrounding them including hedgerows, woodland, carbon sequestration, green energy, and conservation. While soil was at the heart of the practice nothing additionally was ruled out, all being seen as positive environmental management. There was no particular typology of farmer that engaged with regenerative farming, although all were linked by a desire to access information from a wider range of sources with a particular focus on case studies. In short regenerative agriculture is driven by a range of desires, some to improve margins, some relating to the environment and as such is more of philosophical entity than a strict dogma offering farmers flexibility and adaptability to meet their individual circumstances but with long term sustainability a core factor.

Practical application / Sector use:

Regenerative agriculture is increasingly a focus of buyers seeking to improve the environmental performance of their producers. In order to this they require a framework and metrics. What is clear from this study, is that the practitioner's framework is very loose, indeed many of the respondents rejected policies such as the Sustainable Farming Initiative as being too constraining. This has implications for how engagement is acknowledged e.g., being in the SFI does not make a farm regenerative, also how success is measured, and the timeframe actions are implemented and outcomes are observed. As a philosophical approach to agriculture, it offers production with public goods, were this to be converted to a policy it would likely have negative implications for both. In essence this is farmers very much taking back control of land, free of policy and metrics. The challenge is how this may be converted to financial rewards for products plus public goods.