

Knowledge exchange of the highest order



“Regenerative farming offers a hopeful path forward, a way of working with nature not against it.”

HRH THE PRINCE OF WALES

Groundswell has long been renowned for attracting high calibre speakers to its bill, but this year the guest list accelerated the event to a whole new ‘royal’ level. *CPM* took to the session tents to absorb the expertise.

By Janine Adamson and Melanie Jenkins

Even before the mysterious special guest at this year’s Groundswell festival was unveiled, the line up, while perhaps quite hefty, was already impressive in its own right. For one, it included multiple appearances from legendary pioneer of regenerative farming, Gabe Brown.

But even so, a surprise was waiting among the glamping tents and

knowledge-thirsty farmers – none other than His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales. Coining himself ‘the warm-up act’ for Gabe, Prince William addressed attendees with rousing commentary which highlighted the importance of the regen movement.

And while this isn’t the first time he’s popped up at the show – having also walked the festival’s fields in



Shifting perspectives

Gabe Brown challenged the Groundswell audience to change the way that they see things.

Weed control focus

Various sessions tackled the topic of weed management

In the aptly named 'Don't let weeds take the lead', some of industry's renowned experts voiced their thoughts during a breakout session at the AHDB stand.

Opening up the discussion, ADAS' John Cussans said when it comes to weed management, it all starts with the concept of the weed seed-bank, and that three factors are critical to understanding this better. "In a conventional arable field, only around 5-10% of the weed individuals are present as seedlings at any one time; the other 90-95% are seeds in the seed-bank.

"So just understanding that often you're looking at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to managing weeds in the field, is really important."

The second point he made was that weed seed-banks aren't heterogeneous – they have vertical structures which come about as an interaction between cultivation approach and the history of weed seed shed.

"At AHDB's Strategic Farm East there's one field with only 5% of the target weed (Italian ryegrass) present in the surface layer of the seed-bank. Whereas in another, which is currently in an SFI scheme, 95% of the target weed is present in the surface layer.

"Understanding that vertical structure should drive your cultivation choices – there are times when doing nothing is the very best approach for managing the weed seed-bank, but there are other times when doing a lot is better," he explained.

The third factor John highlighted is that not all weed individuals in the seed-bank are necessarily the target problem in the field. "For example, at Strategic Farm East, Italian ryegrass is the only weed visible in the field in the crops being managed, yet in the seed-bank, there are more than 20 weed species.

"Rather than the seed-bank itself,



Don't let weeds take the lead

The importance of understanding the weed seed-bank was explored on the AHDB stand.

the problem is dominance of the aggressive weed, and a lack of evenness and diversity," he explained.

Shimpling Park Farm's John Pawsey joked that he has the biggest weed seed-bank in the whole tent. "We've not used herbicides for 25 years so we obviously have a big weed seed-bank, but it's understanding how you manage that given the life cycle of different weeds.

"How we do that is we make our rotation as complex as possible, including spring and winter cropping; the whole ethos is not letting one thing dominate."

John Pawsey pointed out that rather than blackgrass, the farm's problem weed has been wild oats. "They were rampant and while spending 10 years trying to deal with that problem, I learnt there's no silver bullet, you have to do everything, centred around rotation design. We then revert to mechanical weeding if necessary."

Addressing the concept of new technologies for cultural control methods, Gowan's Dr Will Smith added that while herbicides have been used successfully in the past, there's a growing opportunity for in-crop weed control techniques to manage populations beyond pre-emergence.

He explained that his PhD research had looked at inter-row hoeing as a

mechanical system to remove weeds including blackgrass. "There are also solutions such as the Zurn Top Cut Collect which allow us to target weeds, collect them from the field and dispose of them in a sustainable way, which we couldn't do before.

"No longer are we targeting weeds at one or two points in the life cycle, we can target them outside of this including just before and at harvest. This is a really interesting future for weed management – we don't have to focus and rely on one point, we can exercise control throughout the cycle," said Will.

Over in The Study Tent, ADAS' Dr Lynn Tatnell was part of a panel discussing managing perennial weeds in low input systems. She reminded that perennial species multiply by both seed dispersal and vegetative spread (rhizomes and roots).

"Their morphology really is their best attribute – something like a dock is obviously going to be competitive so requires a long-term, multi-faceted strategy."

Lynn pointed out that one dock plant can produce 60,000 seeds which are viable very quickly and therefore re-germinate quickly. "So preventing docks from seeding is key, to stop that life cycle.

"They're highly competitive, love moisture and high nutrient levels, whereas their roots can regenerate from very small fragments. An amazing weed, but not great if you're struggling to control them on your land."

"This is a really interesting future for weed management – we don't have to focus and rely on one point, we can exercise control throughout the cycle."



A royal address

HRH The Prince of Wales coined himself the ‘warm up act’ for Gabe Brown (pictured left).

2024 – this was his maiden voyage onto the stage, before spending considerable time meeting and greeting those in attendance. “Last year I was uplifted by the sense of mission, the willingness to share knowledge and the innovation throughout the Groundswell community,” he said.

CRITICAL INPUT

“This is a broad church of actors who shape our landscape, put food on our tables and have a central role in combatting the climate and nature emergencies. Farming is not simply the act of growing food; it’s much bigger than that – it’s the stewardship of the land, the health of our soils, the purity of our water and resilience of our rural society, in harmony with nature.”

He stated that a change in climate system and unpredictable weather patterns are exposing weaknesses in conventional thinking, as are the economic pressures of input costs and volatile markets.

“It’s become clear that we need a different approach; regenerative farming offers a hopeful path forward, a way of working with nature not against it. It’s not a single method or dogma, but a mindset rooted in curiosity, observation, community and growth.”

Prince William stressed that the

industry must work harder to ensure society supports those who are taking ‘bold steps’ toward regenerative practices. “Retailers, food manufacturers and processors have a vital role too in valuing quality and provenance, shortening supply chains, and telling the stories of the food we eat.

“And as consumers, we must re-educate ourselves on what we eat, where it comes from and the true cost of its production. For the farmers here today I offer my respect and encouragement – you are at the heart of this transformation.”

With the crowd suitably ‘warm’, Gabe joined the stage to deliver his keynote presentation entitled ‘What is all this talk about regenerative agriculture?’. A highly prominent figure in the regen world, Gabe is widely commended for his transformation of Brown’s Ranch – a 2025ha farm near Bismarck in North Dakota.

Sharing his story with the audience in the Big Top Tent, Gabe said that despite learning a conventional approach from his father-in-law who ‘loved to till’, he began to question this approach to farming.

This led to Gabe selling all of his tillage equipment to go full force no-till. However, after a few challenging years of crop losses due to hail and weather extremes, Gabe said things were looking dire and he had to find a way to get out of debt.

“At the same time I was beginning to see some changes occurring. Before, we’d never had an earthworm in our fields but they were starting to appear, as were pollinators and beneficial insects, and birds. Wildlife was becoming much more abundant and water was starting to infiltrate our soils.

“I remember learning from my father-in-law that in early spring we’d go out discing because we were trying to dry the fields out so we could get in and seed. But by July we were on our knees praying for rain; it didn’t make sense to me.

“So instead, I was starting to see water infiltrating and my soils were beginning to look like chocolate cake and changing colour – this all occurred during those



Shared mission

Wildfarmed’s Andy Cato stressed that the land use framework should be positioned as a collective sense of mission and purpose.

“The change can be rapid if we open our eyes and observe.”

four years. I really began to realise that I'd degraded my ecosystem yet nature was working and we were starting to get help back into the system," explained Gabe.

He said he wanted to impress on the Groundswell crowd that in regenerative agriculture, it doesn't take decades to make a difference. "The change can be rapid if we open our eyes and observe. That's the challenge I want to put forward for you today – change the way you see things."

SIMPLE STEPS

According to Gabe, as long as there's some soil, land can be moved down the regenerative path and it's certainly not difficult. He said during his journey, he'd realised his management had been degrading the soil. "I wasn't being a good steward of the land.

"It was then that I knew I had to become a student again. Despite several college degrees, not once in those classes had I been taught how soil aggregate is formed or how biology drives the natural nutrient cycle.

"That's the most difficult thing we have to do to change the production system – farmers can't implement what they don't understand."

Earlier in the day, a panel discussed the land use framework and how it could be used to power change in farming and nature. Featuring Wildfarmed's Andy Cato, NFU's Tom Bradshaw and Dustin Benton of Forefront Advisors, it explored what government should be considering when devising policy.

Andy said while data is critical in developing the framework and measuring farm outcomes, the situation goes beyond that. "It's broadly acceptable to chop down a forest to build a railway line, and broadly unacceptable to buy farmland back to plant a forest; why?

"It's because we're asking people to leave cultures, callings and deep-seated traditions. So framing this as a collective sense of mission and purpose – after all no species survives the death of its ecosystem – is really important."

Tom added that considering culture and heritage is vital. "If you don't have a community at the heart of those landscapes, what happens over time is you lose the skills and the ability to react and respond.

"We have to put a real value on culture and heritage. This doesn't mean the landscape can't change, but making sure people are there at the heart is absolutely essential." ●

Can agriculture be saved?

Addressing a packed out Big Top Tent, Bramble Partners' Henry Dimbleby explored what can be done to help British agriculture survive and thrive

According to Henry Dimbleby, nature in this country is declining, climate targets are being missed, and the food eaten is the greatest cause of avoidable ill health.

"And yet we have an availability and abundance of food that would have been unimaginable to our grandparents. How do we move away from this miracle that's also a disaster? Undeniably, most of our food system today isn't regenerative but a mining practice, so how do we achieve a healthy food system in 20 years' time?"

In answer to this, the Rt Hon George Eustice highlighted that as a country, it's important to look at the lessons of the past. "We can fuse lost husbandry with the technology of today. It'll also require the government to stick to policy that works instead of chopping and changing, because we know it can take 10 years for changes to come to the fore in regen."

And while he continued to point out that pursuing regen practices in the UK could make farmers more resilient, Justin King, former head of Sainsbury's, flagged that the current food system is a result of spectacular change. "We have to start change by turning the problem on its head and must remember that by solving one problem, we may cause another.



Ensuring a future

A panel discussed what can be done to help British agriculture survive and thrive.

"There's an assumption that if we create something new then consumers will embrace it, but the first thing to do is educate. If we can do this, they'll be better informed and commercial retailers can exploit this."

Justin admitted that during the past 20 years, the biggest driver for consumers has been convenience rather than choice or even price. "People will pay for convenience because you're selling time back to the consumer. So although there's one form of currency to pay with, there are multiple forms of currency to sell under."

To change consumer habits, Henry suggested the idea of government intervention in the form of carbon taxes and asked whether this could work.

In response, Justin highlighted that what businesses actually require from government is consistency so they can plan and invest for the long-term. "If policy is only going to last

three years and not 20, then you never move anywhere because it's too dangerous to set off on the journey in case the policy doesn't exist once you reach that point."

Turning the focus to profit margins, Henry stressed the power of supermarkets and how farmers are left to take what they're given.

But according to Justin, supermarkets are an intermediary and often detached from dealing directly with those they buy from. However, he raised that while at Sainsbury's, he helped to deliver a dairy development group that provided producers with a fixed price over the market value without this extra cost being passed onto consumers.

"The sharing of knowledge among farmers within this ground was the greatest benefit. Fundamentally, it's against the interest of the retailer to destroy the relationship with its producers, but it's also not against them to negotiate hard on behalf of consumers."