

# A circular vision



*"It's about helping the farming to make the biodiversity better, and the biodiversity make the farming better."*

JOSH STRATTON

After more than three decades reshaping his Wiltshire farm into a connected network of soil, habitat and enterprise, Josh Stratton's systems-based approach to sustainability has earned him the 2025 RASE Natural Capital Award. *CPM* reveals more about his winning ways.

By Charlotte Cunningham

**O**n the edge of Salisbury Plain, where the contours of chalk meet the thin soils of Wiltshire, farming has always required resilience. For Josh Stratton, that's taken the form of innovation – not in isolation, but as part of a wider network of people, habitats and enterprises that together form a genuinely circular system.

That joined-up thinking is what's earned him the 2025 RASE Natural Capital Award, recognising a business that has embedded sustainability into its commercial DNA.

Josh is a third-generation farmer, managing around 1800ha in partnership with his family. "When I started 34 years ago, it was a very traditional mixed farm," he recalls. "During the years we've changed the dynamic quite considerably, moving from livestock and cropping to a much more commercial, diversified business."

Today, the holding remains predominantly arable, but is interwoven with renewable energy and a growing commercial property portfolio. That diversification hasn't diluted farming's importance, however, it's strengthened its foundations, suggests Josh.

The rotation is based on first wheats followed by winter or spring barley, with oats, peas and oilseed rape providing the key break crops. Soils are chalky and free-draining, demanding close attention to moisture and structure, he notes.

During the past decade, the business has moved steadily towards minimum- and zero-tillage systems, adopting controlled-traffic farming and direct drilling wherever possible to protect soil structure and organic matter. "We're not trying to be fashionable," he explains. "It's just about doing things better – keeping the soil covered, improving biology and lowering the

amount of steel we put through it."

Digestate from the farm's anaerobic digester forms an essential part of the nutrient cycle. "It's made a massive difference," he says. "It reduces our carbon footprint and closes the loop; we're not reliant on bagged fertiliser in the same way, and it fits perfectly into our circular model."

Straw is often chopped and incorporated rather than baled, and cover crops are used extensively to



## Key priorities

For Wiltshire farmer Josh Stratton, natural capital isn't an add-on to production – it sits at the centre.

► hold soil through winter and feed the microbial community that underpins fertility. These changes have cut fuel use and improved the farm's overall carbon balance, supported by a detailed monitoring system that tracks emissions, soil organic matter and biodiversity.

For Josh, natural capital isn't an add-on to production – it sits at the centre. "We call it the circular economy," he says. "All the elements we do connect with each other. The arable links with the biodiversity around it, the renewables feed the farm, and our commercial tenants now support our environmental projects too."

He points to wildflower margins, pond creation and restored hedgerows as examples of how environmental delivery is integrated with day-to-day management. "It's about helping the farming to make the biodiversity better, and the biodiversity make the farming better."

Josh says the turning point came about seven years ago, when he helped to establish the Wylly Valley Farmers Stewardship Cluster. What began as 10 farms has grown into a network of around 40, stretching up and down the valley. "That really kick-started things," he comments. "Each farm isn't an island – the connection between farms turbo-charges everything we do."

The cluster focuses on linking habitat corridors across ownership boundaries, creating continuous networks of hedgerows, field margins and wetlands that allow birds, pollinators and other wildlife to move freely through the landscape.



## Soil protection

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But its value goes well beyond biodiversity, he adds. "The second thing the cluster does brilliantly is knowledge transfer. It gets farmers together to learn about sustainable farming, regenerative agriculture, the latest grant schemes, SFI – and helps us all to farm more profitably."

Knowledge exchange has become a cornerstone of Josh's philosophy. He's an active participant in Helix Wiltshire, led by Hutchinsons, and this work, run alongside agronomists and researchers, tests the relationship between soil management, input efficiency and natural capital outcomes. "We've always been open to trying new things," says Josh. "But it's data that gives confidence – seeing the results on our own soils, measuring change year-on-year."

Measurement is something the farm takes seriously, and a full-time ecologist is used to monitor habitats, bird populations, invertebrates and soil biology, building a comprehensive picture of ecosystem health. "Measuring helps because it shows whether what we're doing actually works," he explains. "But it also gives credibility. If you can't measure it, you can't value it." The data now informs both management and markets, underpinning the farm's participation in the SFI pilot and the design of future natural-capital projects.

Those metrics have also opened the door to new commercial relationships, too. While some farms have explored carbon-credit trading, Josh has found greater success in embedding environmental value directly into crop pricing. "Lots of companies pay lip service to ESG, and some actually put their money where their mouth is," he says. "We're increasingly finding grain buyers and processors who value the environmental enhancement that comes with sustainable production."

The farm now has five commercial agreements where an environmental premium is built into the grain price. "It's not unique – plenty of people are doing it – but we're trying to do it on a bigger scale, through a larger network of farmers."

That network extends beyond environmental delivery into marketing, and through Salisbury Cereals, a farmer-owned cooperative, Josh sells grain collectively with around 20 neighbouring farms. The same principle underpins his involvement with the Environmental Farmers Group, which aggregates natural-capital assets for trade and employs a full-time trader.

Collaboration is where confidence



## Start with the easy wins

Josh advises starting with easy wins – a few margins, a pond, a hedge – and build from there. He says that once you start connecting things, it grows naturally.

comes from, he believes. "We couldn't have done it alone. Seeing what other farmers are doing you think: 'I might just give that a go.' Farmers will always help one another out."

It's his view that collective structures are the only realistic way to make environmental markets work. "Even though we're quite a large farm, we're not big enough to have any strength in grain or environmental markets on our own. But when we join together, suddenly we do."

Asked what advice he'd give to others, Josh is pragmatic in his approach. "The first thing is to go to as many meetings or farm walks as you can," he says. "You always get something for free – an idea, a contact, a different way of looking at something."

"The next is to join a cluster group or start one if none exists; there's help out there from groups like the Game and Wildlife Conservation Trust (GWCT) and others. Once you're in a group, lots of things flow down from that."

He also emphasises the importance of small, steady steps. "You don't have to change everything at once. Start with easy wins – a few margins, a pond, a hedge – and build from there. Once you start connecting things, it grows naturally."

The RASE judges described Josh as demonstrating 'long-term commitment to growing, measuring and monetising natural capital'. They say the combination of circular systems, rigorous data and commercial awareness is what sets him apart.

Yet for Josh, the motivation remains simple: making the farm work better – economically, environmentally and socially – for the next generation. "We've changed a lot over the years," he reflects.

"But the thing that's made the biggest difference is group thinking. It's about connecting farms, connecting markets, connecting people. That's what will keep us moving forward." ●