



WITH MARTIN LINES

Nature NATTERS

Regenerative farming: data and leading by example

“Is it time that farmers start collaborating to lead the harmonisation of farming data and regenerative farming practices?”

Some in the sector argue that regenerative farming requires a rigid set of standards and certification in order to be trusted and respected, and some feel that a strict protocol would hold back the ability to manage context-specific issues on their farms in the way they would like. Regenerative farming has clear principles of action; what's the best approach for measurement?

There are many data platforms already out there that can capture actions with farm data, soil testing metrics and satellite imagery. I think the challenge is in how we can benchmark progress across farms and throughout the industry using comparable datasets that follow a guiding set of principles for measurement, that are flexible for the unique farm systems we all have. Which practices are reaping improved outcomes, and where? How are we valuing these on-the-ground investments?

Many leading food brands are making commitments to purchase solely from regenerative farming systems in the future, with some already on that pathway. As a farmer selling a range of commodities into the market, I only

want to have to collect one set of data for the market to reward me for what I'm doing, whether that's premiums linked to carbon sequestration, water-holding ability or nature restoration. I don't want to have to test my soil in 20 different ways on 20 different apps for each of my buyers.

The government needs to work with the private sector and align which regenerative actions they measure. We'd then have one harmonised set of data that drives change and investment on farms and through the wider supply chain by rewarding the added value regenerative farming can deliver for the landscape.

It would be great to see the wider retail sector and procurement contracts in schools, hospitals and prisons reflecting the commitment also. Many of the government's environmental schemes aim to support farmers to move towards a more nature-friendly, regenerative farming system. The government could support the farming industry more fully by committing to only serve food produced to the standards they're financially supporting farmers to deliver.

The government has a manifesto commitment for 50% of public procurement to be sourced from British farms. At a recent meeting, I challenged the secretary of state for Defra to commit to moving public procurement



Our soils – I don't want to have to test my soil in 20 different ways on 20 different apps for each of my buyers.

to regenerative farming systems by 2030, as it'd send a clear signal that the government is behind farmers transitioning towards regenerative practices.

We as farmers can also lead by example. How many times have you been to an event to find the only food offering is a wafer-thin, grey-ish beef burger, topped with a square of yellow plastic, and slapped into a bun that can barely be called bread? What a signal it would send if all events hosted by farmers and the wider farming industry offered regenerative produce for their catering options!

Farming is more than just food production. We deliver outcomes and benefits for other businesses and wider society, and this must be recognised and

rewarded by both public and private finance actors. Adapting and investing in new approaches to regenerate soils, better manage water, and restore biodiversity comes at a cost, which should not be borne by us as individuals.

I continue to bang the drum. ●

YOUR CORRESPONDENT

Martin Lines is an arable farmer and contractor in South Cambridgeshire with more than 500ha of arable land in his care. His special interest is in farm conservation management and demonstrating that farmers can profitably produce food in harmony with nature and the environment. He's also chair of the Nature Friendly Farming Network UK.
@LinesMartin
martin.lines@nffn.org.uk.