Regenerative agriculture

As part of our vision to be a positive force for change, we've produced a series of factsheets to help our customers better understand sustainability issues, and what we're doing about them.

Overview

Regenerative agriculture has been a buzzword in sustainability for a couple of years, as it's seen as a lever for improving environmental outcomes in a number of areas.

As the name suggests, it's about regenerating the soil, land and biodiversity, so that the planet can continue to produce enough food for growing global population.

It incorporates the following key principles:

- Minimise soil disturbance, tilling as little as possible
- Integrate grazing livestock, as a key part of the carbon cycle
- protect the soil surface, for example by planting cover crops in winter
- Encourage plant diversity – so that there is greater resilience to pests and disease
- Maintain living root systems, aiding water retention and storage, improving soil structure

This holistic approach to nature's interconnected systems leads to greater resilience (to extreme weather events, pests and climate change).

What's the problem?

There's increasing recognition that conventional intensive farming degrades soil quality and quantity, minimises crop diversity (making crops more vulnerable to pests and disease, and over-reliant on pesticides), destroys habitats (by destroying hedgerows) – therefore damaging the balance of ecosystems, as well as being impactful in terms of local water quality and water quantity required for irrigation.

Conventional methods also mean that carbon sequestration (the natural storage of carbon within soils) isn't leveraged as much as it could be, so greenhouse gas emissions are higher within mainstream farming methods.

A significant challenge is that farmers can't transition to regenerative farming overnight; they need the support and understanding of customers (food manufacturers) in making this change, as the transition period can cause a drop in yields, so financial and commercial arrangements need to allow for this.

The benefit for manufacturers however, is that if they are truly partnered with their suppliers, they're likely to reap the benefits of a more resilient supplier as climate change intensifies.

Our targets and plans

We haven't set any specific targets in this area, as it's so poorly defined at present, but we're going to be sending out questionnaires to our top 50 suppliers to understand their commitments relating to biodiversity and water management as a starting point, and this questionnaire will include a question on regenerative principles.

What can you do?

You can learn more about this by reading our blogs and listening to podcasts on our website. Simply search for 'regenerative' to find them.

There's also lots of information online – there is more and more activity going on in this space, in terms of growing interest in regenerative practices, and commercial partnerships between customers and suppliers.

Do let us know that you're interested in sourcing from suppliers that use regenerative principles and we'll do our best to help you.

Useful to know

A key challenge of regenerative agriculture is that at present, there's no 'standard' or accreditation, in the way that exists for Fairtrade or Organic.

Principles can be implemented partially or inconsistently, so there is a huge potential for greenwash, as food suppliers are keen to exploit the growing interest in regenerative agriculture. This space is evolving continually however, so this is unlikely to stay the case for long.

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We hope you find this fact sheet helpful, we'd love your feedback using the QR code or by clicking here

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