

Can regenerative agriculture become agriculture's new mainstream?

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In an exclusive AgroSpectrum interview, Maggie Keith, fourth-generation steward of Foxhollow Farm, discusses the two-decade journey of land regeneration, the principles underpinning biodynamic agriculture, and why scaling regenerative farming requires more than certification—it demands a fundamental rethink of farm economics, food supply chains and agricultural policy



Regenerative agriculture has gained corporate sponsorship, investor interest and policy attention, but its growing popularity raises a difficult question: are food systems changing fundamentally, or is sustainability acquiring another marketable label? In this **exclusive AgroSpectrum interview, Maggie Keith, fourth-generation steward of Foxhollow Farm** offers a perspective shaped by two decades of land stewardship and a commitment to biodynamic farming. A passionate advocate for Biodynamic agriculture and a creative force in regenerative farming, Keith argues that soil regeneration cannot be separated from the health of livestock, farming communities and regional economies. Her experience challenges an agricultural model that often privileges seasonal yields and immediate returns over long-term biological resilience. She also addresses the debate surrounding biodynamics, distinguishing its broader ecological principles from practices that remain contested, and makes the case for combining traditional observation with scientific inquiry.

As regenerative agriculture attracts larger corporate and institutional investments, she highlights the importance of credible verification without imposing disproportionate costs and administrative burdens on farmers. Co-host of The Farmer and The Foodie and chair of The Berry Center Board, which champions small farmers and land stewardship, Keith also emphasises the need to rebuild regional processing, distribution and marketing infrastructure. Her central argument is that regenerative agriculture will become a durable model not when more companies adopt the terminology, but when farmers are economically rewarded for restoring the land and the systems around them make that restoration viable.

Regenerative agriculture has moved from the margins to the mainstream, yet biodynamic farming still divides opinion. Why do you think biodynamics continues to be viewed with skepticism despite a growing body of scientific evidence pointing to measurable improvements in soil health and ecosystem resilience ?

Regenerative agriculture has attracted considerable attention in recent years, partly because significant amounts of money are now flowing into the sector. Major food brands are investing in regenerative sourcing, companies are incorporating regenerative claims into their marketing strategies, and venture capital, private equity and government funding are increasingly entering the space. This attention has helped bring important agricultural practices into mainstream discussions, but it has also created a tendency to treat regenerative as a broad commercial label rather than a clearly defined set of ecological outcomes.

Biodynamic agriculture has developed along a somewhat different trajectory. It has maintained a more established, though comparatively quieter, following, particularly in the wine industry, where growers and winemakers have communicated its philosophy and practices over many years. Its principles extend beyond individual farming techniques to a wider understanding of the farm as a living organism, with soil, plants, animals and people functioning as interconnected parts of a whole.

Some of the skepticism surrounding biodynamics arises from aspects of this philosophy that are difficult to explain in conventional scientific or commercial language. Its spiritual dimension, its attention to lunar and celestial rhythms, and its understanding of the farm as a living organism can appear unfamiliar or overly specialised to people accustomed to evaluating agriculture primarily through measurable inputs and outputs.

Yet many of the underlying principles are rooted in agricultural wisdom that predates today's sustainability terminology. Observing natural cycles, building soil fertility, integrating livestock with crops, reducing dependence on external inputs and managing land in accordance with its ecological characteristics are all practices with wider relevance to sustainable farming.

I am less interested in arguing over terminology than in understanding what a farming system actually achieves. If we are building healthier soil, creating more resilient ecosystems and communities, and producing good, clean and fair food, we are moving agriculture in the right direction. The more productive debate is about outcomes, the integrity of the farming system and whether it can sustain both the land and the people who depend on it.

Foxhollow Farm's transformation from degraded, monoculture land to one of the few farms holding both Regenified Level 5 and Demeter Biodynamic certifications took two decades. Looking back, what were the pivotal decisions that fundamentally changed the trajectory of the land, and what did conventional farming overlook ?

The pivotal decision was to make a full commitment to Biodynamic agriculture and to build a farming community around a herd of cattle that could help restore the land. We did not approach the transition as a short-term sustainability initiative or as an experiment involving a handful of new practices. We committed to changing the entire farming system and rebuilding the relationships between the soil, livestock, plants and people.

That commitment required perseverance, but determination alone was not enough. My family was also willing to invest in the transition, and I recognise the importance of that financial support. Land restoration takes time, patience and resources. There were years when the returns were neither immediate nor easy to measure, and the benefits of rebuilding soil health could not

always be captured in the short-term economic indicators traditionally used to evaluate farm performance.

The experience taught us that changing agricultural practices is only one part of transforming a farm. We had to reconsider how the different components of the system interacted and what was required to maintain the health of the entire farming community. The cattle were not simply a production unit; they were part of the ecological cycle through which nutrients, pasture and soil fertility could be managed together.

What conventional farming had overlooked on this land was the relationship between soil, animals and people. Agricultural systems can become overly focused on what can be extracted from land in a particular season, without adequately accounting for the biological processes required to maintain its productive capacity over time.

Our commitment to soil health and to people ultimately created something larger than a certified production system. It helped build a model of farming, a way of life, a community and, eventually, a market around food produced in relationship with the land. The two-decade journey reinforced an important lesson: meaningful land regeneration is not a quick intervention but a sustained commitment to rebuilding the conditions that allow a farm to thrive.

Much of modern agriculture has been built around maximizing short-term productivity. Has the industry become too focused on yields per season and too disconnected from the long-term biological performance of the soil itself ?

Yes. Agriculture needs to think beyond the next growing season or financial quarter. We should be making decisions with a generational perspective, recognising that the condition of the land today will influence the opportunities available to the people who farm it tomorrow.

At Foxhollow, even during board meetings, we ask what decisions are best not only for the business today but also for the people who will steward the land after us. Financial viability remains essential. A farm must generate sufficient returns to sustain its operations, support its workers and invest in its future. But profitability alone cannot provide a complete measure of success.

We also need to ask whether the soil is becoming healthier, whether the land is more resilient, whether biodiversity is being supported and whether the next generation will inherit greater fertility, opportunity and productive capacity than we received.

When agricultural performance is judged primarily by the quantity of output produced in a single season, the biological costs of achieving that output can be overlooked. Soil fertility, ecological relationships and the capacity of land to withstand environmental stress develop over time. Their value may not be fully reflected in annual production figures, even though they influence the farm's long-term viability.

If agriculture optimises only for the present season, it risks borrowing from the future. The objective should not be to choose between productivity and soil health, but to develop forms of productivity that can sustain themselves across generations.

That requires a broader definition of agricultural success—one that recognises the importance of immediate farm economics while also measuring whether the natural resources supporting production are being maintained or improved. The real achievement is to leave the land in a condition that allows future farmers to produce food without inheriting an ever-growing ecological and economic burden.

Your approach emphasizes that soil is a living biological system rather than simply a growing medium. As climate change places increasing pressure on agricultural productivity, do you believe soil biology will become agriculture's most valuable asset over the next decade ?

Yes. Soil biology is foundational to the future of agriculture, particularly as farmers confront increasing climatic uncertainty. But healthy soil cannot be considered in isolation from the people responsible for maintaining it. The future of farming depends on investing in both the biological health of the land and the economic viability of the farming communities that steward it.

We need to move beyond treating soil as simply a medium in which crops grow. A farm is a living system, and its long-term performance depends on the relationships among soil, vegetation, livestock, water and the people managing these resources. When these relationships are neglected, farmers can become increasingly dependent on external interventions to sustain production.

Climate change makes this interconnected approach even more important. Farmers need production systems capable of responding to changing conditions, while retaining the capacity to maintain their land's productive potential over time. Improving soil biology should therefore be part of a broader strategy for strengthening agricultural resilience rather than a standalone technical objective.

However, farmers cannot be expected to shoulder the entire cost of this transition. Consumer demand can help create markets for food produced through regenerative practices, but market signals alone will not be sufficient. We also need funding mechanisms and public policies that recognise the value of healthy soils, viable farms and strong regional food systems.

The central challenge is to align ecological objectives with economic realities. Investing in soil health will have a lasting impact only when farmers have the resources, knowledge and commercial opportunities needed to continue that work. Healthy soil and healthy farming communities must advance together.

Many regenerative practices are now being adopted by large food companies and institutional investors. As regenerative agriculture becomes commercialized, how do you ensure the movement remains rooted in measurable ecological outcomes rather than becoming another sustainability label driven by marketing ?

Third-party certification can play an important role in keeping regenerative agriculture accountable. It can help connect claims about farming practices to defined standards and measurable outcomes, giving buyers and consumers a basis for evaluating whether a product or production system meets the requirements it claims to satisfy.

However, accountability mechanisms must also be practical for farmers. Certification and verification should provide credible evidence of progress without creating disproportionate paperwork, administrative complexity or costs. If the systems intended to encourage better farming become too burdensome, they risk disadvantaging the very producers whose practices they are designed to support.

We need to strike a balance between maintaining the integrity of regenerative claims and ensuring that farmers can participate without being overwhelmed by compliance requirements. Verification should be meaningful, proportionate and designed around the realities of farm management.

There is also a larger ambition at stake. My hope is that regenerative agriculture eventually becomes the standard rather than remaining a specialty category that commands attention because it is different from conventional production. Its principles should increasingly inform how agriculture is practised, how supply chains are organised and how food businesses assess the long-term performance of their sourcing systems.

That transition will require credible standards, but it will also require commercial arrangements that make regenerative production viable. A label cannot substitute for changes in the way farms operate or the way markets reward their efforts.

Ultimately, the objective is not to create another premium sustainability segment. It is to make regenerative farming a credible, practical and economically sustainable way of producing food, with verification serving as a means of accountability rather than an end in itself.

Foxhollow operates as a closed-loop ecosystem where livestock, pasture and soil function together. What does this systems-based approach teach us about the future of agriculture at a time when farming has become increasingly specialized and fragmented ?

It reminds me of the old song about the woman who swallowed a fly: one intervention leads to another, and before long, an increasingly complicated system has been constructed to solve problems that the system itself helped create. Agriculture can follow a similar path when individual components are managed separately and the relationships among them are overlooked.

A farm should function more like an ecosystem. At Foxhollow, cattle contribute to the soil, the soil supports pasture, and the pasture feeds the cattle. These relationships are fundamental to the way we understand the farm. When they are maintained and managed well, the farm has a stronger basis for recycling nutrients, supporting soil fertility and reducing its dependence on external inputs.

This does not mean that every farm must follow an identical model. Agricultural systems need to respond to their local conditions, available resources and production objectives. But the broader lesson is that farming should not lose sight of the connections between the components that sustain it.

Modern agriculture has become increasingly specialised and fragmented. Crop production, livestock management, processing, distribution and marketing are often treated as separate activities, even though decisions in one part of the system affect the others. A more integrated approach would reconnect soil, livestock, crops, farmers, processors and regional markets.

The benefits extend beyond the farm itself. Stronger relationships among producers, processors and local markets can create opportunities for farmers to retain greater value from their work while helping communities build closer connections with the food they consume.

Most importantly, we need more farmers farming. Rebuilding agriculture requires not only better production practices but also the people, infrastructure and commercial relationships that allow those practices to endure. A resilient agricultural system must work as an ecological whole and as an economic community.

Biodynamic farming incorporates practices that many dismiss as unconventional, including farming by lunar cycles. In your experience, how should agriculture balance traditional ecological knowledge with modern scientific validation, and why do you believe the two are often presented as opposing philosophies ?

I do not believe traditional ecological knowledge and modern science need to be treated as separate or opposing ways of understanding agriculture. Some of the most valuable knowledge on a farm comes from careful observation over time, from noticing how the land responds to different conditions and learning to recognise patterns in the natural world.

Observation is one of my favourite ways of understanding and validating that a farm is alive. You begin to notice relationships and patterns in the soil, animals, weather, plants and changing seasons. These observations help farmers develop a deeper understanding of their land and make decisions informed by its particular characteristics rather than relying exclusively on standardised prescriptions.

Science can help us measure and explain what we observe, while traditional knowledge often teaches us what to pay attention to in the first place. The two approaches can complement one another when we remain open to examining evidence, testing assumptions and learning from experience.

Biodynamic agriculture encompasses a broader philosophy of farming, including practices and ideas that are not all supported by the same level of scientific evidence. It is important to distinguish between its ecological principles, which overlap with wider approaches to soil health and integrated farming, and specific claims that require further investigation. Respecting traditional knowledge does not mean suspending critical inquiry, just as scientific validation should not require us to dismiss every practice that originated outside formal research.

To me, the strongest agriculture emerges when we remain curious enough to use both observation and scientific inquiry. We should be willing to learn from the land, measure what can be measured and continue asking questions about what we do not yet fully understand.

Agriculture is increasingly expected to deliver not only food, but also climate resilience, biodiversity restoration and carbon sequestration. Should farmers be compensated for these ecosystem services in the same way they are paid for agricultural commodities, and what would need to change for that to become reality ?

Yes, absolutely. If farmers are being asked to build soil, protect water, restore biodiversity, sequester carbon and strengthen climate resilience, those public benefits should have economic value. Farmers are not simply producing agricultural commodities; their management decisions can also influence the health of ecosystems on which entire communities depend.

The challenge is that the market does not always adequately reward these wider benefits. A farmer may invest time, labour and resources in restoring soil fertility or improving biodiversity without receiving a corresponding return through the price of the crops or livestock produced. If these outcomes are important to society, we need mechanisms that recognise their value and help farmers maintain the practices that deliver them.

Public policy has an important role to play, but we must also rethink the time horizons over which agricultural support is designed. I am drawn to the idea behind Wendell Berry and Wes Jackson's proposed 50-Year Farm Bill because it recognises that rebuilding soil and farming communities requires a much longer perspective than conventional policy cycles often allow.

Ecological restoration does not always fit neatly within short-term funding programmes or annual performance targets. Farmers need continuity and confidence that the investments they make today will be supported over the years required to realise their benefits. Policy frameworks should therefore be capable of supporting long-term stewardship alongside the immediate economic needs of agricultural production.

Consumer demand also matters. Markets can reward farmers who produce food through regenerative practices, while public funding can help recognise benefits that extend beyond the individual buyer or farm. The farmers who have been willing to experiment and think outside conventional production models have already undertaken considerable work and accepted significant risks.

We now have examples of regenerative farms demonstrating that land restoration and viable food production can coexist. The next step is to build the policy frameworks, markets and funding structures that reward farmers for caring for the land while allowing them to earn a sustainable livelihood. If society expects farmers to deliver environmental benefits, those expectations must be matched by credible economic support.

After documenting the recovery of this land over twenty years, what is the single biggest misconception policymakers, investors and even farmers themselves still hold about soil regeneration? Looking ahead, what would convince you that regenerative agriculture has truly shifted from being an alternative practice to becoming the dominant model for food production ?

The biggest misconception is that regenerative agriculture is a niche activity. It is not. This is real agriculture, and it can produce food, support viable farm businesses and restore the land at the same time. The question should not be whether regenerative farming belongs at the margins of the industry, but what it will take to make it an integral part of how food is produced.

One of the important lessons from our experience at Foxhollow is that regenerating land cannot be separated from building a viable agricultural business and a community around it. The practices on the farm matter enormously, but their long-term success also depends on whether farmers can access markets, generate sufficient income and secure the infrastructure needed to continue operating.

I will know regenerative agriculture has truly become the dominant model when we have strong regional food supply chains supporting it. That means more farmers farming, more regional processing and distribution capacity, and more food being consumed closer to where it is grown. It also means creating commercial relationships that allow producers to retain value from their work rather than leaving them exposed to the costs and risks of a fragmented supply chain.

Regional infrastructure is particularly important because a farm cannot operate in isolation from the wider food economy. Even when a producer has restored soil health and developed a viable production system, limited access to processing, storage, distribution or reliable buyers can constrain growth. Without those connections, regenerative farming may remain economically vulnerable despite its ecological benefits.

The transition therefore requires more than encouraging individual farmers to adopt new practices. Food businesses, policymakers, investors and consumers must help build the conditions in which regenerative producers can thrive. That includes supporting farmers, strengthening regional markets and ensuring that the economic value of land stewardship is recognised.

Ultimately, I believe the practices matter, but the infrastructure has to change too. If we want regenerative agriculture to operate at scale, we must rebuild the regional food systems that allow regenerative farmers to thrive. The real measure of progress will be whether restoring the land becomes a practical and economically sustainable foundation for mainstream food production.

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