

# Principles to Inform Regenerative Agriculture Recommendations

Prepared by the Regenerative Agriculture and Justice Working Group, convened by the American Sustainable Business Network

The focus of these principles is to foster and support a regenerative and resilient economic model that promotes support of farmers and producers, with special support for farmers and producers of color and of smaller operations, and ultimately equity throughout the value chain. The agricultural sector has been plagued with numerous ecological, social, economic crises and there is a need to transition to a more resilient, equitable and regenerative system to ensure viability of our global farmlands in the long run. These principles provide the right pathways to promote regenerative agriculture whose outcomes not only protect and restore our ecosystems but in doing so also makes the agriculture system both healthier and equally profitable for farmers, business and consumers.

These principles are designed to guide the greater community in finding leverage points, incentives and overall system design/structure that will assist building policy that sufficiently incentivizes regenerative practice and disincentivizes extractive and risk-prone industrial practices. These principles are not only meant to address these crises at a ground level but are also meant to address issues of scale for years to come.

Another essential component of a regenerative economy is equity for all people and workers related to a community and supply chain. For too long now, U.S. farmers and producers have been carrying the brunt of risk and have been producing at a loss with too many struggling to make a living or declaring bankruptcy. These principles emphasize a regenerative economy that diversifies revenue streams, creates more stable markets, ensures labor rights and empowers producers to become a long-term and equitable part of the system, particularly focusing on marginalized and disadvantaged groups of the agricultural community.

Now, a holistic transition towards regenerative agriculture to produce food, materials and products in a manner that creates equity and economic resilience while supporting a healthy planet is necessary. The practice of and transition to regenerative agriculture is a journey with many pathways. Producers come from a variety of backgrounds and such a journey will be different for everyone. Meeting this challenge will require broad collaboration across public and private sectors, including governments, producers, workers, retailers, consumers and more. This Regenerative Agriculture and Justice Working Group has convened to create a platform for just such a collaboration. The following principles are the tenets that guide the recommendations and actions of this working group.

## **Principle 1 - Ecological Regeneration**

Regenerative agriculture and other similar approaches are vital for rebuilding the health of our natural systems and can play a key role in reversing the climate crisis. Agriculture can become a solution in the planet's many pressing and interconnected ecological crises, if policies and market-based solutions do the following:

- Expand farming practices, using a place-based approach, that promote soil health, conservation and rehabilitation of ecosystem services (including soil carbon sequestration and water holding capacity, nutrient cycling, biodiversity, resistance to pests/disease, etc.).
- Use practices like minimal and no-till, cover crops, and compost application to improve soil health on agricultural lands to sequester carbon and combat climate change, while maintaining that soil carbon sequestration is not an alternative to reducing emissions across the economy, but rather a potentially highly effective tool for mitigation and adaptation.
- Move animals out of highly destructive concentrated feeding operations and put them in regenerative systems using managed grazing and reincorporation of livestock in cropping systems.

## **Principle 2 - Economic Resilience**

Achieving resilience in the food and agricultural systems means ensuring secure livelihoods for producers and workers and reducing supply-chain interruptions that threaten food and materials access for businesses, consumers, and communities. To ensure economic resilience we will advance solutions that:

- Improve incomes for producers by reducing reliance on inputs through improved soil health and ecological regeneration and create access to new markets and revenue streams, including patient capital.
- Address agribusiness concentration and monopolies that drive up input costs, drive farm-gate prices lower, create poverty in rural communities, create supply chains prone to disruption; and that engage in land grabs of small, struggling farmers/producers especially people of color
- Invest in regional processing, marketing and distribution to rebuild community wealth and stimulate business activity in struggling rural communities
- Ensure secure and affordable access to land for young, beginning, discriminated against, and tenant farmers, discriminated against, which is a necessity for small- and medium-scale farmers to be able to make regenerative investments in their working lands
- Ensure widespread and equal access to healthy nutritious food and safe fiber to improve health outcomes, lower morbidity and greatly lower health care costs for the entire system while addressing some of the health disparities made visible by the Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Principle 3 - Justice, Equity, and Inclusion**

Current agricultural policy and market structures favor large-scale industrial producers. BIPOC, female, and smaller-scale producers have faced discrimination in accessing government farming programs and markets, and for the most part, still do not have equal access. Many of these farmers and their ancestors practiced regenerative agriculture for centuries before the term existed. Many of their practices and methods and ancestral knowledge are crucial to understanding regenerative processes, especially bioregionally, and their knowledge should be shared and compensated. Workers throughout the food and agricultural system, often immigrants, are some of the most underpaid and under-protected workers in our economy. It is important to center the voices of the marginalized and oppressed and including all stakeholders is important because so many movements in the past have fallen apart for failure to include key groups. We must level the playing field and ensure resource and market access for marginalized, including smaller-scale producers. We will ensure that regenerative agriculture works for everyone involved by doing the following:

- The marginalized who have been most negatively affected by policies and market structures are not only "included" but supported/funded to be in full co-leadership in formulation of solutions and policy proposals. No policies will be adopted or solutions implemented without broad and deep grassroots/base support and leadership.
- Address ongoing effects of racial injustice and discrimination from the USDA, land grant colleges and universities, lending banks, and other institutions with solutions directing resources to those affected and expanding equitable land access
- Ensure equitable access to any incentives for regenerative management
- Ensure the transition to regenerative agriculture is relevant and applicable for different production types; recognizing BIPOC, women, and small-scale producers are more likely to incorporate non-typical approaches and practices.
- Protect workers' rights as human rights, including the right to freedom of association, to organize a union, and to bargain collectively free from retaliation in order to ensure that food workers receive a living wage and safe and healthy working conditions throughout the food and agricultural materials supply chain.
- Support solutions that do not shift burden or harms onto vulnerable or marginalized communities
- Develop programs for the repatriation of productive agricultural lands and water rights currently held by federal and state governments to their rightful, original indigenous owners.

### **Principle 4 - Shared responsibility**

The food and agricultural system is essential for our economy and our health. Risks and opportunities in agriculture and food systems issues are to be found in the contributions of governments, producers, farmers, young, beginning, immigrant, BIPOC farmers, lenders, investors, insurers, food/CPG companies, retailers, and consumers. All stakeholders should be included in co-creating a new system.

- Risk management is essential for advancing regenerative agriculture. There is a role to play for private and public insurers, lenders, and investors, and land owners.

- Governments at the federal, state, Native Nation, and local level provide the regulatory framework and incentive structure for the infrastructure, standards, guidance, stakeholder engagement and enforcement to ensure that producers and consumers all participate in the regenerative agriculture economy.
- Producers have conventionally taken on the most risk of all the parties in food and fiber supply chains. This will need to change moving forward to encourage innovation and taking the risk of adopting new practices. To the extent that various certifications align with regenerative principles and practices, the burden of certification costs should not be held solely by farmers and producers. Other players, especially governments, should pick up these costs.
- To ensure equity, large industrial producers, like Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations, should be required to adhere to environmental regulations rather than receiving payments from programs (like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program) that are meant to assist farmers in implementing conservation and regenerative practices
- Businesses, including retailers, restaurants, food and other CPG companies, institutional purchasers, material producers, and many others, must work with producers and consumers to ensure reliable markets and incentive structures to transition land management.
- The public should have equal access to transparent and verifiable information that allows them to make purchasing decisions to support regenerative producers and supply chains.

## **Principle 5 - Demonstrate Transparent Supply Chains and Responsible Governance**

Common understandings and expectations are crucial for mobilizing the resources necessary to confront this problem as well as enabling individuals to make sustainable decisions. At the same time, we cannot manage what we do not measure, and everything from innovation to enforcement will rely on information collection up and down the agricultural value chain.

**Educating and Empowering People:** There is a shared responsibility among parties to provide education and/or to help promote the acceptance of regenerative agriculture. A transparent system allows all parties to make decisions that support sustainable outcomes, which, when aggregated, are a crucial component of success. Transparency also builds trust in the system.

- **Accurate Measurement:** Performance by all participants in the measurement of ecological outcomes. These measurements should form the basis for an ongoing assessment and innovation process that identifies gaps and deploys resources that support the successful development of a transition to regenerative agriculture for ecological, economic, and social outcomes, understanding that these results may not become immediately apparent, but that regenerative agriculture, in seeking to undo harms to our soil and systems, may take several years to show desired results.
- “True Cost Accounting” methods should be used to determine measurements for all measurement frameworks.
- **Enforcement:** A transparent system with clear standards and performance metrics will make system abuse possible to prosecute in proportion to the extent of violation.

- We aspire to a marketplace of products made from safe and healthy ingredients. To this end, all stakeholders have a fundamental right to know the chemicals in products and the functions of those chemicals. Of particular concern is the presence of chemicals that may harm human health or the environment at any stage of a product's life cycle.

## **Principle 6 - Scalable and Systemic Change**

Incentivization of the various pathways towards regenerative agriculture - The practice of and transition to regenerative agriculture is a journey, we recognize that producers come from a variety of backgrounds and that journey will be different for everyone.

- We will encourage a variety of economic impact incentives and upfront capital systems for producers to transition including procurement preferences, lending, grants, forward contracts, crop insurance discounts or credits, and ecosystem service markets.
- We will encourage all producers, no matter their size or type, to adopt regenerative practices and continue a transition towards a more holistic regenerative approach.
- We will also work with alternative economic structures (e.g., cooperative business structures and land management, barter systems, and circular economies) to support regenerative agriculture and justice.