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# Are Corporate Claims of Regenerative Agriculture Real?



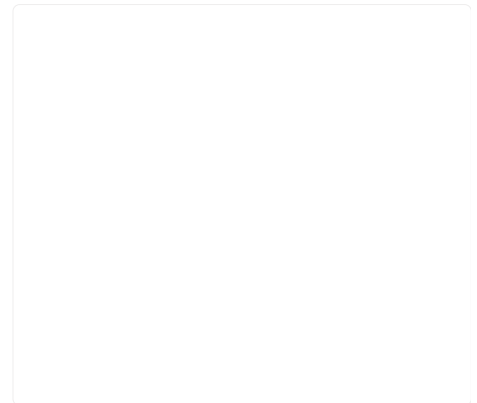
By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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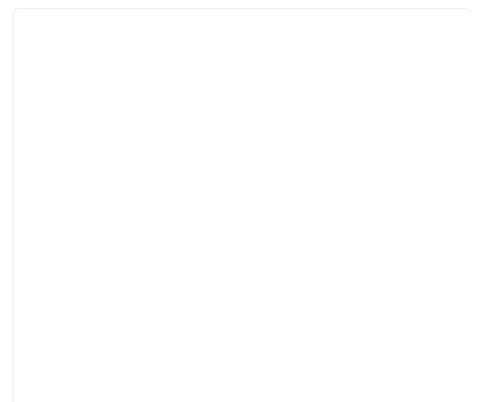
Regenerative agriculture could save the world. Or at least it belongs in the toolbox to help reduce and reverse climate change. EarthDay.org chose it as [a major theme](#) for their 2021 campaigns because so few people are familiar with this important strategy.

But like so many good ideas, corporate marketing teams are already coopting regenerative agriculture into a meaningless buzzword. What is regenerative agriculture really? And how



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can you as a consumer separate the green from the [greenwashed](#)?

## Regenerative Agriculture

Like other sustainable agriculture movements, regenerative agriculture focuses on the health of the soil. Conventional, agrochemical-based farming methods' impacts on [soil health](#) are well documented: erosion, diminished tilth, and destruction of microbiotic communities.

Globally, more than 90% of [conventionally farmed soils](#) are thinning and a third of Earth's soils are [already degraded](#). Sustaining soil is not enough – it's necessary to regenerate it.

## Soil Schism

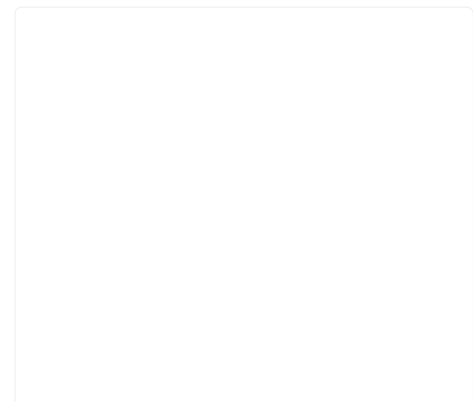
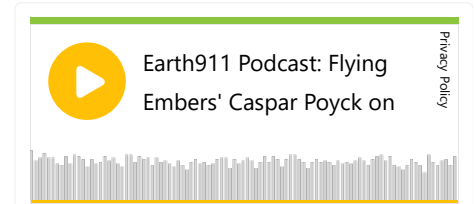
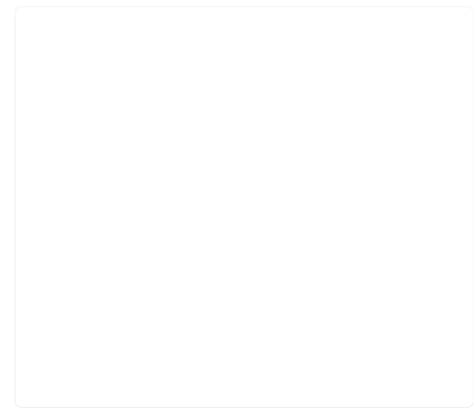
While everyone can agree that soil [restoration](#) is at the heart of regenerative agriculture, it is a fairly new movement that lacks the widely recognized [standards of organic farming](#). The new system, [Regenerative Organic Certified](#), is still fine-tuning its standards and has only issued a handful of certifications. There are two competing approaches to regenerative agriculture.

The [first approach](#) considers regenerative agriculture to be a step beyond organic farming: a holistic, systems-wide reinvention of agriculture that will improve soil and ecosystem health. It will also increase productivity, reduce poverty, and improve nutrition worldwide.

A second school of thought takes a more focused approach that emphasizes [agricultural carbon sequestration](#) as a climate change strategy. This approach does not necessarily eschew all chemical inputs or expect structural industry changes. It only requires carbon capture and erosion control to qualify as “regenerative agriculture.”

## How It Works

Despite these philosophical differences, [certain farming practices](#) are universally acknowledged to be part of regenerative agriculture. These practices [overlap significantly](#) with organic farming techniques.



1. Promotion of biodiversity – This principle is shared by all sustainable agriculture systems. In regenerative agriculture, cover cropping and crop rotation are the primary strategies.
2. Tillage avoidance – Tilling breaks down soil structure, which releases carbon and encourages erosion. Many organic farmers already take a no-till approach. However, others routinely till as an alternative to weeding or to incorporate cover crops into the soil as fertilizer.
3. Reducing agrochemicals – Artificial fertilizers and pesticides disrupt soil biomes and can create soil nutrient imbalances, leading to downstream pollution and delaying the buildup of soil organic matter that is central to regenerative agriculture. However, some regenerative agriculturists may use agrochemicals under certain conditions.
4. Intensive grazing management – Feedlots and traditional grazing have huge environmental impacts. Intensive grazing management is a system of rangeland rotation that minimizes the time animals spend in one area, allowing each grazing area sufficient time for recovery before reintroducing animals.



Some regenerative agriculture techniques include not tilling the soil, planting cover crops, and rotating crops. Here, soybeans are growing in the residue of past corn and rye crops on a no-till field.

## Who Practices Regenerative Agriculture

Corporations have been faster to pick up on the regenerative agriculture concept than the average consumer has. In fact, many of their claims predate the nascent certification system. So with no third-party standards, it's healthy to

approach corporate claims of regeneration with a dose of skepticism. Let's look at some companies making regenerative agriculture claims.

## General Mills

[General Mills defines](#) regenerative agriculture as a “holistic, principles-based approach to farming and ranching that seeks to strengthen ecosystems and community resilience,” with an emphasis on soil carbon sequestration. With more than 100 food brands sold in more than 100 countries, they could make a tremendous impact. However, so far it looks like General Mills' commitment to regenerative agriculture is best described as “testing the waters.” They have spent \$5.5 million on soil research and a handful of pilot projects. That isn't much for a company that earned [\\$17.63 billion](#) in 2020.

## Joyce Farms

Joyce Farms is a family-owned meat producer based in North Carolina. They partner with other farms to offer chicken, beef, pork, and other meats. Joyce Farms is not certified organic. But regenerative agriculture as a system that exceeds organic standards is the [guiding philosophy](#) for all their operations. Many of their products are [Global Animal Partnership \(GAP\)](#) Step 4 certified or [Animal Welfare Approved](#) by A Greener World.

## White Leaf Provisions

[White Leaf Provisions](#) is a family-owned baby food business that earns all the certifications – organic, GMO-free, biodynamic. This last certification is the foundation of their regenerative agriculture claims. Although the international Demeter Biodynamic certification predates the term regenerative agriculture by decades, it is consistent with the philosophy and shares the same primary practices.

## New Leaf Tree Syrups

[New Leaf Tree Syrups](#) uses the sap of maple and other native trees to make syrup. They also cultivate and sustainably gather a variety of forest foods that are usually foraged, including ginseng, mushrooms, and wild berries. Such specialty products won't make a significant impact on the carbon footprint of any individual breakfast table. But generating a line of organic certified agricultural products that relies on healthy forests instead of annual crops is a carbon-smart preservation strategy.

## Cargill

Cargill owns half a dozen brands (including Purina) that provide animal feed. Since [animal agriculture](#) is responsible for 14.5% of all anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions, and feed accounts for 45% of that, [Cargill](#) could eliminate a lot of emissions. Their most significant regenerative agriculture effort involves working with farmers to advance regenerative agriculture practices across [10 million acres](#) of North American cropland by 2030. (The U.S. contains roughly [900 million acres](#) of cropland.) This effort is accompanied by a handful of pilot projects around the world.

## Walmart

Infamous for earning the [second-largest environmental fine](#) in history, last year, Walmart [announced a goal](#) to become a regenerative company. Their goal is net-zero emissions by 2040 and restoration of 50 million acres and 1 million square miles of ocean by 2030. That's great news if they follow through. The company does seem to have improved on its historically bad environmental performance, especially in waste prevention (they now divert 80% of waste from disposal). But until Walmart can show results, it's too soon to tell if regeneration will really guide Walmart's actions or if it's just a distraction from its lengthy [rap sheet](#) of corporate irresponsibility.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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