

Sustainable Vs. Regenerative

Maybe it Doesn't Matter So Much What the Word is, but Who's Using it

By Brian DeVore

When the word “regenerative” is being tossed around freely by the world’s largest agribusiness, one takes notice. There it was, on the front page of the Sept. 17 *Star Tribune* business section, a lengthy story on how Cargill Inc. is dedicated to helping farmers convert 10 million acres of row crop farmland to “regenerative practices.”

There are plenty of questions around whether this initiative, which will supposedly focus on helping farmers adopt such practices as no-till, cover cropping, and diverse crop rotations, is just another example of a large agribusiness firm doing some creative “greenwashing” — taking on the appearance of caring for the environment even while it does long-lasting damage to the land.

But this is just one more example of how the term “regenerative” is gaining traction. These days, it seems like the media — agricultural and otherwise — is full of references to how farmers are using innovative ways to regenerate a farm’s natural processes, thus reducing reliance on those practices that harm the very elements we rely on to produce food — soil, water, the carbon cycle.

But this isn’t just a brainchild of a savvy corporate marketing department — “regenerative” is now part of the agricultural lexicon. In fact, in recent years farmers and others have been using it as a substitute for the word “sustainable.” This hits home for the Land Stewardship Project, which has a mission to “foster an ethic of stewardship for farmland, to promote sustainable agriculture, and to develop healthy communities.” We define sustainable agriculture as a system that is “ecologically sound, socially just, financially viable, and humane.”

But many farmers interested in a more ecologically-based agriculture are saying it isn’t good enough to just “sustain” our land — we need methods that “regenerate” and bring it back to life, thus making it better than ever. I recently talked to a pasture-based livestock farmer who frequently uses social media to promote her product to consumers. She told me that when she uses the term “regenerative,” her posts trend noticeably upward — a sign this word resonates not just with farmers and agribusiness public

relations departments.

This has spawned a bit of a debate over which term better fits innovative, environmentally-friendly farming systems: “sustainable” or “regenerative?” In some cases, the debate has gotten a bit contentious, with at least one Congressional ag leader dismissing the term “regenerative” as a bit too fringy for his tastes.

Well, it turns out this is similar to a debate Dana Jackson was in the midst of over four decades ago. With her former husband, Wes Jackson, Dana co-founded the Land Institute in 1976; she was on LSP’s board of directors and eventually served as the organization’s associate director. During the past several decades, she has written and spoken frequently about ways to advance and support a more sustainable form of agriculture.

In a recent LSP *Ear to the Ground* podcast (see sidebar), Dana talks about how she and others back in the 1970s were casting about for a term that described a more “permanent” agriculture, rather than one based on short-term mining of resources. The late Robert Rodale, whose family spawned decades of organic agriculture research through the Rodale Institute, was in favor of the term “regenerative.” However, others argued that “sustainable,” which had long been used to describe ecologically-based farming, offered a broader definition of the type of system we should be striving for: support of the land, as well as people and rural communities.

“We were talking systemic agriculture,” Dana says. “We weren’t just focused on systems of soil regeneration.”

Eventually, the term “sustainable” won out, mostly because, as Wes Jackson quipped, it was already “loose in the culture.” Now, “regenerative” is back, and in a big way. One often sees the word mentioned in connection with a particular soil health practice, which could in a sense narrow its ability to be applied to the big picture view of a type of farming that, again, does not undermine the very elements it relies on, including people. Words matter, and having a clear definition to work from is important, especially now that we’re increasingly aware

of how our conventional food and farm system undermines the very fabric of society.

But there are signs the word’s definition is becoming broader. For example, the Regenerative Agriculture Foundation puts it this way: “...any practice that makes the land, community and bottom-line healthier year after year is regenerative.” Also, let’s keep in mind that even if someone is focused on building the health of the soil, that’s not exactly taking a reductionist view of life. Healthy soil produces healthy land and healthy food, which eventually supports healthy communities. That’s pretty big picture. We could do a lot worse than promoting a type of agriculture that does right by the world beneath our feet. And if non-farmers seeking clean water, carbon sequestration, and just, healthy economies support soil-building systems with their food dollar and through policy changes, then that’s sustainable long into the future.

Precise, technically correct definitions aren’t always a prerequisite for spawning positive change — words that fire the imagination are important

too. When I hear a farmer using the term “regenerative” to describe a practice or system, I detect

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a spark that isn’t present when the word “sustainable” or “conservation” is used. Partly that’s because the word hints at life and activity, and that’s exciting. It’s similar to how the term “soil health” connotes a biologically-based path for putting farmers in charge of their futures.

So what to do when an agribusiness giant co-opts the word? That puts the onus on groups like LSP to show what real, on-the-ground regenerative agriculture looks like every day. And that means supporting and promoting the very people who have to make it a reality.

As Dana Jackson says, “Maybe that’s one of the ways regenerative has the advantage now in that it’s being spread among the right people to make changes — the farmers.” □

Brian DeVore is the editor of the Land Stewardship Letter.

Give it a Listen

In episode 245 of the Land Stewardship Project’s *Ear to the Ground* podcast, Dana Jackson discusses the debate over “sustainable” and “regenerative” and describes the time agribusiness folks started walking out of the room in the middle of one of her talks: www.landstewardshipproject.org/posts/podcast/1325.