

# Well-Fed: A Roadmap To A Sustainable Food System That Works For All



## Our food system is broken

A handful of agribusiness corporations stand between our nation's 2 million farmers and 330 million eaters.<sup>1</sup> Corporate consolidation drives down farm income, raises food prices and funnels money out of rural communities.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, industrial agricultural pollutes our air and water, harms biodiversity and fuels climate change.<sup>3</sup>

Agribusinesses insist that this highly-consolidated, ecologically-depleting farming system is the only way to feed the world.<sup>4</sup> But this is simply false. A growing body of research affirms that a shift to regenerative and organic practices can boost yield, increase food access, build soil and reduce climate emissions. Family farmers need to be at the center of this transformation.<sup>5</sup>

## From extractive to regenerative food systems

There's no unifying definition of "regenerative agriculture," with the term being promoted by activists and industry alike. We use the term "regenerative" to describe food systems that: invest in the long-term health and fertility of farmland; build soil and prioritize soil health; and rely on natural rather than synthetic inputs. They embody these principles along each step of the food supply chain — investing in local economies, providing farmers and food chain workers with living wages and safe working conditions, and addressing racial and economic injustice.<sup>6</sup>

Some regenerative advocates market it as a new concept that goes beyond the limits of organic agriculture.<sup>7</sup> This is a disservice to the organic community and its decades of work in strengthening the integrity of the organic label, and increasing federal funding for organic research and adoption. It also erases centuries of contributions from Indigenous and other farmers of color who farmed regeneratively long before the term emerged.<sup>8</sup>

Some of the farms featured here are certified organic, whereas others have not sought certification. What unites them is a holistic method of farming that seeks to regenerate, rather than extract, natural resources.

**Livestock play vital roles on regenerative farms.** Before industrial agriculture took root in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most U.S. farms were diverse operations raising both crops and livestock. In fact, extensive research shows that "livestock provide the missing element needed to develop sustainable systems."<sup>9</sup>

For example, Keenbell Farm near Rockville, Virginia embraces the symbiotic relationship between livestock and crops. Keenbell raises grains as well as cows, chickens and pigs — all on pasture. The livestock provide manure fertilizer for the grain crops. In turn, they feed the chickens and pigs a blend of grain byproducts — one more way to "keep the closed loop."<sup>10</sup>

Livestock can also be raised on land less suitable for crop production, including semi-arid grasslands, where cattle meet the ecological needs that bison once provided.<sup>11</sup> The

Rider ranch near Alexander, North Dakota manages its 200-plus cow/calf operation through regenerative grazing. The cattle feed on pasture and forage, avoiding the need for grain feed produced on chemical-dependent monocultures.<sup>12</sup> Grass-finished operations like these also have the potential to reduce or even eliminate carbon emissions, and in some instances are carbon sinks.<sup>13</sup>

**Regenerative farmers are soil farmers.** “My goal is to use the animals, the crops, the forage as tools to manage the soil,” says CJ of Keenbell Farm. Through regenerative management, Keenbell restored a degraded piece of farmland previously leased to a conventional grain farmer, eliminating erosion and increasing the soil’s organic matter.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the Rider ranch carefully manages its herd to allow the pasture to recover between grazing, leading to significant improvement in the soil’s water retention capacity.<sup>15</sup>

In eastern Washington, Jill and Richard of Pure Éire Dairy pursued organic certification because they believe in its principles of building healthy soil and ecosystems. Their dairy herd feeds on pasture during eastern Washington’s long growing season, and are fed grasses and forage on-site during the winter — thereby avoiding grain feed grown on soil-depleting monocultures. In turn, the cows enrich the soil with their manure.<sup>16</sup>

**Diversity builds resilience.** Industrial agriculture encourages specialization. But planting the same crop year after year makes farms more susceptible to plant pests and economic losses. In contrast, smaller, more diverse farms spread economic risks by producing multiple products, and can more easily adapt to supply chain disruptions.<sup>17</sup>

For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic dealt economic blows to farms of all sizes. However, some smaller farms were able to weather these storms thanks to their diversity in products and markets.<sup>18</sup> GRAISE Farm near Minneapolis, Minnesota sells pasture-based meat directly to customers, and duck eggs to co-ops and restaurants across the region. At the onset of the pandemic, GRAISE continued to process livestock since it relies on smaller slaughterhouses — not the crowded mega-slaughterhouses that became COVID-19 hotspots.<sup>19</sup> Master Blend Family Farms, a North Carolina hog operation, shifted from serving restaurants to selling smaller cuts out of its on-farm shop, along with produce grown onsite — the “saving grace” that kept revenue flowing during the pandemic.<sup>20</sup>

Diversity in crop seeds and livestock breeds is similarly important for resilience and food security.<sup>21</sup> Flowering Tree Permaculture Institute in northern New Mexico plants traditional Pueblo crops that are at risk of extinction, and



saves seeds in its seed bank. The Institute encourages the next generation to connect with Pueblo traditions and land, including through sharing seeds with schoolchildren and planting ceremonial corn on communal plots.<sup>22</sup> Seeds developed to respond to specific geographical conditions are essential in helping farmers adapt to the changing climate.

## We need food hubs to connect farmers to eaters

Direct sales and farmers markets are important but not enough; we must also connect local farms to the grocery stores and restaurants where consumers spend the majority of their food dollars.<sup>23</sup> Regional food hubs can play a vital role, aiding smaller farms with distribution and marketing of their products so they can reach new markets that would otherwise be difficult to enter on their own.<sup>24</sup> What distinguishes food hubs from other local distributors is that they are formed with the goal of improving the economic, social and environmental health of their communities.<sup>25</sup> Here are a few examples of food hubs from across the country:

- **Hmong American Farmers Association (HAFA)** serves small-scale farmers of Hmong descent in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. It provides bilingual training on farming and business practices, and opportunities to lease five-acre plots on a community farm. HAFA also purchases food from its members to sell in local community supported agriculture (CSA) shares, local restaurants, schools and business.<sup>26</sup>
- **Mandela Grocery Cooperative** cultivates relationships with Black farmers, who are historically underserved by the U.S. farming system. It is the first grocery store to be built in 50 years in its West Oakland, California neighborhood. As a worker-cooperative, it provides employees with the opportunity to share in its profits and oversight, as well as invest in retirement plans.<sup>27</sup>

- **Common Grain Alliance** is a network of wheat farmers and millers in the Mid-Atlantic region. It connects producers with restaurants, brewers and distilleries interested in locally-sourced grain. It is rebuilding the Mid-Atlantic grain economy that was largely lost during agricultural industrialization.<sup>28</sup>

## A roadmap to a just transition

Regenerative farming is economically viable and already working to feed people, invest in local communities and create jobs. But federal farm policy is not designed to serve these smaller-scale farming systems; powerful agribusinesses spent billions of dollars influencing lawmakers to serve their economic interests instead.<sup>29</sup> But we can fight back against corporate control and reshape farm policy — here's how:

- **First, we need to ban new factory farms and the expansion of existing ones** to stop these environmental catastrophes and level the playing field for more sustainable producers. National legislation like the Farm System Reform Act<sup>30</sup> would ban factory farms while creating a \$10 billion buy-out fund to help current factory farm operators transition to more sustainable systems.
- **We must also halt the march towards greater consolidation in the food industry** by enacting a national moratorium on agribusiness mega-mergers. Models for federal legislation include the Food and Agribusiness Merger Moratorium and Antitrust Review Act.<sup>31</sup>
- **We need to overhaul the farm safety net** to reinstate supply management of commodities and extend it to dairy, in order to stabilize farm prices and prevent overproduction. We should also require farmers to implement regenerative practices in order to participate in safety net programs.
- **We must root out systemic racism within our federal agencies** to ensure that farmers of all backgrounds can access federal resources. Legislation like the Justice for Black Farmers Act<sup>32</sup> would take steps to end racial discrimination within the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and expand access to land and resources for Black farmers.
- **Finally, we should redirect public funding to regenerative practices**, including developing climate-resilient seeds and breeds and making them publicly available to farmers.

Agribusiness giants built the industrial food system over a few decades. We can and we will rebuild this dysfunctional system to ensure justice for all farmers, food chain workers and eaters. Let's seize the moment and pressure our elected officials to act.

## Endnotes

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