



Policy Recommendations for Supporting Regenerative Agriculture in New England

Appendix F for USDA SARE Grant Report:

*Farmer Engagement with Regenerative Agriculture in New England:
Understanding Barriers and Facilitators to Improve Services and Outreach*

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This document outlines regional policy recommendations derived from a qualitative analysis of regenerative farming across New England. Informed by practice theory, this research understands regeneration not as the transmission of technical knowledge, but as the situated enactment of everyday practices—bundles of meanings, materials, embodied skills, and affective orientations.



Farmers in this study did not adopt regenerative agriculture through linear uptake of practices, but through ongoing attunement to land, tools, bodies, and values. Policies must therefore be designed not only to enable adoption, but to foster coherence—the alignment across social, ecological, and material fields that allows regenerative practices to be sustained and adapted over time.

I. Fund Farmer-Led Innovation Through Flexible, Outcome-Based Grants

Farmers in this study adopted regenerative practices through experimentation, sensory feedback, and iterative learning—not by following rigid technical checklists. Marigold described constantly adjusting compost blends “because what helped one year disrupted the balance the next”. Flynn explained that success came from “guessing and trying” when soil tests were too expensive. Judy added, “We started with borrowed land... and learned the hard way what worked here”.

Many, like Alice, found that funding programs did not accommodate values-based decisions: “Sometimes I feel like I’m holding too many values, and they’re tearing me apart”. These stories show that regenerative farming hinges on *practical intelligibility*—farmers learning through doing, adapting to ecological signals and ethical commitments.



I. Fund Farmer-Led Innovation Through Flexible, Outcome-Based Grants

What to do:

Establish flexible, farmer-led innovation grants that:

- Fund context-specific outcomes (e.g. soil structure, water retention, microbial activity) instead of prescribing fixed practices.
- Accept alternative documentation (photos, journals, observed indicators like pest resistance or soil response).
- Enable narrative applications and reduce administrative barriers for small and emerging farms.

Successful models in the region already exist:

- The Cornell Soil Health Initiative funds on-farm trials focused on soil function.
- Maine's Healthy Soils Program supports adaptive learning.
- The Northeast Cover Crops Council Tool helps tailor practices by region.

As Stella put it, “We learn more from each other and from the land than from any template



II. Invest in Shared Infrastructure and Peer-Based Knowledge Networks

Farmers across the study described infrastructure gaps—lack of cold storage, ergonomic tools, fencing, compost handling—as major barriers to sustaining regenerative systems. Ella noted, “Getting materials uphill with a wheelbarrow took all day”. Flynn had compost delivered but had to move it by hand: “It takes days”. Judy said, “My back gave out the second season. That changed everything”.

At the same time, many relied on peer networks and mutual aid to fill those gaps. Doug’s neighbor lent him a tractor “when we needed it most”. Freya’s compost swap with nearby farms “saved us thousands—and we don’t even track it”. Annabel explained, “We learn more from each other than we ever did in workshops”. These informal systems are critical—but underfunded and overstretched.



II. Invest in Shared Infrastructure and Peer-Based Knowledge Networks

What to do:

Fund regional infrastructure cooperatives and peer learning hubs by:

- Supporting community-managed resources like mobile wash/pack units, cold storage, compost systems, and tool libraries.
- Funding informal education spaces—farmer-led workshops, work trades, mentorships—that build adaptive skills.
- Prioritizing collaborative applications across multiple farms or neighborhoods.

Regional precedents exist:

- Land for Good supports tenure-aligned infrastructure funding.
- The Brighter Future Fund offers small grants for regenerative tools and livestock systems.
- Maine’s Healthy Soils Program backs peer-to-peer learning through on-farm coaching.

As Russel shared, “You patch together what you need... but it’s never quite enough”. This recommendation aims to turn patchwork into shared, durable support.



III. Recognize and Support Embodied Labor and Care Work in Funding Criteria



Regenerative agriculture is not only technical—it is physical, emotional, and relational. Many farmers spoke about the embodied toll of sustaining these systems. Judy said, “By August, my arms are shot and my hands are swollen”. Russel noted, “I just can’t do what I used to. My knees don’t like the farm as much anymore”. Brady shared, “There’s mental and physical exhaustion after trying to market and farm all day”.

Yet farmers also described the vital role of relational and embodied care in making the work sustainable. Iris said, “Having my sister nearby helps a lot—we split the load during planting and harvesting”. Violet added, “The joy and energy you feel when the farm ecosystem is working—it feeds back into you.” Despite this, current funding frameworks rarely account for care work, physical limits, or well-being—factors central to long-term viability.

III. Recognize and Support Embodied Labor and Care Work in Funding Criteria



What to do:

Revise grant and program design to:

- Include **care-based metrics** (e.g. physical labor demands, support systems, burnout risk) in eligibility and reporting.
- Support **practices that reduce physical strain**, such as hand tool adaptation, rotational labor, or rest cycles.
- Allow **narrative reporting** of how regenerative systems impact farmer and community well-being, not just ecological outputs.

Emerging models to draw from:

- **Vermont's Pay-for-Phosphorus Program** recognizes farmer-defined practices and outcomes.
- The **Northeast Carbon Alliance** integrates multispecies resilience and ecological feedback into evaluations.
- **Community food sovereignty programs** increasingly use holistic well-being metrics.

As Heather put it: “It’s regenerative for the soil, but not for us”. This recommendation helps close that gap.

IV. Embed Regenerative Practice in Broader Climate and Food Policy

Farmers in this study connected their work to climate resilience, community care, and environmental ethics, yet felt their efforts were siloed from broader systems. Iris noted, “We’re not planning for stability anymore. We’re planning for weirdness—heat, rain, dryness, wind, all of it”. Marigold described the land “holding tension,” while Doug had to pull animals early due to grass stress. Despite these adaptive responses, regenerative farms are rarely recognized as contributors to climate strategy, food justice, or public health. Poppy framed their work as service: “This is how we can best serve our community and the planet”. Yet programs that support climate action or health equity often overlook farms like hers—especially smaller, relationally embedded operations.



IV. Embed Regenerative Practice in Broader Climate and Food Policy

What to do:

Formally integrate regenerative agriculture into:

- State climate adaptation and mitigation plans, including funding through resilience and environmental budgets.
- Public health and food access initiatives, such as procurement for schools, food hubs, and hospitals.
- Equity-focused grant programs, prioritizing farms serving BIPOC and low-income communities.

Regional precedents include:

- The Conservation Law Foundation, which advocates for soil health as climate infrastructure.
- Northeast SARE, which funds participatory, justice-oriented land care.
- The Northeast Carbon Alliance, aligning soil stewardship with carbon mitigation.



All photos in this report were taken on site at participating farms in New England by the researcher.

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