

Final Report for the Soil for Water: Regenerative Grazing and Soil Health-Building Systems Project

Encourage cross-pollination of ideas through Virginia Tech's Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation.

The cross-pollination of ideas was multi-faceted and occurred through participation in Soil for Water field days, Virginia-project team meetings, four community forums (two concurrent sessions at the 2023 Virginia Farm to Table Conference and three virtual online forums), the 4 The Soil A Conversation podcast, the Virginia Soil Health Coalition, and the production of an introductory Soil for Water video and video case studies of eleven cooperating farmers. All field days, conferences, forums, podcast episodes, and video efforts were shared with NCAT and Southern SARE and further promoted through the Center listserv and the email distribution lists for the Virginia Beginning Farmer and Rancher Coalition and the Virginia Soil Health Coalition.

In addition to our Center, Soil for Water project partners included the Virginia Association for Biological Farming. However, we also want to recognize that in Virginia, there is a broad community of collaborators who are committed to furthering regenerative grazing and soil health systems including American Farmland Trust, Mountains-to-the-Bay Graziers Alliance, Piedmont Environmental Council, Virginia Cooperative Extension's Graze 300, Virginia Association for Biological Farming, Virginia Forage and Grassland Council, Virginia Soil Health Coalition, Virginia State University's Small Farm Outreach Program, Virginia USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Virginia Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and more.

Evaluate quality of life aspects of regenerative grazing, including economic benefit for participants, diverse and intergenerational participation and relationships, regenerative, resilient capacity of chain elements, and relation to health, wealth, and capacity.

This evaluation was specifically addressed through development of eleven descriptive case studies using a narrative inquiry framework. Narrative inquiry specifically focuses on the farmer/rancher/grazier as the storyteller, the experiences shared, and opening space for further thought and conversation. The eleven cooperating farmers varied in experience, roles, and types of operations. The semi-structured interviews included questions about farmers understanding of regenerative grazing as well as turning points, lessons learned, a'ha moments, influences, and challenges.

Evaluative insights and research points include the following:

- The protection, conservation, and regeneration of soil and water resources continues to be extremely important.
- Understanding farmers' and ranchers' agroecological values and their stories are critical for creating resilient ecosystems, profitable agricultural systems, and the exchange of meaningful educational experiences.
- Asset mapping, mentoring, diversification, and stacked complementary enterprises can enhance grazing and business success.

- Farmers and graziers have varied stories and dynamic experiences.
- Context and commitment are integral to regenerative grazing and soil health-building systems.
- No farm or situation is the same.
- Values-centric and systems-based approaches can unearth deep motivations for conservation and stewardship of natural resources.
- Regenerative agriculture is a journey and can seem trendy to some farmers and ranchers.
- Educators and technical service providers should embrace complexity rather than a more reductionist approach to educational programming and outreach.

List of Resources:

Soil for Water video case studies available to Luz and others through Google Drive sharing at <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1mhiVMnf-pMbZ0yJuBOvxj2o5W67o61vq?usp=sharing>

Note: Virginia Tech is working with Ernie Didot of Clear Impact Productions to create a series of shorter videos and reels for social marketing and promotion. “In Progress”

4 The Soil: A Conversation podcast (<https://www.4thesoil.org/podcast>) -- Episodes that featured the Soil for Water effort and cooperating farmers:

Episode 24 - 9: Community, Dung Beetles, and a Good Steady Rain with Dr. Elizabeth Heilman of Wichita State University Part II

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/episode-24-9-community-dung-beetles-and-a-good-steady-rain-with-dr-elizabeth-heilman-of-wichita-state-university-part-ii--59588160>

Episode 24 - 8: Calm Your Lizard Down with Dr. Elizabeth Heilman of Wichita State University Part I

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/episode-24-8-calm-your-lizard-down-with-dr-elizabeth-heilman-of-wichita-state-university-part-i--59311429>

Episode 24 - 5: The Unintended Consequences of Deep Tillage with Dale Strickler of Regenerative Wisdom Part II

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/episode-24-5-the-unintended-consequences-of-deep-tillage-with-dale-strickler-of-regenerative-wisdom-part-ii--58799911>

Episode 24 - 4: Drought Resilience: Does Subsoiling Pay? with Dale Strickler of Regenerative Wisdom Part I

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/episode-24-4-drought-resilience-does-subsoiling-pay-with-dale-strickler-of-regenerative-wisdom-part-i--58626485>

Episode 23 - 6: Why I Farm The Way I Do with Becky Szarzynski of Mountain Glen Farm

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/episode-23-6-why-i-farm-the-way-i-do-with-becky-szarzynski-of-mountain-glen-farm--53148978>

Episode 23 - 5: Pasture Bouquets and Soil Health with Becky Szarzynski of Mountain Glen Farm

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/episode-23-5-pasture-bouquets-and-soil-health-with-becky-szarzynski-of-mountain-glen-farm--52868072>

Episode 22 - 24: Stories of Land and People with Lee Rinehart of the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) Part II

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/episode-22-24-stories-of-land-and-people-with-lee-rinehart-of-the-national-center-for-appropriate-technology-ncat-part-ii--51927413>

Episode 22 - 23: Appropriate Technology for Soil for Water with Lee Rinehart of the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) Part I

<https://www.spreaker.com/episode/episode-22-23-appropriate-technology-for-soil-for-water-with-lee-rinehart-of-the-national-center-for-appropriate-technology-ncat-part-i--51775378>