**CONFERENCE SPEECH**

**FOR**

**RHETT CINQUINI (slide 1)**

(Slide 2) “…This tractor does two things - it turns the land and turns us **off** the land. There is little difference between this tractor and a tank. The people are driven, intimidated, hurt by both.” Those words were written by American novelist John Steinbeck, in his 1939 master piece, **The Grapes of Wrath**. Based on what we know and will learn more of today, those words can, and do, apply to conventional, traditional, commonly used contemporary farming methods. Steinbeck also asserted, in the same source, “So easy that the wonder goes out of the work, so efficient that the wonder goes out of the land and the working of it, and with the wonder the deep understanding and the relation.”

(Slide 3) Deep understanding. Respect for the environment. The importance of discovering and rediscovering, tried and true methods to preserve the earth… literally and figuratively, as well as the urgency to conserve our natural, industrial, and commercial resources. It’s why we research, discuss, consider, and encourage **regenerative farming**.

(Slide 4) Before we begin to explore the meaning, history, and methods of regenerative agriculture, we have to be very clear….. every human being on this planet has the right to have access to clean air, clean water, and a “healthy planet,” as the Natural Resources Defense Council states. So many of us take that concept for granted. Too many of us operate “unconsciously” throughout our daily lives. We think that natural resources are just “there,” for the taking. Some may think that fresh, potable water is a given. It’s **not**. I’m sure the majority of people we serve… the end users, don’t even know the processes that are involved to bring nutritious, health positive, earth friendly, environmentally sympathetic foods to tables throughout the country. Many don’t care. But the group of people that **DO** care is growing. That group has to grow. Systematically, consistently, we experience the effects of an angry planet. Every day, throughout the world, we read about natural disasters, environmental crises, abnormal weather patterns, and more. It is up to each one of us to do what we need to do, in order to preserve what’s left of our planet, which is the **ONE THING** we **all** share. While I know it’s not realistic to expect everyone to do everything to that end, I **DO** know it **IS** possible for each one of us, especially farmers and growers, to do our part to lessen the detrimental impact on our precious planet. The way we do that is through education, information, discussion, the sharing of ideas in forums such as this, and ultimately implementation. Advocating for change is crucial. Committing to be the change…. to doing what is needed… to preserve the processes that will support sustainability, must be non-negotiable. To those that know, learning and practicing the principles and methods of regenerative agriculture offers the means and benefits needed to preserve our resources. (Slide 5)

(Slide de 6) To be clear, the first thing we need to ask ourselves is, “What is regenerative farming?”

The answer, according to the NRDC, is this:

“As a philosophy and approach to land management, regenerative agriculture asks us to think about ***how all aspects of agriculture are connected through a web***—a network of entities who grow, enhance, exchange, distribute, and consume goods and services—instead of a linear supply chain. It’s about farming and ranching in a style that **nourishes people and the earth**, with specific practices varying from grower to grower and from region to region. There’s no strict rule book, but the holistic principles behind the [dynamic system](https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsufs.2020.577723/full) of regenerative agriculture are meant to restore soil and ecosystem health, address inequity, and leave our land, waters, and climate in better shape for future generations.”

(Slide 7) Many people ask, “What are the principles of regenerative agriculture?” As you would imagine, the process itself is quite “organic.” The methods and principles are somewhat fluid and can vary, yet all fall under the same umbrella, all with the intention of preserving the planet. Washington State University published an article in their Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources, in which it is stated that there are basic universal principles of regenerative farming: (slide 8)

* **Principle #1….Minimize or eliminate tillage** When I think of this point, I can’t help but imagine a slightly more relatable explanation… we, as human beings, don’t like to be pushed around… we resist being “disturbed”… why then, would we find it acceptable to overly work the soil… the true foundation of the crops that provide our life force and sustenance? Basically, the foundation of this concept addresses the most basic of mandates: “Minimize or eliminate tillage…. There should be the least amount of mechanical disturbance as possible.”
* **Principle #2... Protect the soil “**Armor the soil’s surface.” This particular article goes on to explain the importance of keeping the soil covered to eliminate erosion. As it further states, “You can’t build soil while it is blowing or washing away….” Makes perfect sense, no?? Also important to this point is that there should always be living plant roots in the soil. While this encourages protection of the soil, it is also understood that some crops do require tillage and others call for precise shallow planting. Being conscious of the challenge in upholding the basic principles will, I believe, foster new research and innovations in this field.
* **Principle #3… Biodiversity** it’s universally accepted and agreed that the importance of biodiversity cannot be understated. The article I refer to cites Gabe Brown, who, in his TEDx talk describes how he “implements diversity of plants through intercropped cash crops and high diversity cover crops.” He works with approximately seventy species and states that “crop rotations and cover crops are the basics of sustainable agriculture and should be used when market conditions and cropping seasons allow.”
* **Principle #4… Integrate livestock**  It is a widely known fact that “animal impact” plays a critically important role in regenerative farming, mainly achieved through grazing. The article explains, “Grazing livestock adds diversity to the products produced on the farm, adds value to cover crops (really annual forage crops), and recycles nutrients through manure.”

Please note that while this particular article cited four main principles of regenerative agriculture, extended research further breaks down and enumerates more detailed aspects such as “improving the water cycle, enhancing ecosystem services, and increasing resilience to climate change,” Other sources explain that “As [soil health](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soil_health) improves, input requirements may decrease, and crop yields may increase as soils are more resilient against [extreme weather](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extreme_weather) and harbor fewer pests and [pathogens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pathogen). Regenerative agriculture [mitigates climate change](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Climate_change_mitigation) through [carbon dioxide removal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carbon_dioxide_removal). For example, it draws carbon from the atmosphere and sequesters it.

So how did this all come to be? Where, when, and how did regenerative farming get started, become a force, and literally, “stake its claim” in contemporary agriculture? (Slide 9) Basic searches point us towards Robert Rodale and the Rodale Press. It was in the early 1980’s that Rodale formed the “Regenerative Agriculture Association,” and began to publish books on the topic through his publishing company, Rodale Press. It was Rodale who stated, “By marching forward under the banner of sustainability we are, in effect, continuing to hamper ourselves by not accepting a challenging enough goal. I am not against the word sustainable, rather I favor regenerative agriculture.” Quite simply, he distinguished the term “sustainable” from the concept of “regeneration.” (Slide 10) The dictionary definition of sustainable is, “able to be maintained or kept going, as an ongoing action or process.” The definition of regeneration is, “the restoration of new growth… that has been lost, removed or injured.” By clarifying these two terms, we can distinguish the differences between conventional sustainability and the more encompassing regenerative farming. One seeks to maintain a status quo. The other consciously works towards building new life in farming. In effect, we can say that regenerative farming is the larger umbrella that respects the principles of sustainability while going further to ease agriculture’s overall impact on the planet.

While Rodale is credited with the resurgence of the regenerative process, history tells us that the practice can be traced back hundreds of years, to the Native Americans that tended the soil and grew crops years before Europeans settled on the lands we now claim as our own. The Noble Research Institute informs us that,”North American ecosystems were often managed using many of today’s regenerative principles prior to European settlement. Native Americans utilized many [management practices](https://nfu.org/2020/10/12/the-indigenous-origins-of-regenerative-agriculture/#:~:text=Diverse%20farming%20systems%20are%20centrala%20practice%20known%20as%20intercropping.) that focused on harnessing the power of nature, from intercropping to the use of prescribed fire… in the late 1800s came the expansion of domestic livestock grazing. (Slide 11) At this time, many viewed our natural resources, particularly our grazing lands, as perpetually renewable resources,” with time and exploration into more effective methods of growing groups, raising livestock, and managing economic impacts, regeneration methods adapted to the times and needs of the community at large. As the soil was worked and crops were grown, greater understanding came to light as to the best methods needed to preserve and protect precious resources while earning a living and feeding the country.

(Slide 12) Significant environmental crises, like the Dust Bowl of the 1930’s, also worked to force farmers and the government to research and establish unprecedented conservation practices. The Noble Institute explains, “The devastating impacts of the Dust Bowl forced the federal government to act. At the urging of Hugh Hammond Bennett, they formed the Soil Conservation Service, today known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).”

While looking back on the history that has informed and taught us how to do what we do, the Noble Institute makes a very compelling point when it states, “Thus, tradition “for the sake of tradition” could be creating operational struggles. Many producers instead are blazing their own path forward, one that regenerates their landscape, is economically successful and promotes their chosen quality of life.” It is never too late to take what we’ve learned, adapt principles, and improve on concepts in order to forge a more workable, sympathetic environment to initiate, produce, and market affordable, quality products for the people we serve.

Bernard Baruch said, “Agriculture is the greatest and fundamentally the most important of our industires. The cities are but branches of the tree of national life, the roots of which go deeply into the land. We flourish or decline with the farmer.” This begs the question, how does the farmer or rancher flourish… or at the very least, sustain themselves?? In simpler terms, is regenerative agriculture economically viable? The cynics may say that it sounds like lots of work for a smaller “pay day.” Let’s be candid… How does it all “shake out?”(slide 13) Forbes ran an article entitled, “Is Regenerative Agriculture Profitable?” That seems like a good place to start the query. The author of the article, Artem Milinchuk, a member of the Forbes Finance Council and himself, the CEO OF FarmTogether, when asked the question of financial viability in regenerative farming, has some information for us.

On the topic of “Can moving from traditional cropping systems to regenerative agriculture be profitable?” His first response is, “… a resounding yes. Many might point to decreases in yield, but under the right conditions, and by taking a holistic view of farmland operations and the underlying asset value, the profitability of a farm can increase, all while reducing risk and crop loss.” He goes on to present the following scenario as an example… “Accounting for [approximately 30%](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5831153/) of all gross crop value in the U.S., corn is a crop of special significance in the U.S. agriculture market. Nearly all of that crop is grown through conventional farming practices, which include tillage and the introduction of additional fertilizer and pesticides. Researchers from Ecdysis Foundation [investigated](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5831153/) how the move to more regenerative systems might affect yields, pests and profitability. The twenty farms in the review were ranked based on their implementation of regenerative agriculture practices. The researchers then looked at soil organic matter, pest presence, crop yield and profit. As expected, crop yields decreased in regenerative systems, and by 29%, no less. But while yield has served as the traditional metric of interest for farmers, that decrease in yield does not tell the whole story. The study found that the farms with regenerative practices were 78% more profitable than conventional plots. This increase in profitability was the result of two main factors: input costs and end markets.

“Regenerative agricultural systems, over time, require less external inputs, primarily in the form of seed and fertilizer. The research team observed an increase in soil organic matter. Soil organic matter decreases the need for external fertilizer by ensuring that necessary nutrients are available for crops. In fact, the team found that almost a third of farmers’ gross income went into external inputs on conventional fields, compared to 12% in regenerative fields. But the benefits go beyond fertilizer costs. Increasing soil organic matter also increased the diversity of insects found in the soil. Insect diversity has been shown to decrease harmful pest abundance in cornfields, leading to stronger crops.“

(Slide 14) A man named Henri Alain expressed a unique point of view about being a farmer. He said, “Life on a farm is a school of patience; you can’t hurry the crops or make an ox in two days.” No, Henri, you can’t and neither can we. But we, as farmers **CAN** take on other challenges in farming with the ultimate goals of maintaining and sustaining healthy businesses while improving outcomes and supporting ecological, financial, and agricultural health. If there’s one thing we now know it’s that there is no longer any excuse to not be aware. There is no reason, with information so readily available in the palms of our hands, not to explore…. and not to share… what we have researched or learned in our process of finding the most efficient, practical, earth friendly means of farming and ranching.

(Slide 15) There’s an old proverb that goes, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Sharing this forum inspires me to take that adage even further. “Share your knowledge and research in all areas, encourage curiosity, growth, and implementation, and save the planet.”

The writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The earth laughs in flowers.” We derive joy from seeing the beauty and variety of the many different ways in which the earth laughs. The issue is that the earth isn’t going to be laughing too much longer if something isn’t done soon…. And with greater enthusiasm and purpose, than what has been attempted in the past. Leonardo DiCaprio is not only an actor, he is also, as we know, a staunch environmentalist. He has said, “We only get one planet.” There is not another one or two “waiting in the wings,” to step in. Once the rivers and lakes…. The polar icecaps and the rain forests go, they’re gone. It is our urgent responsibility to be conscious of the issues that we face as a global community. It is imperative that we do our research, and most importantly, do whatever we can to support the health of the earth… not only in terms of the soil we rely on to grow food to sustain all of us, but ultimately, as we know, the actions we take today to support the **EARTH**, with a capital E, will give back to us, our children, their children, and future generations.

Nobel Peace Prize winner, Muhammad Yunus, has said, “Unprecedented technological capabilities combined with unlimited human creativity have given us tremendous power to take on intractable problems like poverty, unemployment, disease, and environmental degradation. Our challenge is to translate this extraordinary potential into meaningful change.” Unlimited human creativity… tremendous power to take on intractable problems. The unlimited human creativity refers to each one of us…. **NO** exceptions. While we may think we are a single individual entity unto ourselves, alone in our corner of the globe, with no say or potential to affect social, economic, industrial, and environmental impact on the incredible “blue marble” upon which we live together, **NOTHING** can be further from the truth. Each one of us is a light that finds its path. Each one of us uses that light to fend of the darkness, and by that I mean the dark emptiness of ignorance.

Well over a century ago, President Theodore Roosevelt warned us, “To waste, to destroy our natural resources, to skin and exhaust the land instead of using it so as to increase its usefulness, will result in undermining in the days of our children the very prosperity which we ought by right to hand down to them amplified and developed.” President Roosevelt wasn’t a “rocket scientist” back in the early 1900’s… come to think of it, there **WERE** no rockets back in the early 1900’s (**wait for the laugh**), but he **was** a man who was aware, interested, informed, and concerned about his family, the people of his country, and the relationship he…. and we… all have to the environment.

There are so many quotes… words to consider… theories to assess, that have the power to bring us to our knees if and as we truly consider the damage that is being done globally. Thoughts like, “There’s a tendency at every important but difficult crossroad to pretend it’s not really there.” Or consider this: “There is something fundamentally wrong in treating the Earth as if it were a business in liquidation.” … (slide 16) And it was Pope John Paul II who said, “The Earth will not continue to offer its harvest, except with faithful stewardship. We cannot say we love the land and then take steps to destroy it for use by future generations.”

Thoughts like those are beyond sad and frustrating. I offer them to you, not to goad you to give up or give in, but to offer a wake up call… to light a fire…. To encourage you to see that where there’s life, there’s hope, to let you know it’s not too late to salvage what we have and to do whatever possible to regenerate the resources that really have been “loaned” to us during our time here on this planet. My colleagues and I firmly believe that one important, meaningful, proactive response is to implement, and advocate for, regenerative farming.

I’ve laid out for you some of the nuts and bolts of what it means to endorse and practice regenerative farming. As people who are educated, interested, curious, and involved, it is our mandate to spread the word, encourage best practices, and guide those who may have less exposure to, and opportunity for, learning and implementing the positive principles of regenerative farming.

I want to also point out something very important. I think it is natural that, in the process of being hopeful and proactive for the future, we run the risk of going to the “dark side…” of looking for the negatives… of doubting the process and principles… of being wary of our capability to turn things around and heal what is left of our rapidly breaking planet. I want you to know that as I researched for this presentation, I also found hope in the words of those who have preceded us. I’d like to share some words of encouragement with you.

(Slide 17) While Thomas Jefferson said, “I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past, he also taught us, “Agriculture is our wisest pursuit, because it will, in the end, contribute most to real wealth, good morals, and happiness.” As well as being a statesman, Jefferson was also a brilliant scholar, designer, architect, and inventor. He had an amazing ability to see things globally… by that I mean his thought process considered all sides and angles of a puzzle. He was deeply aware of the importance of farming to enrich the people and the country. He knew, on many levels, what it meant to nurture the body, mind, and soul. He knew the importance of nourishment and shared his research and ideas.

(Slide 18)Will Rogers said, “The farmer has to be an optimist or he wouldn’t be a farmer.” How true is that? It’s the farmer who must have blind faith in the unknown. It is never guaranteed that what is sown will also be reaped. That is why doing one’s best to enrich the experience of farming as well as the caring for the the raw materials involved, is so critical.

(Slide 19) President John Kennedy was known to have said, “The farmer is the only person in our economy who buys everything at retail, sells everything at wholesale, and pays the freight both ways.” While that was said over fifty years ago, I really hope some conditions have improved!! Even so, the farmer has a back breaking job that grows more challenging with every rule and regulation imposed. If there were something to make the farmers life more meaningful, I believe it would be the implementation of the practice of regenerative farming. As has been stated, the impact is lowered, the crops are more substantial, and the ecosystem is preserved, more so than in previously conventional methods of farming. It is my intention that regenerative agriculture becomes the standard for farming… and even newer, more efficient, eco-friendly practices emerge as we all get involved, share stories, and analyze results.

When it comes down to it, in some ways, farming is a metaphor for life. (Slide 20) This thought came to me when I read the words of Masanobu Fukuoka, who said, “The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.” Well, that said, we have our work cut out for us!! (**Wait for the laugh**). In all honesty though, farming is a metaphor for life. (Slide 21) We plant seeds… ideas… concepts… connections… we grow roots… we reach out as we connect to other root systems… we nourish the seed… the “what if” and we have faith that it will grow and take care of us to the extent or beyond the intentions that we tend the crop. To a very large extent, we are codependent on the crops we bring to life. As I mentioned earlier, a major guiding principle of regenerative farming is respect for the soil. It functions best… gets richer and more responsive when it’s not disturbed. Who among us is willing to admit the same?? When I am on a mission, whether it’s farming or other important tasks, I know I function best in a supportive, more independent environment. The earth is the same. Farming, and humans, follow an “organic” process. Both need respect to properly function.

Inspiration and words of wisdom come from those that precede us. In some cases, they come from people who had vision hundreds, if not thousands of years ago. It was the Ancient Roman philosopher, (Slide 22) Pliny the Elder, who stated, “The master’s eye is the best fertilizer.” It’s time now for me to remind each one of you that we all have the capacity and calling to be masters. While some of us may be more reluctant than others, we have it in us to achieve expertise in whatever we choose to tackle. When we apply our own natural resources… that of interest, caring, determination, consideration, and the willingness to adapt to our calling… in this case, agriculture, we too, can and must apply our talents… our fertilizer… to conquer the puzzles and issues placed in our paths. The work that we do is critical to the survival of our families, friends, neighbors, and ultimately the global community.

(Slide 23) In the Wizard of Oz, the Good Witch Glinda reminds Dorothy that the entire time she thought she was lost in Oz, she had the ability to go home. All it took was looking around, believing in herself, her strengths, and having faith in her calling. It is no accident that each one of you is here, listening and watching this presentation. No matter where we find ourselves, there is something of value to be had. At this conference, you’ve been given the opportunity to open your minds, get the “wheels” turning, and figure out how you, as one individual light, will bring purpose and power to the projects you choose. If, and as, you choose agriculture, it is my intention that, thanks to this session, you look upon this sector with new eyes. It is my hope that you leave today asking yourself many questions. It is the energy formed from the exercising of your minds that will come together with other like-minded, curious, and willing individuals that will make a difference in this world. (Slide 24) President Abraham Lincoln taught us, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” No matter our age or station in life, no matter our geographic locale or our commitment to and position on, the food chain, the future is ours to create. As well as biodiversity nourishes the principles of regenerative agriculture, it is diversity of people, principles, and points of view that will ultimately shape the future.. make no mistake,.. there **WILL** be a future. What is in our hands, to the extent that we can create and build it, is the quality of that future. That’s not up to the person standing next to you or sitting to your right or left. It’s not up to the person behind you or the person that’s taller or shorter or closer to the door. Although we are definitely not alone on this planet, we must operate as though there is no one else out there. We each get one vote… one voice… one chance to make a positive impact on all in our trajectory. There is an expression I often use that really gets me to thinking… “I am part of all of that I have met.” We are now a part of one another…. Participating in this conference has ensured that all of you, and this process, is now a part of me. How do I intend to use what I’ve learned today to bring it to my corner of the world? How do **YOU** intend to take what **YOU’VE** learned and absorbed and bring it to **YOUR WORLD**.. what are some of the thoughts you have about today’s discussion? Do you have any questions? If you’d like, we can spend the next couple of minutes sharing thoughts and questions, after all, this session, and farming itself, is a collaborative effort. Every contribution allows me to grow, and I hope the same is true for you.

( slide 25) The earth is truly a miraculous creation. Sometimes we have to see it from a distance to fully appreciate the magnificence of it all. As I said earlier, if we think of each one of us as individual specs of light, when we join forces, we’re powerful enough to be seen from outer space. When we gain distance, we find perspective, and the incredible geometry that we work so hard to maintain, becomes an incredible pattern, poised to inspire and urge us to take care of it and it’s resources. I want to say that I truly appreciate the time we have spent together, exploring the concept of regenerative agriculture, and I thank all of you for being sounding boards and a “launch pad” for fresh, new ideas and implementation of exciting innovations for the future of farming in healthy, supportive, nurturing and nourishing ways!! Thank you all!!