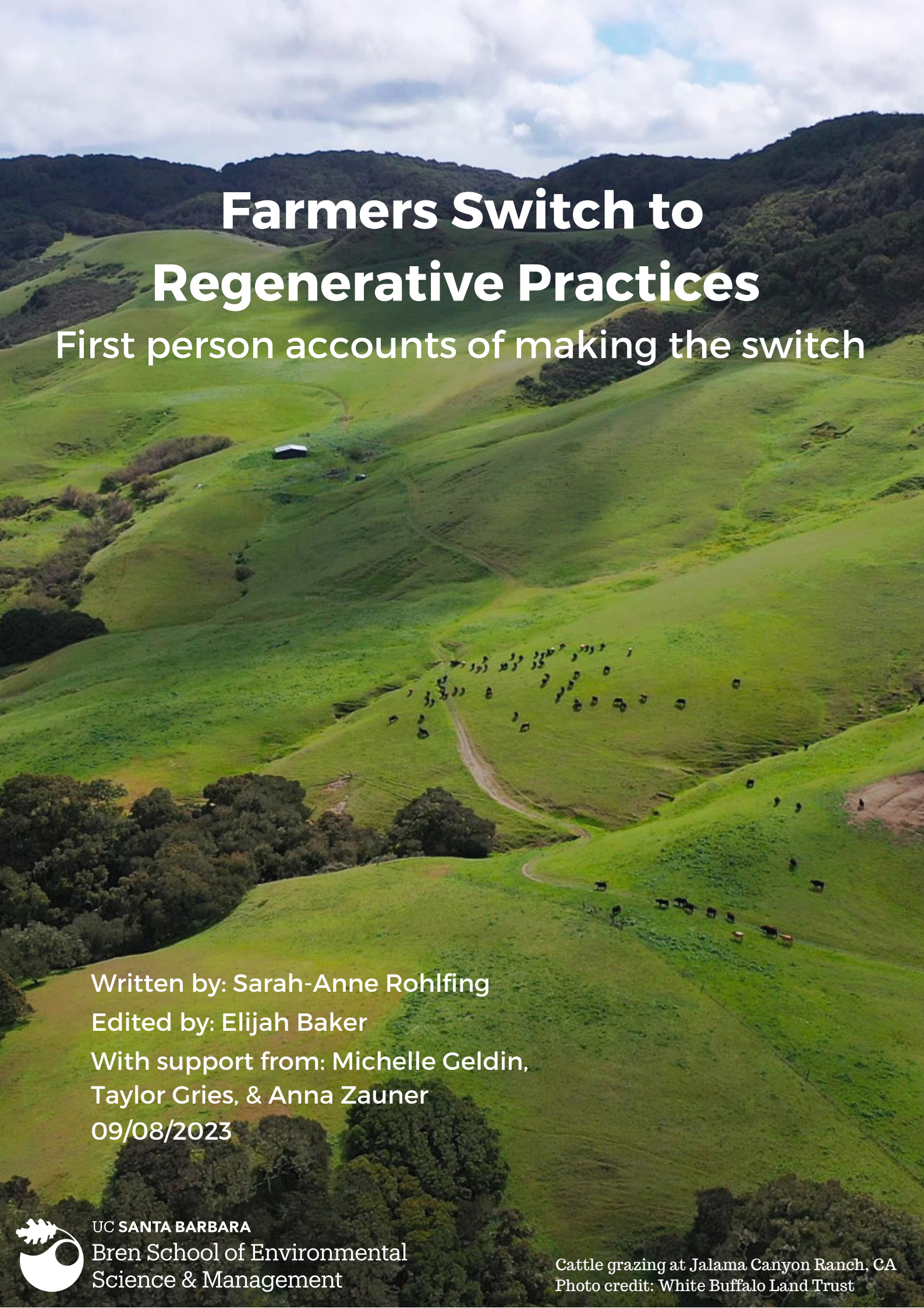

Farmers Switch to Regenerative Practices

First person accounts of making the switch

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Cattle grazing at Jalama Canyon Ranch, CA
Photo credit: White Buffalo Land Trust

Who are we hearing from?

"It was a slap in the face; an epiphany moment. What am I doing wrong? Why is my soil garbage compared to that field? That is what I want."

- **Scott Park**
Founder of Park Farming Organics, Meridian, CA

Nathanael Siemens
Owner of Fat Uncle Farms
Wasco, CA

Danielle Sotelo
Owner of Tenbears Sustainable Farms
Claremore, OK

Jordan Lonborg
Viticulturist at Tablas Creek Vinyard
Paso Robles, CA

Stefan Selbert
Operations Manager at Las Cumbres Ranch
Santa Maria, CA

Zach Heyman
Soil Fertility Manager at Apricot Lane Farms
Moorpark, CA

Scott Park

Scott Park has been farming for over 50 years and has worked on conventional, organic, and regenerative farms growing 20 different crops. He left the city for a rural lifestyle when he was 20 years old and never looked back.

> “There is no question I was completely on my own, I was a pioneer. Still, there are no organic fields within 30 miles of me. I don’t think I saw an organic field until 1994 when I started going to US Davis for some direction on how to manage my land.”
>
> - Scott

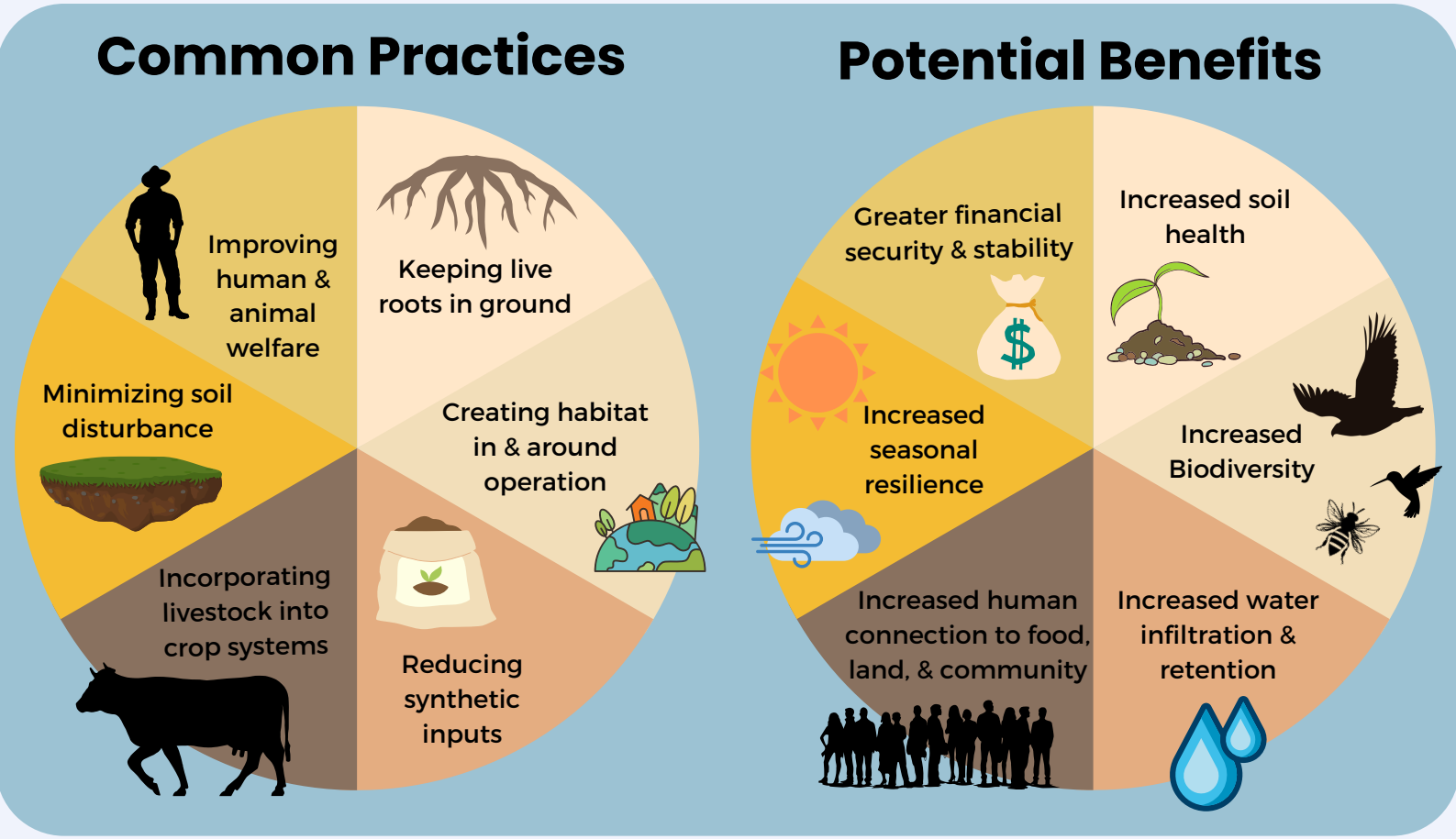
Scott owns a 1,400 acre Regenerative Organic Certified (ROC) farm, Park Farming Organics, growing 20 different crops. “Our farm developed by cutting out mistakes and through serendipitous experiences.” Scott hopes the lessons he has learned can help other land managers understand the benefits he experiences through regenerative farming.

When Scott first leased land in Meridian California, he ran a conventional farm, using chemical fertilizers and pesticides. Things were going well, he thought, until he picked up soil on his neighbor's farm a quarter mile away. The difference was remarkable. Scott recounts, “It was a slap in the face, an epiphany moment. What am I doing wrong? Why is my soil garbage compared to that field?”

Scott learned that his neighbor’s management practices used a simple crop rotation, selected plants that incorporate biomass into the soil, used minimal tillage, and let their land rest. This was different from Scott’s management, which relied on heavy machinery. Scott’s ground was getting harder, the inputs were becoming more costly, yields were not increasing, and profits were negligible.

What is Regenerative?

To Scott Park, Regenerative Management means using natural processes to grow a crop that benefits the environment and the local community, while also generating profit for the farmer.



Through interviews, farmers and ranchers shared that one of their greatest hopes was to leave their children land that was both healthy and financially profitable. Conventional agriculture is more likely to contribute to soil erosion which diminishes the quality and fertility of a landscape. But, by investing in regenerative agriculture, these farmers are building soil health to ensure it is productive for future generations.

Though regenerative agriculture is becoming more popular, these practices are not new. Regenerative management is based on tried and true principles of indigenous knowledge, creating resilient food systems that supported communities for thousands of years. Indigenous people cultivated much of North America and created a rich, biodiverse landscape through their land management; farmers and ranchers can achieve similar land resilience and productivity by adopting these practices.

Stefan Selbert

Stefan has increased the intensity of grazing at Las Cumbres Ranch over time. He started off moving cattle every 9 days and has begun moving them into smaller paddocks every 1-2 days with impressive results. They are seeing grasses grow 3 times as tall with the higher intensity grazing which Stefan credits to letting the land rest longer.

"Every time we make less passes through a pasture, we come in with more density. Every time you go through a pasture there is literally more stuff growing, there's more diversity and the plants are bigger."

- Stefan

Top photo: Roger Savory and Stefan Selbert at Las Cumbres Ranch
Bottom photo: Pedigree Bonsmara cattle switching paddocks
Photo credit: Las Cumbres Ranch

Increased Net Profit

The general consensus among farmers is that the best way to increase profits is to increase overall yield. However, that is not the only way.

> "It's highly unrealistic for a farm to function without making a profit. The profit factor has to be there."
> -Scott

"If you are focused on maximum yield, you will need to spend money on a lot of fertilizers and preventative pesticide and herbicide sprays," says Scott. Regenerative farmers cannot view increased yield as their means to greater profit margins. Scott adds, "Industrial agriculture is based around instant gratification. In order to be successful in farming regeneratively you need to have long-term thinking."

Scott makes his profit by 1) increasing the price of his crop based on its quality as a regenerative product and 2) reducing his operating costs by minimizing the use of inputs like herbicides, pesticides, fertilizers, fuel for machinery and water.

If you are considering the switch, you may have to contend with the upfront costs of the investment. "You might have yield drags for three years," Scott says, "One way to reduce financial risk in the transition years is to grow simple crops that require less investment and give you more financial flexibility to plant cover crops. Once you start charging premium prices in years four, five and onward, the increase in profits covers your financial losses from the lagging years."

Nathaniel and Danielle are also saving money through a reduction in synthetic inputs. They agree that despite decreased yields they are making more money. Nathanael says there is less of everything once you switch to regenerative practices. There are reductions in inputs, costs and yield. There is also a reduction in pests, disease and weed pressure.

> "Knowing that the yield won't be as high, you need to restructure the economics of your operation and adjust your lifestyle plans. My net income has decreased, but net costs dropped as well."
> - Nathaniel

Danielle Sotelo

To help with the time and financial investment of going regenerative, Danielle has started making her ranch regenerative one segment at a time. She suggests that farmers who are interested in regenerative management also begin to make the transition in steps.

Danielle has already found an economic advantage over neighboring ranchers through her regenerative practices with her small step approach . With a recent drought in the area, surrounding farms were forced to purchase hay bales for feeding cattle.

> "You don't need to overhaul your entire management system at once. Make changes plot by plot so that you aren't taking on too much of a financial burden, while also increasing the resilience of your land."
>
> - Danielle

It became was very costly for ranchers due to the price of hay going from 50 dollars a bale to 100 plus dollars a bale. It caused a lot of hardship for ranchers. We had 100 cows this winter and we only went through about 20 bales of hay. That's because there's still so much forage, even in the winter. And even though everything's dead, there's still so much forage from the rest of the year that we don't have to feed," says Danielle. "It was pretty exciting to see how quickly we can repair the land. Even doing slightly less intensive grazing, just because we have to be practical. We don't have time or the money to do everything at once. We found it much more useful and practical for us to only move [our cows] every two days rather than moving them constantly. And we're still seeing benefits to the land." Having healthy land that can handle extreme weather events has made Danielle's ranch more financially stable and resilient.

Top photo: Danielle Sotelo and her children
Bottom photo: Danielle with a new calf
Photo credit: Tenbears Sustainable Farm

Soil Health

Healthy winter cover crop at Park Farming Organics
Photo credit: Scott Park

Scott wanted to understand why his soil was struggling. The season after he felt his neighbor's soil, he leased a wheat field. Following his neighbor's lead, he did not till the soil and he added the unharvested biomass back into the soil. He let the land rest; one year later, the soil structure had changed dramatically. "Instead of farming a brick, I was farming a sponge," says Scott.

Healthy soil is home to a high diversity of living organisms. These in turn generate nutrients that feed plants and increase the ability of soil to absorb and hold water. Improving soil health creates a chain reaction of benefits.

"The chain reaction goes: you start feeding the soil, you realize, 'I don't need to disk this twice,' 'I don't need to add as much water,' 'I don't need to put on as much nitrogen,' all of it starts feeding itself and you start to see the resilience that healthy soil brings to your farm."

- Scott

Over the last 12 years, Scott has only sprayed organic-approved pesticides three times and a fungicide once, treating only 4 crops out of a total of 240. Scott firmly believes that increasing the biodiversity around his farm has kept pests in check. Now, 30 years after becoming a California Certified Organic Farmer (CCOF), the only inputs Scott has for his entire farm are cover crops, algae, compost, and microorganisms which continue to enhance the soil health.

Scott Park displaying a deep root system from a cover crop
Photo credit: Scott Park

Zach Heyman

Zach at Apricot Lane Farms has seen biodiversity balance above and below ground. Above ground there are all kinds of raptors that keep rodents in check. Underground, the results are also impressive.

"We went to an avocado block that has been growing for decades to sample macro-life soil biodiversity. The Regenerative Organic Certification standards say to take a shovel full and if you count 5 different species, that is considered excellent and we found 10 or 11 different species! The proof is in the pudding."

- Zach

One of the benefits to having healthy soils is harnessing its ability to absorb water. During the 2022-2023 winter, Ventura, along with the rest of California, saw around 180% of the typical rainfall expected in a year. Apricot Lane Farms saw a noticeable difference between their land and neighboring farms during these rain events. Surrounding farms watched the rainfall strip away topsoil and flow straight out into the ocean. "We saw 30 inches of rainfall and didn't see it runoff anywhere," Zach said. Being able to capture as much rain as possible into the soil and retain it will reduce the need to irrigate for the 2023 growing season. This water capture also recharges the aquifer that has been depleted throughout the drought years and prepares the farm for droughts to come. Healthy soil creates a farm that is resilient and adaptable.

Background photo: Cover crop root system
Photo credit: Tablas Creek Vinyard

Family & Community Benefits

Nathanael expressed his concern about the next generation of farmers taking over family farms or starting their own farms. “Raising future farmers is a serious concern in ag [agriculture]. If our kids enjoy it, that increases the odds exponentially and is a big part of regenerative agriculture.” Nathanael lives on property at Fat Uncle Farms and says it is simply more enjoyable to live on a natural system. He brings his children with him around the farm and feels safe doing so knowing there are no pesticides around. He hopes that their experiences on the land will plant a seed that inspires them to follow in his footsteps.

Stefan was working in the music engineering industry before returning to his family’s land to start a regenerative ranch. He wanted to contribute to something greater than himself and pursued regenerative practices to build community resilience in a healthy space. “A lot of my friends are young ranchers, mostly around my age who are from old ranching families… I didn’t realize there were ranchers my age. A lot of them are interested in regenerative practices and are starting to implement them. They don’t want to lose their farms”, says Stefan. Not only has Las Cumbres Ranch become a place of positive change for the land, but now the whole family is a part of the management and has brought everyone closer together.

It is not only the family that benefits from regenerative practices. Workers and the surrounding community benefit as well. “Regenerative moves beyond organic because of the social fairness emphasis,” says Scott.

Scott speaks to the benefits of paying his employees a fair wage. Each one of his employees makes more than the county average for minimum wage, has a pension plan, health insurance, gas compensation for commutes, 0% interest loans, and paid time off. All of his employees are invested in the farm, and because of this, Scott sees less equipment malfunctions, fewer irrigation problems, and more enthusiasm in cultivation. If a problem arises, his farm team wants to fix it, which creates a dynamic of trust and respect between Scott and his employees. His employees have also expressed their gratitude for working in a safe environment where they are not exposed to chemical pesticides, fertilizers and herbicides. “By treating them well, they treat the business well,” says Scott.

Background photo: The crew harvesting grapes at Tablas Creek
Photo credit: Heather Daenitz

Jordan Lonborg

Tablas CreekVinyard Team
Photo Credit: Heather Daenitz

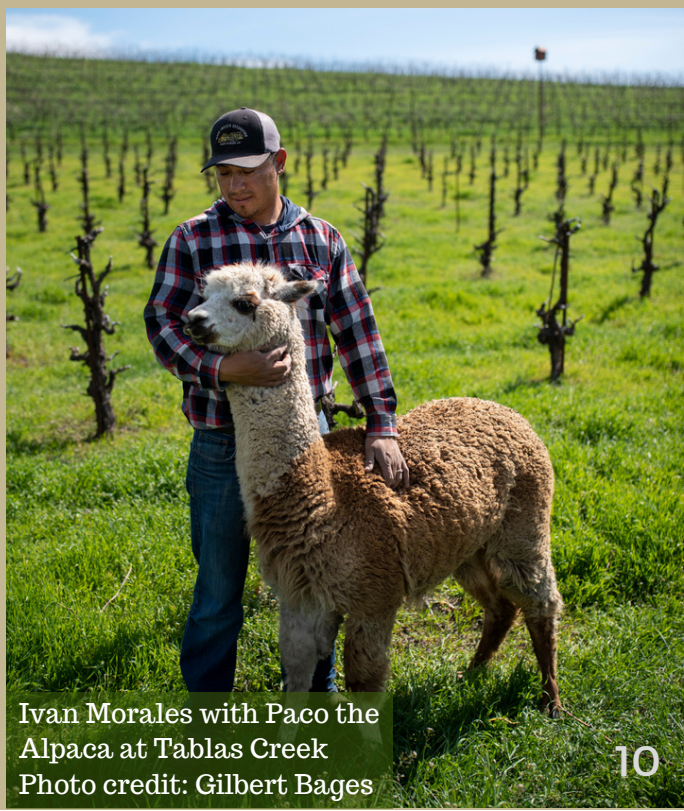
"Regenerative farming incorporates the human side. Personally, I don't think you are farming regeneratively unless everyone on the property is getting paid a living wage. You can be using regenerative practices, but you can't call yourself a regenerative farmer unless you are also focusing your resources on the people that work that land."

- Jordan

Similar to Park Farm Organics, Tablas Creek is Regenerative Organic Certified and uses ROC's living wage calculator. They invested about $200,000 in their operation to pay every worker a living wage based on ROC's calculator. The following year Tablas Creek saved $20,000 that they attribute solely to employee behavior changes. These benefits included:

- Remaining for the entire work shift even when conditions are harsh
- Improved worker efficiency
- Pride in their work and the property
- Elimination of littering in the fields

By increasing worker pay, Tablas Creek ensures the same team is always returning to the vineyard. Jordan added, "We try to have weekly meetings so everyone has a voice at the table. The discussions can be really fruitful. They are touching every vine, so they are able to notice and notify us about pest explosions, weed explosions like morning glory and star thistle. That community and communication is improving the ranch."



Ivan Morales with Paco the Alpaca at Tablas Creek
Photo credit: Gilbert Bages

Making the Switch

Regenerative Management Training being held at Jalama Canyon Ranch
Photo credit: White Buffalo Land Trust

These changes do not happen overnight or even in a single growing season. The shift to regenerative has been a long-term investment for these farmers.

The benefits of regenerative management are cascading and abundant. As Scott has informed us, it all begins with soil health and everything builds off of that foundation. Increased soil health will lead to a productive and balanced system that will no longer require costly, synthetic inputs. The land will start to feed and protect itself and in turn, benefit everyone involved. The cumulative benefits bring resilience to the land, as well as to farmers and ranchers. These farmers have all expressed a deep sense of fulfillment in their work and pride for their land, something every farmer deserves to feel.

“If you aren’t investing in your farm, what are you doing? You’re tearing it down; You are positioning yourself to have to spend more money in the long run,” Scott says. Regenerative management is a solution that can keep farm land productive for generations to come.

To learn more, you can start your regenerative journey by visiting: https://www.whitebuffalolandtrust.org/resources

Additional Resources:

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education:
https://www.sare.org/grants/

Cooperative Extension Serveices:
https://www.almanac.com/cooperative-extension-services

USDA natural resources conservation service:
https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs-initiatives/cig-conservation-innovation-grants

Photo credit: Tablas Creek Vinyard