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Matt Eastland:
We're living in a time where agriculture is facing some of its biggest challenges yet. Climate change, soil degradation, biodiversity loss and economic pressures are pushing farmers and the land and ecosystems that they care for to the brink. But within this crisis lies the potential for revolution, one that regenerative agriculture is leading. But here's the thing, the path to success in regenerative farming isn't a smooth one. In fact, it's full of setbacks, failed experiments and really tough lessons. And that's why in today's episode we're taking a closer look at the role of failure in transforming approaches to farming, how mistakes and missteps have driven some of the most innovative breakthroughs in agriculture. Hi everyone, I'm Matt Eastland and welcome to the Food Fight podcast from EIT Food. Exploring the greatest challenges in our food system and the innovators dedicated to solving them. To talk us through this regenerative rollercoaster, I'm joined by Sarah Langford, a barrister turned farmer, author and regenerative farming advocate. After transitioning from law in the city to managing her family's rural Suffolk farm, she's become a leading voice of sustainable agriculture. And her best-selling books, including Rooted, explore the challenges of modern farming and highlight the importance of regenerative practices in addressing environmental and economic issues. Sarah, welcome to the show. Thank you very much. Lovely to have you here. And making his second appearance on The Food Fight is Patrick Holden, CBE, a pioneering organic dairy farmer and co-founder of the Sustainable Food Trust. With over 40 years of experience, he's been a leading advocate for ecological farming, prioritising environmental health, animal welfare and sustainable food systems. His work in farming, advocacy and global change has made him one of the most respected voices in regenerative agriculture. Great to have you on the show again, Patrick.

Patrick Holden:
Well, thank you very much for inviting me.

Matt Eastland:
So Patrick, we had you on the show, I think we were saying back in 2022, and I think we spoke about the definition of regenerative, which everybody seems to want to know about. Obviously, since then, you know, a lot has happened and that has changed a lot. So I just wanted to get both of your takes. What does regenerative farming mean to you? So Sarah, maybe I can start with you first.

Sarah Langford:
I've got a friend called George Young, who is a farmer in Essex, and I think he came up for me with the really sort of essence of the short answer, which is that you're putting back in more than you're taking out. Ultimately, at the end of your rotation, whether that's

four years or seven years or whatever, when you've measured everything, water holding capacity, soil life, life above and below ground, you've got much more of it than when you started, but you're still farming it, still getting food off it.

Matt Eastland:
That's probably the simplest, shortest answer I've ever heard. Patrick, can you beat that?

Patrick Holden:
Not really. It doesn't surprise me that Sarah won on this one. After all, she's got a razor-sharp mind and she's very articulate. I think there are supposed to be out there somewhere five principles which I couldn't recite of regenerative farming, but one of them I know is don't disturb the soil. But controversially, I think that there are occasions and places where ploughing is appropriate, as long as you farm in a biological way. But I guess it's yes, it's farming in harmony with nature. It's practicing the law of return. And it's building natural and social capital at the end of your rotation, as Sarah says, however long that is. and we're at the end of hopefully a period of extractive farming and regenerative farming is rather a good term because it does what it says on the tin. It regenerates what we've lost hopefully, but of course we need to establish that by measurement.

Matt Eastland:
If you could go back in time, what advice would you give your younger selves starting out in regenerative agriculture? So if there was one thing that you could say to your younger self before you embarked on this journey, what would it be? Patrick?

Patrick Holden:
When we came here, I was a member of a back-to-the-land commune, and we really did have a PhD in naivety. We didn't know what we were doing. We bought the farm on an impulse. We just thought, let's do it. In a certain way, I would say to my younger self, of course, you should have learned by studying for years, maybe gone to an agricultural college or something like that. We didn't do that. I learned farming by doing and in some ways I think I don't regret that. I think I'd say do it again and maybe I could give the advice to a person who's now 22 as I was when we arrived here and I'd say just do it because you'll learn from your mistakes which is great and when you're young you have this attitude that anything's possible and I think fear is what stops us doing a lot of the things that we'd like to do but never do. And when you're young, somehow that doesn't apply for a short period. So give it a go.

Matt Eastland:
So you would double down on your PhD in naivety, which I love, by

the way. Thank you, Patrick. Sarah, what about you? What would you tell your younger self?

Sarah Langford:
Two pieces of advice which I wish I could have given my incredibly naive and possibly slightly arrogant self that I could just like flip from one completely different life into another. One is that some of the things that you perceived as your weaknesses would turn out to be your strengths. Like being the only woman in a farmyard at an arable field, not having a particular fetish for farm machinery. like the other men that I was standing with. And also, whilst I come from a farming family, and so I don't know, large animals didn't scare me or dead things didn't scare me. I had been living in the city for a very long time. But coming from outside something can be a huge strength, because it makes you ask the question, why? You already look like you don't know anything. You already don't know anything. So you lose no face by saying, but why do you do it like that? And I think also that I wish I'd understood that it would change the way that I saw everything, because you have to change the way that you look at your fields when you're farming regeneratively, because one of the five principles is diversity. keeping the ground covered, not turning the soil, integrating animals and so on. And so we are so used to looking at a farm and thinking that's a good farm and that could be a very neatly trimmed hedge and a monoculture wheat field that all stands at the same height and no animals anywhere near an arable field but instead dotted around a very big pasture field. That is the opposite in regenerative farming. You've got sheep in an arable system. I've brought back sheep into the arable system as a tool. When you look at regenerative fields, you will see a variety of plants. Some of them are called weeds. They're still quite helpful in some respects because they tell you what's going on underneath the ground. And you will grow a diversity of plants, whether that's something like oats and beans together or different varieties of wheat together, whatever it is. But when you start to change the way you look, train yourself to change the way you look at that, you find that it goes into other areas of your life, where you look at diversity being the sort of secret weapon of all strength, whether that's on boardrooms, in cities, social groups, whatever it might be. So the way that you look at sort of failure and success changes, And the principles that you apply, the most obvious one, which of course Patrick has been talking about for years, which is that everything is connected. You can't make a decision in isolation and not expect there to be a ripple. You just might not know what it is yet. So the idea of a silver bullet has never really existed because there will be a consequence even if it's accidental. So I think that was a really unexpected lesson that these principles about farming could actually completely alter how you saw all other parts of life.

Matt Eastland:
Wow, I hadn't realised that it was, you know, kind of all consuming like that, but it's amazing that it is. And Sarah, you've already

started talking about your story, which I love. So you've gone from being a barrister to a regenerative farmer, and you write about your story in your book, Rooted Stories of Life, Land and a Farming Revolution, which is really hailed as being like the go to book in the space. So anyone who wants to read it,

Sarah Langford:
There are other books.

Matt Eastland:
I'm sure there are, but this one is definitely the best. Why did you feel the need to go from your successful law career into farming? And was that transition the thing that inspired the book?

Sarah Langford:
Well, I guess the word need is working really hard in that sentence because it was definitely not a plan. I've never really had a plan. So this is, I guess, another thing that regenerative farming teaches you. You can't control stuff. You just have to be open to what lessons might come up. So I was a criminal and family barrister. So I did live in London, but I travelled all over the country going to courts that I imagine no one listening will have ever visited to represent people who've done very bad things or were accused of doing very bad things. And then I had two children, which is not a sensible move if you've got to be in court every day. But while I was doing that, I got a book deal to write my first book, which is called In Your Defense, which is a sort of hybrid of a memoir and a narrative nonfiction account of the stories of the people I represented. Whilst I was writing that, my husband lost his job. We had just bought our first house that either of us had owned in London, but we couldn't live in it because no one else wanted to buy it because it was in such bad nick. and so we thought well there's no point staying here paying that let's get out of here and so we moved to Suffolk where we had been going back and forward for years anyway because that's where he grew up and we rented a cottage and his dad had always had a dream of being a farmer and at the age of sort of 81 or whatever he was, he finally realised it by buying 180 acres of very conventional, intensively farmed arable near the 50 acres of pasture that they had slowly built up. So being unemployed and naive and possibly a bit arrogant about it, we were like, oh, we'll do it. How hard can it be? And had no idea of the kind of consequences of that decision. Neither did my literary agent, who after my first book, which did quite well, and she was convinced that this was going to be a path for me to write a very lucrative series of crime fiction novels, because that would be an obvious thing for a criminal barrister to do, I had to turn around to her and go, I'm completely obsessed by this. It's all life is there. Everyone is going to be looking at this. I can feel it. But this was back in, I guess, 2018 when even the word regenerative was really niche. No one was talking about it, let alone Nestlé and PepsiCo. And she initially just held her arms up on a massive cross and said,

absolutely no way. What are you doing? Farming is so boring. No one will read that. And so I eventually kind of wore her down on the basis that this, at its heart, is about people. They're human stories. And farmers, a bit like the people that I used to represent in court, are treated in quite a black and white way by the majority of people who eat the food that they produce. And every sort of third Guardian article I read in the city told me that farmers were responsible for the majority of ecological catastrophe. And what I did know, because my uncle was an incredibly stellar vocal farmer, he had a column in Farmers Weekly, which is like the Bible for all arable farmers particularly, where he just talked about how fed up he was of carrying all the risk of what they were producing, food being a commodity, and getting paintballed by people who lived in the city for what he had been asked to do. So I sort of saw it a little bit like a follow on from my old job. This was, in a way, the sort of defence case, which was not that they hadn't done it, but it was the context in which those decisions were made and where we're going now. And the stories of the people who taught me how to farm but were also reached that wall. They were like they either cannot carry on doing it like this because they just cannot afford to, or they had that feeling in their gut that they just didn't want to anymore.

Matt Eastland:
Patrick, just obviously your story is a little different. So your journey started in sustainable farming back in the 1970s, and then you've been leading the way on regenerative agriculture with the Soil Association and Sustainable Food Trust as well. So as a pioneer in sustainable farming, I'm interested to understand, you know, what were some of the setbacks that you've experienced? You know, because obviously, when, as you said yourself, back in the 1970s, you kind of started from scratch, not really knowing what you were doing or where you were going. So can you give some highlights of some early setbacks?

Patrick Holden:
You could look at it through a certain lens, say the whole thing's just been a succession of setbacks. and culminating in the fact that, you know, the transition to regenerative farming becoming the norm, a lot of people want it to happen, but it isn't happening anywhere near fast enough. So, you know, after all these years, we're at the beginning, really. Just before I answer that, I was touched by what Sarah said, because I think learning from your mistakes and recognizing that your weak areas can sometimes be the most important areas in your life. I think it's deeply true. And you know this word, vulnerability, it comes from the Latin, vulnero, I wound. And in a way, we need to be wounded by our experience. And that's when we learn. And I'll give you a current example. We've got an amazing field of carrots. I just showed you the carrots. They are, for all our listeners, incredible bunch of carrots. Amazing. They would have been for Sarah, but I got stuck in Wales. But right next to this field of carrots, well, acre of carrots, is the rest of

the field. growing the weediest crop of oats and peas that we've ever grown in our 51-year history. So weedy is it that we've mown it to see if the combine will pick it up once it's dried up a bit. It's an experiment. I don't think the combine driver's going to like it. So we're still learning from our mistakes on a daily basis. But if you just kind of expand that into a bigger picture, I think, you know, there's a really interesting question. Why isn't the transition happening faster? And I think finance is the biggest barrier to change. If you try to do what Sarah's been brave enough to do, what I've been trying to do for many years, you'll quickly find that it doesn't pay as well as if you farm in an extractive way. And that's because the polluter doesn't pay and the subsidies have been misdirected. Society doesn't value the natural capital, the social capital that has been destroyed during my farming lifetime. If you're farming as we do, one quickly realizes that there isn't a very good business case for it. In my case, I've got a day job. And also we're lucky enough to be producing quite a high value cheese, so we're sort of overcoming that barrier on a single farm basis. But if you speak to our neighbours, they all came round here. Just three nights ago they came round, it's called the Lampeter Discussion Group. very important group of just all the farmers in the region. And they came around, and we walked the fields, and we saw the third cut silage, and we looked around. And you could see the whole experience was probably quite disturbing for them, because they were thinking, well, I like what I see here, but I don't think I could apply it on my farm. And they're kind of not wrong. And I suppose that makes me feel very reflective that after all these years, we haven't created the conditions where the transition that everybody is talking about can actually happen at scale. So I think it's really important in one's life to recognize that it's not, as Sarah said, just about what you succeed in. It's about the challenge that is created by failure. And I hope that we're at some sort of inflection point today where many people are thinking about this in a deeper way than ever has been the case before, and things could change in a positive direction quite soon.

Matt Eastland:
We're here to talk about failures and learning in terms of regenerative. Can I sort of transition to asking you another big question? So what's your biggest fail with regenerative farming and what have you learned from it? So Sarah, can you give us a snapshot of probably like the worst thing that happened for you in regenerative or maybe the best learning that you had?

Sarah Langford:
Well, I guess because it's the most recent, like I've definitely taken a bet. It's just maybe hands over 50 quid because I lost it, which was one of the principles of regenerative is to keep the land covered as much as possible. But when you are not relying on glyphosate to kill your winter cover crop or weeds, then you have to turn the soil. You have to find a way to create a tilth into which you plant. And there are. plenty of people who are trying to do

experiments with what we would call living mulches, where you'd sow directly into them. We've done that, disaster, like crimson clover right out the top. It's very interesting in loads of other ways, but not an ideal scenario for growing wheat. And so last winter, which I think was the wettest winter for 150 years, was a Nissan Micra floating down our village high street, for example. and all the very intense conventional farmers near us to just sown their winter wheat, which was then just brown water flowing everywhere. And we had a field which has got a slight, it's a big field, it's got a slightly sticky slightly sticky lower half if that doesn't sound too weird. Anyway, moving quickly on. And I sat there arguing really hard. We didn't need to plough it up and put a cover crop in over winter because what we had got in there already would serve as a cover crop. So I have a contractor called Richard who I write about in Rooted and we sort of have basically a farm partnership together. This was debated hard by Richard. He was right. And so the entire half a field has not been cropped this year because come spring, when it also rained and rained and rained, you cannot go in there with a plough because you just create concrete. That was a lesson in humiliation and probably respecting my elders and learning from 45 years of farming experience as opposed to five. You knew best, surely. I did in that moment, but I know better now.

Matt Eastland:
So it's £50 down plus, I imagine, quite a lot of money from a potential crop as well.

Sarah Langford:
Absolutely that. Although, you know, we'll see. This is the big lesson in farming, is that the experiments take a year. Actually, to be honest, sometimes more. because something that you will have planted, maybe you've done an experiment where you've undersown trefoil in a crop. Two years later, you'll look at the field and go, that's so weird. That is way thicker and greener. than the rest. Oh, that's where we did that experiment three years ago.

Matt Eastland:
So it's still having... You almost have to mark out the places where you did the experiment.

Sarah Langford:
The secret is to keep a record so that you can go back on it and go, God, you know, the legacy that is still there is still benefiting us. So it's kind of like treating your entire seven year cycle maybe as a bank. So you cannot just take one year and go, that's my profit this year. You look at the whole thing all in one. which is saying, well, actually, I stashed loads of savings then and I'm going to take it out in two years' time. But that means a lot of sitting on your hands in a world where we've all got quite short attention spans and want immediacy.

Matt Eastland:
And also trying, I imagine, lots of experiments and never quite knowing which one's going to cash out at some point, so to speak.

Sarah Langford:
Yeah, totally. And then chuck in a storm and chuck in a frost and chuck in an August that rains and no April showers and there's no control test.

Matt Eastland:
Yeah. Patrick, so you must have done some serious experimentation over the years. What was some of your biggest fails in terms of that experiment?

Patrick Holden:
I think it's very interesting to think of farming as ecosystems management. It's absolutely not passive farming. You are intervening. If you shut the gates like they did at NEP, then obviously nature comes back. But that's not what we're doing. We're trying to strike the right balance between farming in harmony with nature, but the crop getting the upper hand, as it were. That doesn't always happen. And I have an ongoing struggle with the right degree of intervention. So we have quite challenging soils and Sarah does too on some of her farm. We have silt soils which like to grow rushes in a very wet climate and we can do something about that with mole ploughing which is a kind of subsoiling it's like drawing a metal tine through the soil to structure it a bit and bring air into it. And I think the purists would say, well, that's very interventionist. You should just leave it to do its own thing. And that is definitely not what we are doing. Not that you want to plough all the time. If you plough and grow monocultures, that's terrible for the soil. But if you plough shallow and you plough carefully, I think that's a very important way of getting a clean seedbed for a crop. And so it's really learning the balance. And I think that if I look at the issue that is playing out on the regen stage at the moment, which I think is important to highlight. and it's related to ploughing or not ploughing, the majority of the farmers who, say, went to groundswell, which is a most amazing sort of Glastonbury for regenerative farmers, happens every year and it's brilliant, but the majority of the arable farmers going to groundswell, I think, are still quite heavily dependent on Roundup or glyphosate to control weeds. And I'm certain that that chemical would be banned within the next few years because there's more and more evidence emerging that it's harmful for human beings but also for nature. And so really designing a system which is truly biologically rooted and not reliant on occasional chemical intervention I think is a challenge for all of us and it remains our challenge even after 50 years as I've demonstrated with our field which is called Welsh Blackfield.

Matt Eastland:
Thank you, Patrick, and you make a point there, which, of course, in any conversation about regenerative, you need to bring it up. It's about soil health. And I guess I'm quite interested in what are the most challenging aspects of of soil health restoration that you've come across? Because obviously, in order to kind of bank something so that you can get it all back later, you hope. you need to invest in the soil. And I imagine particularly when you're going from, you know, like traditional farming to regenerative, that can be extremely complicated. So are there any aspects of soil health restoration that, you know, you think we should highlight here and about how difficult or maybe easy that is? I don't know.

Sarah Langford:
We've got pretty heavy clay soils. Man's land, I was told. Man's land. Man's land, not boy's land, man's land. And they are hard. I mean, they're great to grow crops in, in some respect, because they hold onto water, but you can mess them up really easily by getting machinery on them at the wrong time and compacting them. And that we have definitely done. So I have done hole digging where you can see the compaction just not reading it completely right on the day. And it's really tricky to do that. particularly when you're trying to farm in a way that gives you no get out of jail free card. Because when you're farming conventionally, there will be a bag for something, whether that's a bag to kill aphids or a bag to kill snails, you know, you can you can spray your way out of a problem. I would argue you win the battle, but you'll absolutely ultimately lose the war. You're spraying your way out of that problem and no doubt creating another one that's going to rear its head in a few years time. But when you're farming organically and all of those tools are taken away from you, you're relying on constant observation. And so, yeah, it's really easy to compact our soils by just going on them at the wrong time or going too deep or getting it wrong. But what I have learned, I guess, over the last few years is that the answer to the answer to it, like everything else is plants. So we have one the field with the wet lower half, that went in, that was our first field that we put into what we call a herbal lay, which is basically just like a really diverse mixture of plants, some of which have got incredibly deep roots, which is basically sort of like a nature's plow. And it went in, I guess, for nearly, well, just over a year. And when we plowed that up, the soil was completely transformed. And it was a field that previously had been sprayed three times with glyphosate and had five Lithuanian men pulling out wild oats by hand and black grass by hand because the weed burden was so high in it. I mean, you can never say never, but neither of those two problems have come back to the level that they're a real problem. And so taking a land out to, and Verticom is rest it, but actually nothing restful is happening. There's so much happening underneath. It's restoring. It's actively restoring it by allowing it a chance to come alive again.

Patrick Holden:
That's absolutely right.

Matt Eastland:
Yeah, I was going to say, Patch, I can see you nodding away in the background here.

Patrick Holden:
But I think I just want to amplify that. Herbal Lays, we use nothing but Herbal Lays now on all our reseeds. we've abandoned all sort of nanospecies mixes in favor of herbal lays. And again, Sarah's so right that the best way to deal with arable weeds is through a proper rotation with a long term bit of grass. And that's one of the thing, the big barriers to transition at the moment is that the public have a misunderstanding about the role of livestock. in truly sustainable farming systems because they alone can turn the herbal layer or the grass bit or the pasture bit of the rotation into food that we can eat. And more than that, their manures and their grazing habits have a fantastically regenerative impact on soil health. So a lot of farmers, I think, would be very worried to introduce livestock into their systems because they've probably not got any effective buildings anymore. They don't have stock persons who know how to look after animals. They don't have the fences and the water, all the other infrastructure you need. But more than that, they would be worried that people wouldn't want to eat the meat that comes from those systems, because they're all going plant based. So I think, you know, across the fence in the towns and cities of the world, we have a parallel challenge, which is we need to take the public on a journey to get them to understand the real story behind the food they need to eat for the future, which does involve grass-fed and mainly grass-fed livestock. And I think the only way to achieve that is to get them out on farms and give them a seeing is believing experience.

Matt Eastland:
Definitely, definitely. And I'm just sort of reflecting on some of the things you're saying there, Patrick, as well. It feels to me there's a lot of unlearning to be done here. you know, not just from the public side, but also from the farming side. And I guess I'm, I'm interested, you know, what, based on your experiences, if you have a, you know, a farmer who wants to make the transition, what kind of things do they need to unlearn before they can then learn how to be a regenerative farmer? I mean, Sarah, from your experience, what, what, what have you unlearned that you know, that everybody needs to unlearn?

Sarah Langford:
Well, I had the great advantage of not knowing anything. That was actually genuinely a very good advantage. And I think it's important

to remember that conventional has been conventional for 70 years out of the whole of farming's history. It's a great word trick to call it conventional, but it's not been around that long. Well, I get the experience of being at agricultural college or universities is now, my dad went there 40 years ago to become a land agent. Not entirely sure, much has changed in the syllabus. No, they would be very cross with me saying that because they are doing, they're making great strides. But what, I think you're right, and I not only have had loads of farmers say it to me directly, but I've seen it from other sort of, you know, WhatsApp groups and things like that, where people go, this is making me unlearn everything that I have thought was right and have been taught. That's really hard and so the first chapter of my book is about my uncle Charlie who farmed from the age of 23 up until when he retired literally two years ago at 60 in circumstances which you'll have to read the book to find out. But To say that you have spent your whole life, which has not been an easy one, and where you've been right on the edge of potentially bankruptcy or not being able to feed your own family, growing food for other people, and to say that you not only have maybe been doing it wrong but have actually caused real harm, It's a hell of a thing to ask anyone to say. And so I think that's why I prefer a route of, that's where the goalposts were then. We were in a post-war generation where we needed to make as much food as we could, as quickly as we could, otherwise this island nation would be starved into defeat. We were really good at doing that. Now we produce enough food to feed 3 billion more people than actually exist, 40% of which is thrown away or wasted. We don't need those goalposts anymore, we need different ones. And these are the new goalposts. So without any judgment or shame, this is the new direction of travel. And the lucky thing about that is that you get to be heroes again, because this is not just about growing food. It's also about stopping the village from being flooded downstream and creating clean air and keeping rainwater in the field so that in the inevitable droughts that are coming, we aren't suffering so much. And now that you've got radical things like green prescribing rather than pills beginning to come in to create a place where communities can reintegrate with farms as places that they are part of rather than something over the hedge that are not allowed to go into.

Matt Eastland:
I love what you're saying about you get to be heroes again. I can really see how that might, you know, spin it for people so that they can, you know, understand why that transition is necessary. And Patrick, you speak to farmers and people in this space all the time. Is that narrative starting to cut through that actually it's not about that, you know, you failed in the past and now you just need to do things differently, but actually it's more of like an evolution and you're just, to Sarah's point, just changing the goalpost. Is that going to work with farmers, do you think?

Patrick Holden:
I think with me it needs to go further than that because I think

during quite a lot of my career, my sort of day job career, I've been seen as, you know, somebody who's been angry at conventional agriculture but after extensive anger management therapy, which is not entirely succeeding, I now realise that it's important to acknowledge to conventional farmers by which we mean farmers who are still responding to the old signals, that of course they would have done it that way, because they were following the best business case. And sometimes when you say that to a farmer, you can see the relief, because they're so used to feeling on the wrong side of my angry rhetoric or whatever. If I say, look, unlike me, who had privileges, you had to follow the business case, and you did, and, you know, well done for doing that, but let's see if we could work together to change the signals that we're all under. I think that's the important thing, that everybody, especially me, hates to be criticised. I think I realized that a bit late in the day, you could say, but I do see that now, that when these farmers came around the farm the other night, I think my test for myself was not to antagonize any of them or make them leave the farm feeling, you know, what a bastard, sort of thing. And I think I succeeded, actually. I think that made me feel very good afterwards, because one or two of the farmers, when they left, you know, there were about 35 of them, And we walked around the farm, then we had tea and flapjacks and stuff. And as they left, one or two of them came up and said, that was really, really, really interesting. And I said, oh, what's your thing? And they said, I'm an intensive dairy farmer. But it wasn't said with shame. It was just said, that's what I'm doing. And that meant a lot to me.

Matt Eastland:
That's really nice to hear and kudos to you for that and I just hope these sorts of things can continue and I really like the fact that this is not a blame thing. I think that's super important. It sounds to me like a lot of this is quite emotional. You know, and it feels, you know, we talk about the rollercoaster of regenerative. It actually sounds to me more like the emotional rollercoaster of generative. And I'm interested from you both. How do you balance a sense of optimism with obviously what are the stark realities of economic pressure and environmental uncertainty, et cetera, et cetera, for farmers? How I mean, I can maybe like you said, you're both in a in a privileged position, but If someone was trying to get into this space, how do they balance that? Any advice or tips that you have to kind of get over that, Sarah?

Sarah Langford:
I always thought that farming is not a job, it's an identity. And that's why the criticism stings so hard, because it's not what you do, it's who you are. And if that is a third generation, fourth generation, fifth generation scenario that's even weightier. Because in a farm office somewhere, there will be a photograph of someone who died before you were even born, who bought the land that you're now farming. And woe betide you if you let that ball drop on your watch. It's not really about you. It's about an entire legacy. and

that's why it's so hard to take the risks that this requires but I think that the crossroads we're at I guess have left people with not that many other ways out of this because inevitable biological resistance to many of the sprays that intensive conventional pharmacy using has come about. So you might, as I say, win the battle, but you're not going to win the war. You're getting a huge amount of pressure from government and community to change as well. And now there is the sort of connectivity to enable you to learn how to do that in a way that there never has been. So everyone loves a bit of kind of roadside farming where you look over your neighbor's hedge and make your own judgments about it, to the point where a friend of mine says one of his clients used to spray the two tram lines of wheat next to the road with two extra loads of fertilizer so they would be bigger than the others. Now you don't just have to compare yourself to your neighbors because the world is connected. So in places like social media, or even on, you know, if anyone is listening and is interested in finding out more, the starting place that I would suggest is to go to the Groundswell website, which has its own YouTube channel. And this Regenta Farming Festival has got huge, brilliant free resources on it, which cover a massive range of kind of topics. And you can look on that or Instagram or TikTok or whatever and go, do you know what? There's a guy or girl that's doing what I want to do. And it turns out that maybe like an hour and a half away and they're doing it and they're posting on here. And so just because all my neighbors think I'm mad doesn't mean it's impossible. which means that there is a great collective and one of the kind of, given that we're supposed to be talking about failure, one of the fascinating things I think about regenerative farming is that it's all about failure. It's all about telling people what you did wrong rather than what you did right so that they don't have to make the same mistake. I can't express how extraordinary that is in farming because you would never tell people what you cocked out, not really. So much so that I was talking to someone the other day and they said when they got back from their year out in Australia, maybe to 40 years ago, they tried to find the contractor in their part of the world that was the most successful. And they went to all the farms that they were working at and asked the landowners, how are you doing this? And they're like, well, we can't tell you because we signed a non-disclosure agreement. So the contractor had physically stopped or legally stopped the landowners from even talking about how their farm was farmed. That is radically different now. So you will go to Groundswell or you will be in these spaces or farmer cluster groups, which I think are very powerful, which are just a collection of neighbours coming together basically to learn from each other. where you're saying, I got this completely wrong. I really wouldn't try that. Or I did that and maybe I would have tried it differently the next way around. So this openness about failure, which removes the ego from it, the competitiveness from it, and it makes it a very kind of collaborate, galvanizing movement, which is also really fun to be involved in, especially if you've watched, as some of my friends have, watched your dad on a tractor for the last 30 years and thought, no way am I doing that. No way. And now they are going, this is such a different job.

Matt Eastland:
That's so cool. So this is a, this feels to me, I mean, I know regenerative is a, is a different way of saying things, but it's actually a complete mindset shift in terms of, you know, Patrick, you were talking at the start about being vulnerable. It feels like, you know, it gives you permission to just start talking to people about, I completely messed this up. Oh, you completely messed that up. What did you learn from that? And Patrick, has that, has that been your finding as well? When you talk to people, you, I imagine people get, start to get quite excited about it, don't they? About, oh, I tried that, experimented, innovated, totally didn't work. But you learn from it, right?

Patrick Holden:
Well, I'm an old hippie, so I'm going to quote Bob Dylan. There's no success like failure, and failure is no success at all. And I think vulnerability in the face of failure is very interesting. I know Jeremy Clarkson not well, but I met him at a party the other night, as you do. We got talking about Andy Cato's wild farm wheat failure because there wasn't enough fertility in it. And I said, you know what you ought to do? You need a rotation with at least three years of grass because that will sort it. And he said, I know that's what we're going to do. And he said, you know, a lot of people have been critical of Plantz's farm because they think it's all made up. And he said, it's absolutely not made up. I really don't know what I'm doing. I'm learning by my mistakes. And he said, interestingly enough, the biggest critic I have is Caleb, because he basically doesn't want me to go reach it. And I thought, how great is that? Because, you know, he is an amazing communicator, and I think a lot of people have learned a lot about farming, including my own boys, actually, who've grown up on a farm, from watching his programs. And I think he's in quite a good place, because he's just showing it how it is. I mean, obviously, it's a bit enhanced, but I do think the program is essentially honest. And I think a hell of a lot of farmers read exactly Jeremy Clarkson's position. They're sort of moving in a regen direction. They're still using roundup. They're trying to introduce a crop rotation. They're not quite sure what it should look like, but they're certainly watching him and seeing what he does and who's going to win, you know, Jeremy versus Caleb.

Matt Eastland:
That's right. We're talking Clarkson's Farm here for anyone listening and I love that. I mean, it's been a fascinating watch and I totally binge it every single time it comes in because it does expose the challenges and I like his brutal honesty. He goes into it not knowing what he's doing, but let's give it a go to your points.

Patrick Holden:
And also, by the way, who's the biggest influence on him? It's Lisa, of course, who grew up on an organic farm.

Matt Eastland:
Think about it. Who is hands on, I mean, like incredible.

Sarah Langford:
It does go to another point, Patrick, that whole thing about that one year of farming being a failure. I mean, that in itself is exactly what we've been talking about. If you've eaten doughnuts your whole life and then someone gives you, I don't know, a quinoa salad and says, right now you can run a marathon. Surprisingly enough, you'll struggle. And so you take one field that's been farms incredibly intensely on the kind of stony Cotswolds brash and, like an addict, wean it off everything cold turkey. I've never heard it referred to like that before. That's what you're doing. You're going cold turkey. The soil is going cold turkey. I mean, you know, for wild farms you are allowed to use a bit of artificial fertiliser, although you have to test it to make sure that the plant actually needs it first. But in terms of pesticides, you're out. So any disease, insects, anything like that, you cannot use any insecticide, fungicide, herbicide. So this farm has been completely, this soil is basically sort of growing matter. It's not soil, it's hydroponics. You've just been adding what you need to it. And it's got to be able to come alive again. And growing one year of wheat in it and saying, well, that's failed, shows you really how essential is to think of this farming system exactly as Patrick said as a rotation, as a long book rather than one chapter where everything bleeds into each other, they're all interwoven and you cannot experiment with this and think I'm just going to try that and well that didn't work so I'm just going to duck out now. completely re-evaluating it and as you said earlier, it is all down to the soil. If your soil's dead, you're not going to be able to grow anything in it that's going to thrive unless you add all the potions that it's been used to. Give it three years though, especially if you put a load of grass and cows on it and it will be a totally, totally different story because you're giving it a chance to become alive again and then you will be able to plant something in it and watch what it's supposed to do.

Matt Eastland:
And you talk about, I quite like this metaphor is like regenerative farming as a book. I'm interested in the next chapter. So, I mean, Patrick, since we last spoke, lots have changed, you know, lots of focus on regenerative. I imagine and I'm hopeful that This is going to be the case and things are going to accelerate as we go forward. So where do you see this space going? And I guess if I could add another question, what excites you most about where we're going next with regenerative? Patrick, maybe I could start with you.

Patrick Holden:
Well, I, in 2020, joined an initiative called the Sustainable

Markets Initiative, which was launched by the then Prince of Wales, now King Charles at Davos. And his big idea was that we'll never get the transition to climate and nature-friendly everything. in the time available, unless we involve CEOs of the world's biggest companies. And even though, you know, my anger management might have failed in the past, I've met some of these people and never thought I would, but I now know some of these CEOs and they're all really, obviously, highly intelligent and successful, but they're nice people and they've got children and they've got consciences. And what really strikes me about them is they don't quite know. I mean, even the ones that are running food businesses, they don't know about farming, but they know they've got to do something. And I think one of the things that can come out of the Sustainable Markets Initiative is a project called Financing the Agricultural Transition, because farmers, regenerative farmers, are delivering massive climate, nature and social benefits for which they haven't been paid. And if we could measure accurately the impact of all farming systems using a common framework so that we could have a language for measuring sustainability, which is the same in Australia as it is in Africa, as it is here, then we could start to collect data about, let's say, Sarah's farming system. If after five years she's got huge gain in soil organic matter, biodiversity and positive social outcomes, including maybe employing more people better nutrient density, all those kind of things, then that could open the way for a third income stream where farmers could be paid for those climate, nature and social benefits. That excites me because that sounds like a partnership between the food industry and the banking people and all the asset people who've got all this money floating around looking for a home. we could be paid to be stewards of nature and carbon, why not? And I think that's a real exciting possibility. And then if we could somehow link that to a labeling scheme, so people could recognize regenerative farm products in the marketplace, including, by the way, organic products. Because we haven't spoken much about the difference between organic and regenerative. Well, in an ideal world, I would say organic farmers are the ultimate regenerative farmers. They're not always succeeding in doing that, but that's our aspiration. So I see a space for organic farming and food in the marketplace as part of the bigger regenerative transition. I think it's got to happen because, frankly, there's no alternative. And Sarah's already touched upon this. We're losing all the... We can't even maintain the system we've got. It's just been too extractive.

Matt Eastland:
So I'm taking away from that some kind of global aligned true cost accounting, a true partnership among the food system players and some form of globally agreed aligned labelling system to make sure that all of this works. Sarah, is that exciting for you? Is there other things on the horizon that are also exciting you?

Sarah Langford:
I think Patrick's kind of nailed it. I mean this Friday I'm giving a

speech, terrifyingly, to 50 wealth fund managers about farming. Really? It wouldn't have even crossed their radar two years ago and they're interested in it because farmland might be a safe asset on their portfolio to invest in because there is a burgeoning market in biodiversity net grain and carbon credits. It's still a bit wild westy and we've been waiting for the government to kind of give us some sort of regulation framework about it, like a carbon code. But there is a growing interest in people that just would not have thought that this would be their subject. and that applies to people in the city. And I don't want, you can't give Jeremy Clarkson all the credit, but it is the most watched Amazon show. Its reach is phenomenal. And I've never met anyone able to explain direct drilling in a sentence before. So he is a master at making very nuanced, complicated subjects actually very accessible, whilst delivering himself up as the fool. And so we, the audience, learn with him. And he is sort of saying what everyone else is saying. It's got to go this way. Sustaining something, being sustainable, it's nowhere near enough. We can't sustain something that's completely depleted and on its knees. We have to be able to regenerate it. And I think if we're talking about failures, and this will seem really rude in front of Patrick, who, of course, was CEO of the Solid Association, but he knows I'm going to say this because we've talked about this before, but the organics as a movement has not succeeded in becoming mainstream. it's a full percent of the market. So as a concept of saying well-managed systems that put back in as much as they take out or hopefully more, that hasn't worked. And this movement that has now got not just people watching TV about it, but people in cities choosing to buy products that are made from it, or the interest of massive corporations who probably 10 years ago when Patrick was trying to convince them of this would go, well, that's just a load of heavy nonsense. We don't need to worry about that. That's no real threat to us. All of them have now got regenerative, well, their flags are up about it, but a lot of them have actually got documents that talk about where their systems are going to go. And then you've got high street shops like Waitrose and so on who are investing in or have made pledges to go regenerative in the majority of their food products, as far as I know. So that is a broad transition. And I think the transition is the key words in this, because as we've already talked about, you can't just do it in a year and expect it all to work. There is going to be pain before there's gain. And so that is the bit that needs to be financially supported by the government, in my view, because that public service that it's providing, clean air, clean water, nutrition, food, all the rest of it, is not only quantifiable. It's also tangible, as Patrick said, when Patrick was talking about like, I was thinking as you're going through your list about what I would be able to prove on our farm, because we have tested our soils. And we have had a biodiversity survey done by the local wildlife trust. But more than that, I was grabbed by a woman in the village about six months ago. And she said, you don't know me, but I know who you are. And I walk on the public footpath over your field. I say to my husband every time it smells different here. it smells different. I'm like, I think it does too. But even that in itself is a connection with someone who lives nearby, who feels like they have an investment in

this, feels like it's something that they align their walk to or whatever it might be. So it provides a massive public benefit on loads of different levels. The key is financing the transition and then allowing the private market to pick up the real bill after that.

Matt Eastland:
Got it. Got it. Thank you. And now I now I have to go and visit your farm to smell it as well.

Sarah Langford:
You're welcome. Anytime. Smell my soil.

Matt Eastland:
Weird guy just turning up smelling your soil. Folks, this has been an amazing conversation. I always feel that when we start talking about regenerative, I need like another hours and hours. But maybe there's a part B to this. Before we wrap up and if I could ask you to be as succinct as possible, what one final message would you have for any farmer out there considering the switch to regenerative? Patrick.

Patrick Holden:
I think Sarah's just touched upon it, the social impact of transition to regenerative farming, including improvement of public health, is possibly the most important of all. So people's attitude when they walk in a field which is still farmed in harmony with nature, or the improvement in their health that I believe they would experience if they ate more nutrient-dense food. These are long-lasting cultural impacts, and I think we need to measure those as well and reward farmers with social credits. I mean, just for instance, let's get every child to visit a regenerative farm while they're at an impressionable age. If we could do that and scale it, then I think that's really subversive because then you're planting seeds in the next generation who will be ruling the world in only 25 or so years time. So that's why I think this is an unstoppable force for change.

Matt Eastland:
An unstoppable force for change. Sarah, I mean, is that enough to get more farmers to switch? And, you know, any final message you have for those people considering it?

Sarah Langford:
I think I'm going to borrow the words of a farmer who's far wiser than I am, Tim Parton, who said, if you think you can, or you think you can't, you're right. This is about mindset. And the attitude with which you go into something will, in part, predetermine its

outcome. And that might be just doing something for a year and then giving up because it doesn't work exactly how you imagine it. But I think the have a go advice that so many people give is that you don't have to do what we did, go cold turkey and put the whole farm into organic, which is terrifying. You just do field. Just don't use insecticide. And maybe just one fungicide, not seven. don't pre-desiccate your crops with herbicide before they go into the food chain. The idea of really Having a go at something and then seeing if the outcome is as disastrous is less frightening if you're just doing a bit of it. And what I've seen inevitably is that people do it and just fall in love with it. And then three years later, they do things like two old guys that I was walking behind on a field walk the other day who were having competition about who had the most turtle doves on their farm. Really? Yeah, and or another farm I know who calls it crikey farming because he goes crikey I didn't expect that to happen so quickly and I was walking our farm not that long ago with Richard and he usually drives it and I usually make him walk it and this bird took off like in front of us and he went Bloody hell, I haven't seen one of those in 10 years. I went, what is it? There's a snipe. And you could see him watch thinking, that bird is here because of what I've done differently. And so once you begin to sort of start the unfolding, it's a wave. It's a wave that means that you're lifted into places that you didn't think you would go and it brings back the enjoyment and the fun of it. But that is, you can't sell that at the beginning, you have to see it to believe it. And so the go into it with an attitude that this might work and just do a bit and I'll see you in five years. I love it.

Matt Eastland:
So go into it positively, start small, experiment and see where it takes you. Love that, love it. What a lovely way to finish. So I have to ask, final thing, thank you, obviously, thank you both for everything that you've spoken about today. Where can listeners go for more information about you and all the great work that you're doing? Sarah, maybe I could just ask you to carry on.

Sarah Langford:
I've got a website called Sarah Langford Writes. And so that's probably where I post stuff that I'm speaking and things like that.

Matt Eastland:
OK, great stuff. Thank you very much, Sarah. And Patrick?

Patrick Holden:
Well, go to the website of the Sustainable Food Trust and sign up for our regular newsletter. We'd love you to do that. But also, if you want to see something more about this farm, go to at Havod Cheese, our Instagram. And if you go there, you can see the carrots that we just sent off to the Carmarthenshire schools last week. Interestingly enough, harvested by three of my four boys, two of

whom left university to come back to the farm. Now that is cause for hope.

Matt Eastland:
Wow. Yeah, that really is. Fingers crossed. You know, we're all going to be farmers soon. Thank you both for all of this. It's been an amazing conversation. Like I say, probably not enough, but super interesting. And I'm sure our listeners are going to love it. So thank you very much for coming in. Thank you for having us. Thank you. So that was Sarah and Patrick there talking about regenerative farming specifically around failing at regenerative farming and the positives that brings. So we spoke a lot during the episode about regenerative farming actually being about failure and that openness and to see it as failure, it should be seen as a strength. And Sarah really demonstrates that when she spoke about her naivety when she started regenerative farming, but she totally saw that as looking back as a real positive because you absolutely question everything. We also spoke kind of off the back of that about the fact that regenerative farming is a complete and utter mindset shift. So it's no longer about how, you know, the great your yields are or how well, you know, your farm has done. It's actually a lot more about vulnerability. And you start talking about how badly things have gone and how interesting the learnings are. And that allows you to speak to lots of other people. And the community around regenerative farming is very much more vulnerable and open than perhaps previous generations, which is really interesting. We also spoke about the fact that regenerative farming, it's not something that you can focus on in just year one. Sarah mentioned the fact that regenerative farming is like a book and every chapter brings something else. So there is a longevity thing here that, you know, after three, four, five years, you'll start to reap the rewards of regenerative. You know, she even mentioned the fact that she saw the land as basically being addicted to the chemicals, the drugs, and that you need to go cold turkey through regenerative farming. And then finally, I think both Patrick and Sarah really spoke to this, but it's, they said that for anybody who tries regenerative farming, you immediately fall in love with it because, you know, you're finally back in tune with nature and you're really starting to regenerate the land and, you know, you can really see the results. I think it's a call to action for everybody out there is, in whichever way, shape or form, let's all try a little bit of regenerative farming. Thank you once again to Patrick and Sarah for another fascinating conversation. Thank you everybody for listening in. This has been the Food Fight podcast. If you'd like to find out more, head over to the EIT Food website at www.eitfood.eu. And of course, if you haven't already, please make sure that you sign up to the show so you never miss an episode. Thanks again.