# Regenerative agriculture in the US faces criticism over pesticide use and greenwashing claims



In the United States, regenerative agriculture is rapidly gaining traction as a food system model designed to work in harmony with nature. This approach is promoted for its potential to mitigate climate change, reduce water pollution, and enhance the nutritional quality of food products by improving soil, water, and ecosystem health. It has attracted significant attention in books, films, and policy circles, notably as part of the "Make America Healthy Again" movement led by the new Health and Human Services Secretary, Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Across the US, an increasing number of farms and ranches are obtaining certification to label their grains, beef, eggs, and other goods as produced through regenerative farming methods. On a global scale, the regenerative agriculture market is forecasted to experience double-digit growth between 2023 and 2030.

Despite this surge in popularity, a report released on 29 April by Friends of the Earth (FOE), an environmental advocacy group, highlights an emerging controversy surrounding regenerative agriculture. The report criticises current regenerative agriculture programmes for permitting the use of weedkillers and other pesticides, arguing that these practices are being utilised to "greenwash" widespread pesticide use in farming.

FOE's report particularly focuses on corn and soybean production in the US, where farmers commonly employ “no-till” farming, a hallmark of regenerative agriculture that avoids traditional soil tilling to preserve soil microorganisms essential for plant health. While no-till practices have environmental benefits, FOE highlights data from the US Department of Agriculture showing that over 100 million acres of corn and soybean crops use no-till methods, with a vast majority—93%—relying heavily on toxic pesticides. These pesticides pose risks to both soil and human health, with roughly one-third of the nation’s annual pesticide use attributable to corn and soybean production under no- or minimum-till systems. Furthermore, 61% of this pesticide use involves chemicals classified as highly hazardous.

The report implicates major agrochemical corporations such as Bayer, which acquired Monsanto in 2018 and promotes regenerative agriculture as part of its future vision for farming. Bayer recommends combining regenerative farming techniques like no-till and cover crops while continuing controlled herbicide use, including glyphosate-based products like Roundup. Glyphosate has been classified by international health authorities as a probable human carcinogen, and numerous lawsuits have linked its use to cancer.

Bayer offers financial incentives to farmers who adopt regenerative practices, with potential payments of up to $12 per acre. However, FOE accuses companies like Bayer and Syngenta of capitalising on regenerative agriculture’s popularity to promote conventional no-till farming that still depends heavily on pesticides and genetically engineered seeds, casting doubt on the genuine environmental benefits of these programmes.

Bayer defended its position, stating that glyphosate-based herbicides help farmers adopt sustainable practices such as cover cropping, reducing soil erosion, and sequestering carbon. Syngenta has also expressed support for regenerative agriculture, acknowledging that chemical inputs can be useful when applied in reduced quantities. In March 2024, Syngenta announced a partnership with PepsiCo aimed at encouraging farmers to transition towards regenerative methods.

This report adds fuel to ongoing tensions between the established organic farming sector and the emerging regenerative agriculture movement. The organic industry, regulated by the US Department of Agriculture since the late 1980s, prohibits synthetic pesticides and most chemicals, promoting a distinct agricultural framework. Organic advocates argue that regenerative labels are misleading, as they can apply to farms that still rely on synthetic herbicides harmful to soil health and consumers. They also raise concerns about the lack of official government standards or oversight in regenerative agriculture certifications, which they say could enable greenwashing.

Gary Hirshberg, chairman of Organic Voices, an organic industry advocacy group, told The New Lede, “It is scientifically and ethically disingenuous to claim to be regenerating soil while you are using synthetic chemicals, which harm soil microorganisms, and it is well-established science that no-till systems actually require more, not less, chemical fertilizers and pesticides.”

In contrast, supporters of regenerative farming emphasise soil health as the foundation of planetary health, contending that herbicides, when used sparingly, are preferable to frequent tilling, which some organic farmers employ to control weeds. Andrew Margenot, associate director of the Agroecosystems Sustainability Center at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, explained, “The science is very clear on this: there is a greater net benefit to using an herbicide to enable no-till … than to avoid it altogether if that means resorting to tillage.”

Proponents describe regenerative agriculture as a gradual process that can start with no-till and herbicide use but expands to include cover crops, livestock integration, and organic soil amendments, potentially reducing or eliminating the need for chemicals over time. North Dakota farmer and author Gabe Brown, a proponent of regenerative practices, said, “One cannot claim that no-tilling alone will make a farm regenerative just like one cannot say that organic, alone, is regenerative. If an organic producer tills too often it can be highly degrading. If a no-tiller uses too many synthetics, it can be degrading.”

Brown, who founded the Regenified certification company to support farmers, also highlighted the challenges of organic certification, noting it can be costly and inaccessible for many producers. He described the current expansion of interest in regenerative agriculture as “truly making a difference … it’s exciting.”

The debate over regenerative agriculture’s credibility centres on balancing the use of chemical inputs and soil health improvements, reflecting broader tensions in US agriculture about sustainable food production approaches. The Friends of the Earth report offers a detailed critique of the regenerative agriculture movement’s current practices and corporate involvement, underscoring the complexity and contentious nature of redefining agricultural sustainability in the 21st century.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

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