

REGENERATE VIRGINIA

An action plan for regenerative agriculture



PRESTON KERES/USDA



REBECCA DROBIS



BLEND IMAGES/ALAMY

Foundations for Action

From American Farmland Trust's decades of pioneering leadership at the intersection of agriculture and the environment, we know that broader adoption of regenerative agriculture is critical—for the future of farming, our communities, and our planet.

Regenerate Virginia articulates an ambitious but achievable action plan and a forward-looking vision for agriculture. It is rooted in the current realities of what exists and what is needed in Virginia—and what could work here.

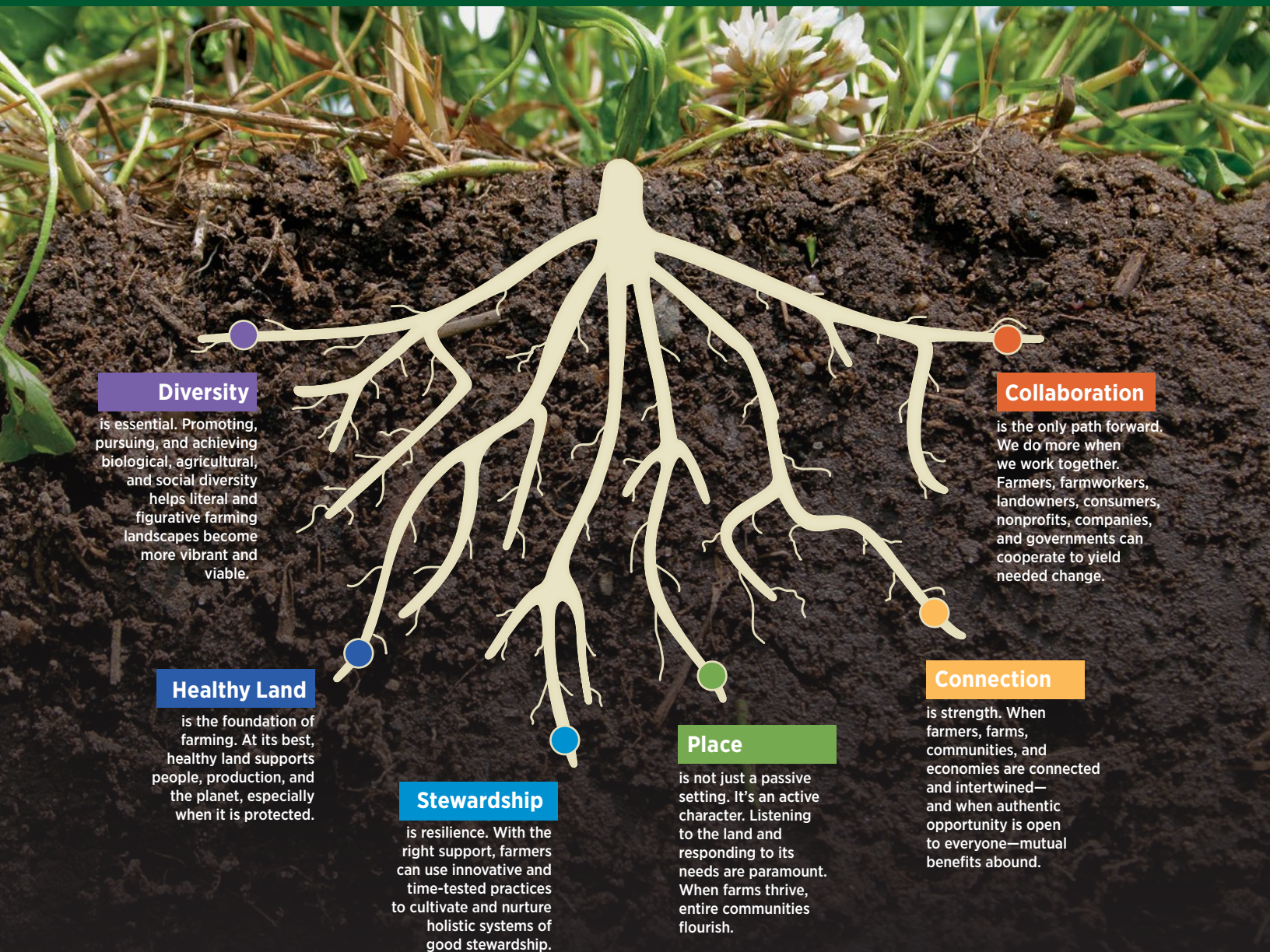
AFT had a sense of what's possible in Virginia from our engagement in current programming. We are, and have been, actively supporting the Commonwealth's farmers and leaders on the ground. But to craft a viable plan that recommends specific actions, we needed to learn more.

So we listened to more than 100 farmers through surveys, focus groups, and interviews. We explored what state and local governments are doing to advance agriculture. We investigated how Virginia's academic institutions and nonprofit organizations are supporting farming communities.

“ [Farming] is about stewardship. It's about treading lightly and leaving places better than we found them. We want to have topsoil. We want to have biodiversity. We want to have polycultures instead of monocultures. And we really want to build...a place where we can grow and learn from the land in addition to having a profit.”

— FARMER AT AFT LISTENING SESSION

The Roots of Regenerative Agriculture



USDA/NRCS

Regenerative agriculture combines practices in the field with a holistic approach to support farmland protection, land access, farm business viability, and farm communities.



In addition to this research, AFT brought our own experience, reflecting on what we've learned from our work in Virginia and through our extensive engagement in other states and regions.

We also brought a bias. AFT does not see regenerative agriculture as being only about better practices. To us, there are inextricable linkages between the land itself, the practices that occur on that land, and the people who steward that land.

The most forward-looking agricultural practices—as essential as they are—will never realize their full potential unless there is sufficient farmland. Similarly, the many environmental benefits of regenerative practices will prove short-lived if the farmland does not remain in agriculture—demonstrating the critical role of permanently protecting farmland.

Finally, none of this holds together unless farmers can make a living following the best practices, and unless we cultivate a new and more diverse generation of farmers who have secure, long-term access to land and are equipped to be successful.

We can only advance regenerative agriculture through a comprehensive systems approach. Thus, the action plan articulated in *Regenerate Virginia* is multifaceted. It recognizes and builds on existing state government programs, supports and expands the important work already begun by local organizations, and fills crucial gaps with new initiatives.

We invite you to read this executive summary and then turn to the full report. Reflect on its findings and recommendations and roll up your sleeves. Join us in our shared effort to Regenerate Virginia: farmland.org/regeneratevirginia.

By embracing rotational grazing, reduced tillage, cover cropping, and silvopasture, Virginia can reduce its emissions by **960,000 metric tons** of carbon dioxide equivalent annually as measured by AFT's CaRPE™ tool, offsetting about 15% of Virginia agriculture's emissions.



Virginia could address generational turnover head-on, adding at least **26,000 new farmers** by 2050. Given trends over the last few decades, this outcome signals a much-needed redirection for Virginia agriculture.



“Climate change is...something that I keep in mind every day that I'm outside. [And] that motivates me...to combat climate change [through] carbon sequestering by nature.”

— FARMER AT AFT LISTENING SESSION

“In high land cost areas like mine, land access really is the key. Without owning a ‘base’ of acreage, it’s more difficult to make long term investments in infrastructure and regenerative practices. If there was a pool of conserved land that was available only for agriculture to be purchased by farmers willing to practice sustainable ag, that would be a game changer for local production, especially for folks not born into farming families or with more sizeable outside income streams.”

— FARMER AT AFT LISTENING SESSION

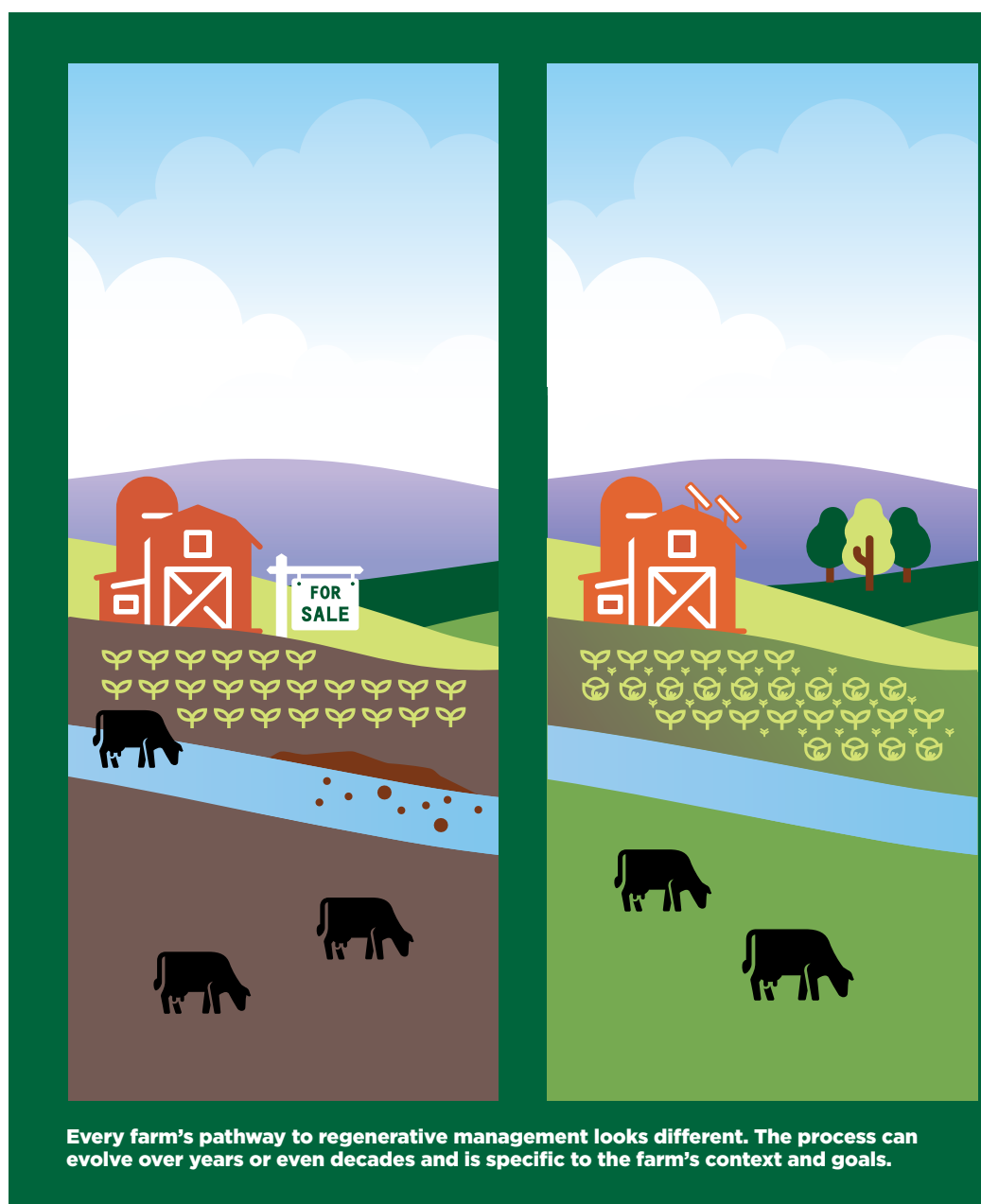


REBECCA DROBIS

Vision

We envision a farming and food system in Virginia that produces abundant, healthy food; enhances soil health; supports functioning ecosystems where wildlife thrives; sustains vibrant agricultural communities; addresses climate change; and creates opportunities for people of all backgrounds. We envision an approach to farming that prioritizes local and regional solutions, along with connection with and affection for place.

The values, goals, and strategies that serve this vision are designed to provide a comprehensive action plan for regenerative agriculture in Virginia. Given our experience, AFT could play a leadership role in some of these strategies, while in other cases, our most valuable contribute is to support the many existing local and regional leaders in a way that complements—rather than competes with—their good work. By thoughtfully collaborating and contributing, AFT can make a lasting difference in Virginia’s agricultural communities.





The illustration here includes many potential shifts in the ecology, economy, and community of the farm as it adopts regenerative systems.

“There is no one-size-fits-all formula, but regenerative ag principles can work in a lot of different places. I hope we continue to see more folks try this farming style, and I hope more information will be presented in the future on the ecological and economical outcomes of farming this way.”

— FARMER AT AFT LISTENING SESSION

By 2050, Virginia could permanently protect **750,000 acres of farmland**—or about 10% of its current agricultural acreage—securing an estimated \$320 million in annual farm output and over 11,800 jobs.



GOALS



Goal 1. Promote the widespread adoption of regenerative farm systems.

Expand technical and financial support to farmers for their transition to regenerative production and to grow support for vibrant peer-to-peer communities of farmers engaged in regenerative agriculture.



Goal 2. Catalyze a new wave of agricultural land protection, access, and transfer.

Create innovative opportunities to protect farmland and support a new generation of farmers, by (a) advancing regenerative practices and systems on protected land, (b) protecting more land that is farmed regeneratively, and (c) helping exiting farmers and non-operating landowners successfully transfer their farms to the next generation.



Goal 3. Strengthen farm viability and enhance community support for regenerative farming.

Support robust business management strategies to help farms adopt regenerative practices and systems, bolster local and regional markets for regeneratively-farmed products, and increase farm profitability through innovative production and distribution systems, and where practical and appropriate, through smart solar siting, including dual-use solar.

Strategies

- Strategy 1. Develop business management capacity to ensure financial viability for regenerative farms.
- Strategy 2. Build effective peer-to-peer education among farmers working to adopt regenerative practices and systems.
- Strategy 3. Improve quality and availability of technical assistance for regenerative production and management.
- Strategy 4. Coordinate and foster creative, equitable opportunities for financing transitions to regenerative production and management.
- Strategy 5. Increase capacity of land protection organizations and local governments to support regenerative production and management.
- Strategy 6. Facilitate access to land for a new generation of farmers prepared to advance regenerative practices and systems.
- Strategy 7. Promote secure land tenure and succession planning for farmers who adopt regenerative management.
- Strategy 8. Expand ecosystem services payments to support regenerative production.
- Strategy 9. Advance smart solar to support farmers and rural communities.
- Strategy 10. Build markets, supply chains, and infrastructure for products from farms that embrace regenerative practices and systems.

Call to Action

Our vision is ambitious because it has to be. If we don't act with conviction and urgency, Virginia faces a challenging future.

Close to 1 million acres of the state's irreplaceable agricultural land could be lost to development in the next two decades. Proven regenerative practices that benefit people, places, and the planet will not take root. Because of economic challenges, the fate of family farms—especially small to mid-sized farms and those led by underserved and lower-wealth farmers—will be uncertain at best. Many may be pushed so far to the margins that their very survival will be threatened.

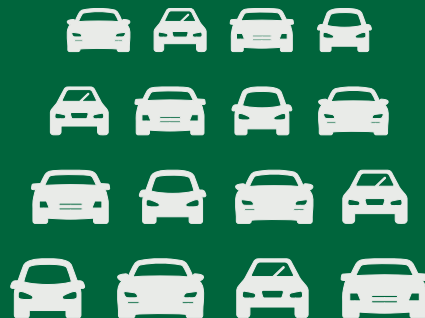
The holistic adoption of regenerative agriculture could prevent these devastating prospects. But the expansion of regenerative systems will do more than protect against negative outcomes. It will generate a bright and hopeful future for farms and farmers across Virginia.

The strategic initiatives identified in *Regenerate Virginia* will ensure we have a sustainable land base to grow food, support ecosystems, and strengthen communities. They will help a new and more diverse generation of farmers access land while enabling exiting farmers to retire with confidence. They will generate value, economic and otherwise, for farmers who pursue better days through better ways, who use regenerative practices to become ever better stewards of their land.

And they will help make Virginia agriculture an economically sustainable solution to the climate and environmental crises we all face, keeping care and commitment front and center in the minds of farmers, leaders, and consumers alike.

By embracing this action plan, we can ensure an abundant future for the farms and farmers we all depend on. Urgent and sustained efforts can make agriculture more regenerative, more prosperous, and more equitable. The fate of Virginia farming is in all our hands.

If 50% more Virginia farmers adopted regenerative practices like cover crops, no-till, and rotational grazing...



...that could reduce greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to removing

60,400

passenger cars from the road.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the generous and visionary donors who supported the development of Regenerate Virginia. We are also thankful for the knowledge and dedication of the dozens of agricultural leaders, conservationists, and farmers who provided their insights and wisdom. Without their guidance, this action plan could not have been developed.

“ [Farming] is about resilience. It's about self-sufficiency. And it's about not only being able to take care of yourself, but taking care of your neighbor when they need a hand.”

— FARMER AT AFT LISTENING SESSION

CHESAPEAKE BAY PROGRAM



farmland.org

American Farmland Trust is the largest national organization dedicated to saving the land that sustains us by protecting farmland, promoting sound farming practices, and keeping farmers on the land.