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USDA Launches Regenerative Pilot Program to Rebuild American Soil and Food Quality

Analysis by Dr. Joseph Mercola | January 16, 2026

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Industrial farming has weakened soil biology, reduced food quality, and contributed to chronic disease, prompting renewed focus on soil health as a foundation for human health and agricultural resilience
- Regenerative agriculture rebuilds soil without reliance on heavy chemical inputs. This approach improves water retention, nutrient density, and long-term farm productivity
- In December 2025, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) launched a $700 million Regenerative Pilot Program to support farmers transitioning to soil-building practices
- The program uses existing conservation funds, public-private partnerships, and a unified application process to reduce administrative burden and make regenerative practices more accessible
- You can support regenerative agriculture through your daily food choices by prioritizing food from regenerative farmers, choosing pasture-raised meat and dairy, and avoiding ultraprocessed foods

The food system you depend on today operates very differently from the one that fed previous generations. Not long ago, food was grown in ways that supported the surrounding ecosystem rather than depleting it, producing food that reflected the health of the land itself. That relationship began to change in the mid-20th century, when the Green Revolution accelerated the adoption of industrial, chemical-dependent farming methods.[1]

As agricultural practices shifted, the relationship between soil health and human health began to deteriorate. Food quality followed the same downward path as soil structure, microbial diversity, and water retention, resulting in products that fill your stomach while failing to support your health, as well as increased rates of chronic diseases.[2,3]

Growing concern about the long-term consequences of this model has finally brought soil health back into focus as a public priority under the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Strategy released in September 2025. Building from this, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has launched the Regenerative Pilot Program, which reflects a long-overdue effort to align farming practices with soil restoration, farmer viability, and the quality of the food that reaches your table.[4]

What Is Regenerative Agriculture?

Regenerative agriculture is a return to what "organic" was originally all about. This approach focuses on rebuilding soil biology, addressing a wide range of problems tied to modern food production. In practical terms, regenerative agriculture helps:

- **Rebuild topsoil instead of stripping it away —** Topsoil is the thin living layer that supports nearly all food production, yet decades of tilling, monocropping, and chemical-heavy practices of industrial farming have steadily depleted it.[5]

  Regenerative farming restores this layer by keeping soil covered with living plants, rotating crops, and integrating animals in ways that stimulate microbial activity. As organic matter returns, soil structure improves, erosion slows, and carbon is stored underground where it supports fertility.

- **Protect water sources and reduce overall water demand —** Industrial agriculture consumes most available freshwater while polluting rivers, lakes, and aquifers with fertilizer runoff and waste.[6] Regenerative systems change how water moves through the land by improving soil structure and increasing organic matter, allowing soil to absorb and retain far more moisture.[7]

For every 1% increase in soil organic matter, an acre of land holds tens of thousands of additional gallons of water.[8] Healthier soils also filter contaminants before they reach waterways, protecting drinking water supplies.

- **Produce more nutrient-dense food and better long-term health —** Depleted soils produce crops with lower mineral and antioxidant content, while regenerative systems rebuild soil microbiomes that regulate nutrient uptake and plant health.[9]

  Animals raised on regenerative farms also benefit from these conditions, as diverse forage and healthy soils support stronger immune function, healthier fat profiles, and lower reliance on antibiotics.[10] The result is food with higher nutritional value, linking soil restoration directly to long-term health rather than treating nutrition as a downstream issue.[11]

- **Reduce food safety risks at the source —** A high amount of foodborne illness originates from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) where animals are crowded, stressed, and routinely given antibiotics. These conditions promote pathogen spread and antibiotic resistance.[12]

  Regenerative livestock systems rely on pasture-based grazing, lower stocking densities, and natural diets that support stronger immune function. Meat and dairy from these systems show lower contamination rates and reduced antibiotic resistance, directly affecting food safety.

- **Lower chemical use, which reduces pollution and allows ecosystems to recover —** Industrial agriculture contributes heavily to air, soil, and water pollution through fertilizer runoff, pesticide drift, waste lagoons, and ammonia emissions. These pollutants harm nearby communities and degrade ecosystems that support pollinators and wildlife.[13,14]

  Regenerative agriculture minimizes chemical inputs and relies on biological processes, allowing land to regain its capacity to support diverse plant and animal life. As ecosystems recover, pollution declines and landscapes become more resilient to environmental stress.[15]

- **Strengthen farmers and stabilize local economies —** Regenerative systems reduce dependence on costly inputs such as synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and purchased feed, lowering long-term operating costs.[16] Financially resilient farms support stronger local food systems, more stable employment, and rural economies that circulate value locally instead of exporting it to input suppliers.

If you want a deeper look at how this farming practice helps restore soil biology, read "**The Right How, Cow, Plants, and Biology Heal the Land**."

USDA Announces $700 Million Regenerative Pilot Program

In December 2025, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Brooke L. Rollins joined U.S. Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services Administrator Dr. Mehmet Oz to announce a $700 million Regenerative Pilot Program, which aims to help American farmers adopt regenerative practices.[17]

- **Soil health is the foundation for national health and farm viability —** Secretary Rollins emphasized that protecting topsoil and improving land stewardship directly support farmer productivity and long-term food security.

  > *"Today's announcement encourages these priorities while supporting farmers who choose to transition to regenerative agriculture. The Regenerative Pilot Program also puts Farmers First and reduces barriers to entry for conservation programs,"* she stated.
  >
  > *"This is another initiative driven by President Trump's mission to Make America Healthy Again. Alongside Secretary Kennedy, we have made great strides to ensure the safe, nutritious, and affordable food our great farmers produce make it to dinner tables across this great country."*[18]

- **The announcement aligned federal health agencies around food system accountability —** Secretary Kennedy reinforced that soil restoration sits at the center of the MAHA strategy, noting that public health outcomes begin with the

condition of farmland. Dr. Oz added:

> *"We cannot truly be a wealthy nation if we are not also a healthy nation. Access to wholesome, nutritious, and affordable foods is a key tenet of the Make America Healthy Again agenda, which President Trump has directed this administration to execute across all government agencies."*[19]

- **The timing reflects both urgency and opportunity —** More than 350,000 children have received diabetes diagnoses in recent months, and over 75% of Americans between ages 17 and 24 cannot qualify for military service due to obesity, poor physical fitness, or mental health challenges.[20]

  These figures point to a health crisis that extends beyond individual choices or medical interventions, reaching back to the nutritional quality of food and the agricultural systems that produce it.

- **The program revives a conservation mandate born from ecological failure rather than ideology —** The institutional roots of this effort trace back to the 1930s, when Congress created the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) in response to the Dust Bowl, a prolonged ecological disaster marked by severe drought, widespread soil erosion, and massive agricultural collapse across the Great Plains that displaced farming families and crippled rural economies.

  NRCS was established to help farmers conserve soil and water resources, a mission that has contributed to substantial productivity gains over time. Between 1948 and 2021, total U.S. farm production increased by nearly 190% while overall farm inputs, such as land, labor, and water, declined slightly.

- **Despite this progress, significant problems persist —** USDA data show that significant erosion concerns remain, with a quarter of cropland affected by water-driven erosion and additional acreage impacted by wind erosion. This underscores the need for approaches that are easier to implement and better aligned with how farms operate.

However, many farmers face heavy administrative burdens when attempting to adopt regenerative practices.

The Regenerative Pilot Program is designed to address those challenges directly by simplifying participation and expanding access to producers at different stages of experience, from those just beginning with practices like cover crops to operations with years of conservation work already in place.

How the Program Is Designed to Work

Administered by NRCS, the initiative introduces an outcome-based conservation model that allows producers to plan and carry out whole-farm regenerative practices through a single application. Rather than applying separately for individual practices, farmers can bundle multiple soil- and land-building strategies into one plan, simplifying participation and reducing administrative burden.[21]

- **Funding is drawn entirely from existing conservation programs to avoid new bureaucracy —** The USDA allocated $400 million through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and $300 million through the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) for the first year. By relying on established authorities and familiar program structures, the agency preserved continuity while introducing a more integrated planning framework.

- **An advisory council will oversee implementation and data integrity —** To guide implementation, NRCS is establishing a Chief's Regenerative Agriculture Advisory Council composed of farmers, industry representatives, and consumer-focused stakeholders.

  The council will meet quarterly to review progress, advise on data and reporting, and help ensure the program remains practical and responsive to on-the-ground realities, with its recommendations shaping future conservation delivery.

- **Public-private partnerships expand resources without increasing federal spending —** The USDA is inviting private-sector partners to co-invest in conservation outcomes through existing authorities. Federal dollars will be matched with private funding, increasing total support for regenerative practices while aligning on-farm improvements with broader supply-chain demand.

- **Applications are submitted through local NRCS offices —** Farmers and ranchers interested in participating are encouraged to apply through their local NRCS Service Centers based on their state's ranking schedules for fiscal year 2026.

  Applications for both EQIP and CSP funding are submitted through the new unified regenerative application process, with additional information available through NRCS for those seeking technical or financial assistance.

Taken together, the Regenerative Pilot Program is designed to make conservation work the way farming actually works. By consolidating funding, oversight, and application pathways into a single whole-farm framework, the program aims to lower barriers to participation while rewarding practices that improve land function over time.

How to Show Your Support Through Your Food Choices

While the Regenerative Pilot Program helps address gaps in policy and funding, regenerative farming can gain more traction when farmers can see that these methods are economically viable. That outcome is shaped well beyond federal programs — it's driven by everyday choices made throughout the food system.

When your decisions consistently favor regenerative practices, you reinforce farming systems that protect land, support farmers, and improve the quality of the food supply over time. Here are practical ways to do that:

1. **Buy directly from regenerative farmers whenever possible —** Look for farmers who use cover crops, rotational grazing, composting, and no-till methods, and take the time to ask how they farm rather than relying on an "organic" label alone. Local

farmers markets, regenerative CSAs, and platforms like Regenerative Farmers of America make it easier to find producers applying these methods.[22]

2. **Choose meat and dairy from pasture-raised animals —** Labels like "100% grass fed" or "pasture-raised" can be a useful starting point, but transparency matters more than branding. **Direct relationships with farmers** provide the clearest window into how livestock are managed.

3. **Minimize purchases from brands tied to industrial commodity agriculture —** Most ultraprocessed foods, **synthetic meat alternatives**, and industrial dairy rely on supply chains rooted in soil-depleting monocultures. Brands that cannot trace or explain how their ingredients are grown are often disconnected from the land entirely. When possible, favor smaller producers with clear sourcing standards and commitments to regenerative ingredients.

4. **Share credible information within your community —** Most people have never seen what healthy soil looks like. Demonstrations using rainfall simulators, side-by-side field comparisons, and soil profile cuts show what degraded versus regenerated land actually means. Share visual content, case studies, or educational materials, and organize or attend farm tours, talks, or webinars that show regeneration in action.

5. **Engage locally and politically to shift public support —** Food choices matter, but so do civic actions. Supporting local food programs, encouraging schools and retailers to source regeneratively produced food, and backing policies that reward soil-building practices all contribute to long-term change. These efforts help shift incentives away from chemical dependency and toward land stewardship.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) About Regenerative Agriculture

Q: Why does soil health matter to my health?

A: Soil health affects the nutrient content of the food you eat. When soil biology is depleted, crops contain fewer minerals and protective compounds, and animals raised on that land tend to be less healthy. When soil is restored, food quality improves.

Q: How does the Regenerative Pilot Program affect me?

A: The USDA Regenerative Pilot Program directs federal conservation funding toward whole-farm regenerative practices. It matters to you because it supports farming systems that improve food quality, protect natural resources, and help farmers transition away from practices that degrade soil and ecosystems.

Q: What makes regenerative agriculture different from conventional or industrial farming?

A: Regenerative agriculture focuses on rebuilding soil biology through practices like cover cropping, crop rotation, reduced tillage, and managed grazing. Instead of relying heavily on synthetic inputs, it uses natural processes to maintain fertility, water retention, and resilience, which leads to healthier land and food over time.

Q: How can I tell if a farmer is actually using regenerative practices?

A: The most reliable approach is to ask about practices directly. Look for farmers who use cover crops, rotational grazing, composting, and reduced or no-till methods, and don't rely on labels alone. Farmers markets, regenerative CSAs, and directories like Regenerative Farmers of America make these conversations easier.

Q: Do I have to be a farmer to help improve soil health?

A: No. You can influence farming practices and help heal the land every time you buy food. Supporting regenerative farms helps reinforce agriculture that restores soil, supports farmers, and improves the quality of the food you eat.

Sources and References

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