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Regenerate
FARMING

Rethink
PROTEIN

Rewild
SOIL

Lab grown, factory farmed or compassionately produced, meat will be part of the human diet for the foreseeable future. But meat is part of a much bigger picture, and how we farm today, and the lifestyle choices we make now, will affect how many generations will survive to enjoy what we leave behind.

Philip Lymbery, Global CEO of 'Compassion in World Farming', has been talking to Fergus Byrne about the package of measures needed to ensure food for all and a future for our planet.

Rethinking protein is just one of the three Rs that Philip Lymbery talks about when he explains his vision for the future of world farming. Whether it's giving a Ted Talk, educating businesses on better practice, or working with government to push for a better policy on food production—as global CEO of 'Compassion in World Farming', his goals are manyfold. But he breaks down the complex needs of our planet into three main challenges: Regenerative farming—combined with Rethinking protein—and Rewilding our soil.

Whilst there are many interpretations of regenerative farming, Philip describes it as 'what it says on the tin'. He defines it as being about 'putting back into nature's bank account. It's about revitalizing soil health. It's about bringing back biodiversity. It's about having a natural environment that conserves water and stores carbon. All of those things are what regenerative is about.'

'Regen', as it tends to be referred to, is a way of farming that tries to use nature and a more advanced way of working with soil to grow our food. The damage done to soil by conventional farming remains a massive issue, and the amount of chemicals used on land and antibiotics used in factory farming has led to a polarising debate on the impact of farming on health and environment.

But how does that relate to farmers and consumers? For farmers it means a 'change of mindset' says Philip. However, it doesn't necessarily mean massive upheaval. In fact, he believes changing farming practices to a more biodiversity friendly and therefore environmentally friendly process will mean the 'road to immediate

profit is so much shorter.’ What he’s also saying, and he backs it up with examples, is that farmers who step away from artificial fertilizers and chemical pesticides will find they have a ‘lower entry point’ cost, and more profit.

‘The great thing about regenerative farming’ Philip says, is that ‘if you do it right, with a diversity of crops and animals rotating around the farm, then you are essentially able to spread bet your risk—because you’ve got a diversity of different products. The vulnerability of industrial agriculture is that it uses monocultures and seeds single crop regimes, which essentially means you’re putting all your eggs in one basket.’ Whereas, with regenerative methods, Philip believes that even producing less of each product, the diverse range of different products can lead to better profit. ‘So, I think the proof is in the pudding. That increasing numbers of farmers are being converted to regenerative farming, not just because it’s the right thing to do, but because it’s a profitable way to go.’

However, farming is a complex business with a need to think ahead, whilst at the same time needing to be versatile and reactive to weather, markets and even consumer trends. Many farmers are committed and, in some cases, heavily invested in machinery, stock and commitments that make change a major challenge. And many simply don’t like change.

Although he understands this position, Philip cites the Kingsclere Estate in Hampshire as an example of a large estate that was prepared to make changes. He describes it as a ‘big farm that was an industrial monoculture farm using chemical pesticides and artificial fertilizers.’ It is run by Tim May, who found that his yields were declining. ‘And he could have dialled up the chemical company and said, give me something stronger, give me more artificial fertilizers and pesticides. But no, he decided to dispense with all of that, and he brought animals back to the farm. First cattle, then sheep, then pigs and chickens. As part of the rotation, he started to mix it up. And he left the artificial fertilizers and pesticides in the barn. And this was saving him more than £700 a hectare. And guess what? His soil and his yields bounced back. The biodiversity returned, and he’s got a profitable, and I would say a beacon business—a beacon of what we should be doing.’

Whilst one example doesn’t make a trend, Philip says there are many farmers who have made the change and have seen huge benefits.

But transition is not easy, and he believes the key is a change of ‘mindset’. Something he appreciates is challenging for many farmers, especially as ‘there’s been 70 years of government policy and subsidy that has gone into encouraging farmers down the intensification route. Every agricultural college in the land has been teaching the mantra for 70 years.’ So, changing the mindset, he says ‘really does mean going against the grain’ but he thinks there are now sufficient numbers of people farming regeneratively that ‘making the change has never been more timely, nor more easy.’

Surely that will mean some serious push back from those

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businesses invested in conventional farming. On this Philip is philosophical. He believes there are two options for the companies that are supplying ‘bags of artificial fertilizer or pesticides or whatever it is.’ They can either treat regenerative farming as ‘competition’ and ‘as a threat to their business, and really redouble advocacy for “conventional agriculture”’ or they can ‘see the writing on the wall’ and understand that ‘we do have to change the way that we produce food, the way that we farm’.

Philip says he has been pleading for better treatment of animals for the last 25 to 30 years. ‘Keeping animals in

factory farming conditions in this industrial agricultural model comes with an industrial approach to producing crops that are then used to feed the animals and feed ourselves’ he says. ‘All of which is not only causing the biggest amount of animal suffering on the planet, it is also a major driver of wildlife declines, and is integral to the climate challenge that we are now all facing.’

However, in the last eight months he has been working on a document that most people wouldn’t believe was possible to create in the time allotted. ‘I’ve been part of the EU Commission president’s strategic dialogue



*Philip Lymbury
Photograph by Richard Dunwoody*

on the future of agriculture in the EU', Philip explains. 'We were put in a room in January and told by the Commission president to come up with a consensus set of recommendations. That was Mission Impossible—it was never going to happen, was it? But eight months on we came to a consensus report, more than 100 pages long, which deals exactly with how we need a policy coherence, policies on food, farming, the environment, food security, trade. All of them need to be coherent in driving the transition in a way which leaves no one behind.'

Philip was one of 29 members working on the *Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture* representing a diverse range of interests including: Fertilizers Europe, Greenpeace, EuropaBio, Eurogroup for Animals, Slow Food and the European Investment Bank.

The Dialogue aimed to foster a collaborative approach for evolving European farming, food, and rural areas. The report provides guiding political principles and recommendations to address the "diversity and complexity of agrifood systems," tackling systemic imbalances. It highlights the urgent need to transition to agrifood systems that are resilient, sustainable, competitive, profitable, and equitable, noting the "triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution" as significant pressures.

Philip describes the initiative as promoting 'triple win scenarios' where farmers are paid and supported to 'do the right thing for animal welfare and for the environment and for consumers.' He also believes that the Dialogue is something that other countries and other regions, including the UK, 'could and absolutely should emulate.'

He is passionate about the potential value of the proposals announced in the document, and with an intensity reminiscent of David Attenborough he applauds the efforts of the members saying: 'These were really important recommendations. I think this is a huge breakthrough, and as Ursula von der Leyen herself said when she was accepting the report, it just shows that we can overcome polarization and come up with a really clear, coherent consensus.'

Philip Lymbery has published a trilogy of books beginning with *Farmageddon: The true cost of cheap meat*, which was followed by *Dead Zone: Where the Wild Things Were* and his third book, *Sixty Harvests Left: How to Reach a Nature-Friendly Future* was published by Bloomsbury in August 2022. They all highlight the damage caused by intensive farming practises. Something that is close to his heart.

'Factory farming is responsible for probably 80 to 90% of production in the USA' he says. 'In Britain, a great deal of our products, animal products, particularly when in respect to chickens and to a

large extent pigs, comes from animals that are factory farmed. And I think what I identified in my last book, *Sixty Harvests Left*, was that there is a rise of what I would call US style mega farms. These are not just factory farms, but they are huge factory farms. And we've now got more than 1000 of these huge factory farms in Britain, in counties such as Norfolk and Lincolnshire and Shropshire, tucked away. They don't want to be seen, but they are there, and they're huge.'

He is thankful that, currently, we don't have the kind of '100,000 cattle feedlot systems' that are prevalent in the US. However, he says, 'we are seeing a rise in the number of cattle that are being kept in smaller scale feedlots for beef, but also indoor dairies, where the cattle never get to go outside.'

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He cites a 'particularly hideous example' of a plan to house 8,000 cows permanently indoors in a 'US style mega dairy' in Lincolnshire. 'We got that stopped' he says. To put this in context he describes the plan as the equivalent of 'more than 100 average UK dairy farms.' It would have produced 'as much sewage as a city the size of Bristol.' But nevertheless he believes that under the radar, out of public sight there is 'a growing number of large scale factory farms in Britain.'

In his latest book, *Cultivated Meat to Secure Our Future: Hope for Animals, Food Security, and the Environment*, he compiles a selection of essays debating the potential of lab grown meat.

The key point Philip makes about the cultivated meat debate is that it's not about replacing animals. 'This isn't about getting rid of meat altogether' he says. 'This is about reducing our reliance on meat and dairy from farmed animals, because they take up such a big planetary footprint.' He cites scientific advice that suggests that 'for our own individual health and for planetary health, we need to reduce the amount of meat and dairy from farmed animals by about half.'

The 'sweet spot' he says 'is that we get animals out of factory farms. Because putting animals in factory farms has meant that we're now using farming practices that are destroying the soil and ecosystems and heating the planet.'

Philip wants to reverse that 'by getting animals out of factory farms and back onto the land as part of mixed farm rotations, where it all works with nature and regenerates and gives the animals a decent life and produces much better food.'

However, he says that at the same time, we need to reduce our reliance overall on the animal numbers and that's where cultivated meat comes in. 'Because cultivated meat is essentially the renewable energy equivalent for food.' Comparing it to our need to charge our phones without thinking about the downside in energy needs, he says people generally don't want animal suffering and environmental collapse 'they just want meat, and the great thing about cultivated meat is it is real meat without the downsides. It takes a fraction of the land. It doesn't have the climate impact and there's no animal suffering. What's not to like?'

But again, like push back against regenerative methods from the industry that supplies artificial fertilizers and chemical pesticides to farming, those promoting cultivated meat are getting push back from the intensively farmed meat industry.

'Some parts of the established Agri food industry do see cultivated meat as competition' says Philip, 'and what they're trying to do is to stifle the competition by getting it banned. In Florida, in Alabama, they've got it banned. In other places, there been proposed bans that have been withdrawn. Italy has banned cultivated meat. So, there are these reactionary things. But ultimately, what are we saying here? Are we saying that it's okay to bring in legislation to stifle free competition in the marketplace. Is it right for consumer choice to be thwarted before it's ever given the opportunity? And are we saying that it's better to produce meat in ways which is terribly cruel, environmentally degrading and unhealthy to consumers? That that's okay, but the healthier animal, environmentally friendly equivalent should be banned before it ever gets started? What sort of nonsense is that?'

One comment in the book *Cultivated Meat* hits home when the writer points out that for chickens, trapped in many factory farming systems, the space around them when they get put into the oven is more space than they have had during their short lives.

Global CEO of Compassion in World Farming, Philip Lymbery will be joining a new conference called LandAlive which will be held at the Bath and West Showground on the 22nd and 23rd November 2024. It will feature a two-day programme of talks by top experts in regenerative farming and sustainable food. Tickets are available from www.landalive.co.uk.

'...we need a policy redirection from government level downwards, so that government policy, agricultural subsidy, and institutional training gets behind the transition.'



*Philip Lymbery with beautiful rescue highland cow.
Photograph Richard Dunwoody*