

# FDI Feature Interview

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## Minister Alannah MacTiernan: Land-degradation and Regenerative Agriculture in WA

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### Key Points

- West Australian agricultural soils are declining due to a range of issues such as acidification and salinity. Poor soil health results in lost food production and lowered nutritional density.
- Effort needs to be placed on the biology of the soil to increase nutrient cycling and less focus on synthetic fertilisers and insecticides.
- *RegenWA* is an important vehicle for farming communities to engage with each other and to share information and ideas aimed to enhance farming.
- A strong focus in WA farming in the future will be towards increasing nutritional density in cropping and livestock products to supply a premium market where food-quality and nutritional values are critically important.
- A move to regenerative agriculture is slowly occurring in some Australian states; a change in Federal Government may stimulate and enhance progress towards these practices.

### Introduction

FDI recently interviewed The Honourable Alannah MacTiernan MLC, the West Australian Minister for Regional Development, Agriculture and Food, to gain her views on land degradation and its long-term effects on the WA farming sector. Discussed also was an increasing focus towards regenerative agriculture practices and future importance on enhancing the nutritional value of food that West Australian farmers produce.

## Interview

**FDI – You attracted considerable attention when you first said that Australia’s land degradation was a major drawback to our primary industry. How did you arrive at this conclusion and what did you mean by this statement?**

**Minister MacTiernan** – It is pretty evident to me, when talking farmers, that there is great concern about the acidification of soil and the increasing march of salinity. We are seeing question marks arising about the quality of food we are producing in terms of nutritional density. These questions go back to the quality and health of our agricultural soils.

In Australia, and particularly in WA, we have ancient and fragile soils and, for a century or more, farming of these soils has been carried out in a classically western manner. The introduction of chemical fertilisers has seen massive increases in yield. But we also understand that the input costs of production are rising. We are also liming and applying phosphate, and the required amount of this work appears to be increasing.

We have seen a whole range of farmers who are changing the way they manage soils. They have asked whether or not we have lost some of the inherent value of the soils that were there before – loss of water retention, ability to sequester carbon and whether those soils were actually capable of sustaining production for long periods of time.

We shouldn’t just see our soils as a NPK (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) box or something that merely holds plants upright, to which we apply chemical additives to get the plants to grow. Rather, there is a more complex story to be told about how nutrients are made available. It seems to me that quite compelling cases are being made for an increased focus on the biology of the soil and what we need to do manage it effectively.

**FDI - You launched the Regenerative Farmers’ Network (*RegenWA*) at the *Dowerin Field Days* event in August 2018. What do you hope this concept will achieve?**

**Minister MacTiernan** – We know in agriculture, and in many other fields, that often the proponents of change find it very difficult to affect change. In small communities, there appears to be a view that, if you depart from the conventional (farming) practice of the community in general, you are in some way adversely reflecting on the community. Probably more than we find in urban endeavours, there is a reluctance, or a particular difficulty, for people in small farming communities to promote a different practice to that which is conventional. We can go right back to when farmers in WA were first promoting the use of superphosphate. That aggrieved their neighbours who said it will never work. We also know that ‘no till’ (of the soil), a farming practice that is now widely embraced, created some fierce debate for more than a decade.

One of the great benefits of *RegenWA* is that it can create an opportunity where progressive farmers are connected. For instance, you might have farmers from Wellstead, some from Albany, some from Wyalkatchem or from Gin Gin, where their practices might not necessarily be valued or encouraged in their own community. Nevertheless, *RegenWA*

creates another community for them, providing support and encouragement. It provides for information sharing and is very fruitful for dialogue where people are learning from each other. There is no doubt that some of the more classical regenerative farming processes seem to work well in high-rainfall areas, but some will argue against these practices for poorer soils. By spreading the dialogue over a big geographic area, we learn to understand how these things are playing out and how the differences of rainfall and soil type need to inform the regenerative farming practices.

**FDI - You also established the Soil and Land Conservation Council. What role do you see this Council playing and how will it drive regenerative land practices across Western Australia?**

**Minister MacTiernan** – We are still in the process of re-establishing the Council. We sought to re-establish the council when issues started to emerge, and we saw reports from the Auditor General, reflecting that very little had been done in the last eight years or so in terms of monitoring the state of our pastoral lands. I was also receiving reports about our southern pastoral lands which were less than positive. As well, the Auditor General pointed out much the same results in relation to the problem of salinity in WA.

I also heard about soil health concerns from a number of areas and it seemed to me that we had taken our eye off the ball in WA on these issues. As well, and possibly because of reduced rainfall, the march of salinity hasn't seemed to be as rapid as it was before. This meant a loss of focus on this problem.

I must admit that I was quite appalled to learn that even though there was a statutory obligation to have a Soil and Land Conservation Council, the requirement had not been honoured since 2003. It would be fair to say that the current Council's composition is not the most exquisitely formed that is necessary to achieve a modern outcome. Accordingly, we formed a Ministerial Soil Advisory Committee to advise us about how we might be able to change the composition of the Soil and Land Conservation Council. Based on recommendations, my judgement now is that we will move to amend legislation to get the Soil and Land Conservation Council more 'fit for purpose'. In the interim, working with the existing legislation, I am now in the process of trying to put this Council together. We are now going to work to seek to re-establish this using the current legislation and aim to have this all sorted by mid-year.

**FDI - What are the major challenges to achieving the outcomes you have identified and how will you confront these challenges?**

**Minister MacTiernan** – Part of the challenge, I think, is that much of the research is, understandably, funded by fertiliser companies, seed producers or companies producing herbicides and insecticides. At the present time, there is no 'big-player' wanting to fund research around the regenerative farming practice. This is because regenerative farming actually reduces the use of inorganic inputs. Therefore, I think part of what we need to do is

ensure that research is done to test the propositions that are being put forward by the regenerative farmers. Support for that research is going to have to come from government. I also think it's really important for us to ensure rigour in the development of this process in terms of both the efficiency and looking at the economics. Conducting long-term trials on regenerative practices is important to see if and when they work.

Another issue that will become increasingly important is nutritional density in both cropping and livestock products. As we in WA seek to trade into premium markets overseas, we realise that with our high labour costs we will find it difficult to compete with other suppliers in lower value product. As such we need to look at supplying to the mid-range and premium markets where people are going to be very interested in the quality of the food they're eating. This is not just in the sense of being biologically safe but actually understanding the nutritional value of the food produced.

We look at modern diseases and we engage in medical heroics to save people from devastating illnesses and medical conditions. It seems to me that there is no strong focus towards trying to work out why many of these diseases are so prevalent. I think it is important for us to be more sophisticated about understanding food values and effects on health.

**FDI - What advice would you give to a range of organisations, including those who do research, advise farmers and deliver education, to understand and adapt to the concept of regenerative farming?**

**Minister MacTiernan** – It's a complex point because farmers routinely say to me, the thing that got them to turn the corner (towards regenerative farming) is they were sick of spending their time killing things; they no longer wanted to spend their day on boom-sprayers dispersing chemical herbicide or insecticides. When talking with farmers I think we need to suggest that they keep an open mind because evidence (from regenerative farmers) is that whilst yields in some cases are down, profitability is up.

Those looking for another dimension to their farming life have committed to sustainability and working with the land. This is a fundamental principle to regenerative agriculture. We must ask if we have more to gain from working with the land rather than necessarily working against the land. As government, we have a part to play by helping to ensure that some of our research budget is directed towards looking at regenerative agriculture. Also, we must more deeply understand and create a mechanism whereby, if we are seeing improved nutritional value, that there is a standard against which we can measure success or otherwise.

Regenerative farming is a different concept to 'traditional, organic' farming practices. We still need some way that those farmers are able capture the value that comes from providing a product that has an enhanced nutritional value.

**FDI - From a national point of view, do you have a sense that we are thinking along the lines that you are thinking in order to be able to achieve some of these outcomes?**

**Minister MacTiernan** – It certainly doesn't appear at the agricultural minister's meetings. When the *Soils for Life* proposal for a national approach was presented, I became concerned that the substance of the material that was presented wasn't being given the recognition that it deserved. I think we have a way to go.

It's fair to say that there is no evidence the current Minister for Agriculture or the Federal Department have engaged on this issue. We do know there is quite a lot of progressive practice happening in Victoria and in NSW. So presumably those outcomes are feeding through the State agricultural departments.

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**About the Interviewee:**

The Honourable Alannah MacTiernan MLC is currently the WA State Government Member for the North Metropolitan Region. Her ministerial appointments include Minister for Regional Development; Agriculture and Food; Minister assisting the Minister for State Development, Jobs and Trade.

A member of the Australian Labor Party, she was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Council in 1993 until moving to the Legislative Assembly in 1996, where she served as a senior minister in the Gallop Labor government. She resigned from state politics in July 2010 to move into local politics as the mayor of the City of Vincent from 2011 to 2013. She was elected to the federal seat of Perth at the 2013 federal election, though did not contest the seat at the 2016 federal election. She returned to Western Australian state politics at the 2017 state election.

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