

FDI Feature Interview

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Keith Pekin: Implementing Regenerative Agriculture in WA

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Key Points

- *RegenWA* functions as an important social vehicle where farmers and their local communities connect to share information and ideas.
- The move to regenerative agriculture is gaining momentum in the WA agricultural sector and a number of farmers are gaining global recognition for their innovative efforts and the results they're achieving.
- To investigate the science, which will lead to a better understanding of regenerative agricultural practices, greater engagement is required from government and industry groups, tertiary bodies and private enterprise.
- Consumers are increasingly seeking verification of safe, healthy, Australian and ethically produced food produced from farming systems that can demonstrate sustainability credentials.

Introduction

The *RegenWA* programme was launched by the West Australian Minister for Regional Development, Agriculture and Food, The Honourable Alannah MacTiernan MLC, in August 2018.

RegenWA supports WA farmers who are leading the way in identifying more sustainable farming practices. FDI recently interviewed Keith Pekin, from [Perth NRM](#) to learn about how the programme is being implemented, its uptake by the WA farming community and the priorities and opportunities for future development.

Interview

FDI – What was the genesis of the *RegenWA* programme and what has been the degree of uptake by WA farmers?

Keith Pekin – We started the [RegenWA](#) (Regenerative Agriculture in WA) programme about two years ago, with a focus on connecting farmers who are developing and trialling different farming practices. These may become the new ‘best practice’ for farming in WA.

We know there are inherent risks to farmers changing their farming practices and those risk factors can inhibit real innovation and change. *RegenWA* is about supporting the ‘pioneer farmers’ who are prepared to take a risk and who are now at the leading end of the change process. In addition to the more obvious challenges of trialling different farming practices, these farmers are often challenged by their local communities for breaking away from convention. In some ways, by supporting and connecting these farmers, the *RegenWA* initiative has become a social movement for change towards more sustainable farming systems.

We have been surprised by the amount of negativity towards regenerative agriculture (RA). For us, RA is as much about regenerating the West Australian farming landscape and communities as it is about the practices and methods that are employed in producing food. The reality is that all farmers have adopted some RA practices, for example [minimal till](#), while at the same time some pioneer farmers have adopted fairly comprehensive regenerative farming systems. It’s a sliding scale and we don’t know where the end point is.

RA is a farmer driven journey toward an understanding that the food production practices we have all benefited from over the last six decades or so have also contributed to agricultural productivity constraints like: salinity, soil acidity, desertification, declining availability of water and erosion. *RegenWA* has always been about supporting the pioneer farmers who are willing to trial and demonstrate farming practices and systems that can negate those productivity constraints. It’s good to remember these pioneer farmers are our best bet for identifying the farming practices and systems we will need for the long-term future of farming in WA.

Fortunately, we have a [Minister for Agriculture, Minister MacTiernan](#) who understands those needs and she has been very supportive of the *RegenWA* programme.

FDI – Have you a sense of an increase in numbers of people paying attention to the concept of regenerative agriculture?

Keith Pekin – Though the ‘awareness’ has definitely escalated, the ‘adoption’ of regenerative farming practices has, and continues to be, very slow.

For farmers, the financial risk to transition is a key constraint and the standard response we receive from universities, researchers and product suppliers of “show me the science”, just adds to that.

The term ‘regenerative agriculture’ is also a major distraction because people want to define what it means. This isn’t helpful, as each farming enterprise operates in a relatively unique set of circumstances; some RA practices may not be transferable or appropriate, depending on the farming situation or location; the focus needs to be on the outcomes that different practices and systems can offer. If the outcomes of adopting these practices lead to improved natural capital, that’s a good thing - natural capital is defined as the stock of resources like water, healthy soils and biodiversity that support ecosystems services like food production. Natural Capital Accounting is quickly emerging as the accepted means for understanding and measuring the true asset value of a farm.

In conventional farming, farmers are able to consult with agronomists who will help them to identify and mitigate risk. Unfortunately, in the context of RA, few local agronomists have the appropriate knowledge and skills. That lack of available technical support has emerged as a key constraint to the next cohort of farmers seeking to adopt RA practices and systems. To counter this, I believe we need professional, skilled specialists who are able to provide one to one farmer or small group support. While applicable training courses do exist, they are quite expensive and are difficult for individual farmers to access. We would prefer to see the existing professional agronomists complete the training and support farmers across the WA farming sector.

A significant barrier *RegenWA* is working through is termed ‘market pull through’ or ‘price incentive’, combined with a lack of infrastructure to get the differentiated product to market. Hopefully this situation will change soon but right now there is no strong ‘pull through’ or incentives of a better price or customer preference for their product to reward farmers for changing their farming practices.

FDI – Amongst the National Farmers Federation, applicable government departments and various farming and agricultural groups, is there support for the key issues relevant to RA?

Keith Pekin – Though individuals in those organisations are very supportive, generally speaking, the answer is ‘no’. Large organisations, including government departments, universities and other tertiary institutions, they all demand to see and understand scientific evidence before throwing institutional support at a movement like this.

Noting that, the leading farmers in this space are already demonstrating success: their crops are more resilient; and, the farming business model is successful. So, the on-ground evidence is there, but not the strictly rigorous ‘scientific data and analysis’ generated by academics and institutions.

From a whole-of-system point of view, there’s a massive timeline problem. If RA farmers can present enough evidence to gain support for a scientifically rigorous RA program, we might have to wait another ten years to get the scientific evidence supporting the experience of the RA farmers we have now. And as I noted before, not all RA techniques are applicable to all locations.

With growing populations requiring food, and continuing degradation of farmland, it’s not unfair to say we don’t have time to wait.

There are significant costs to setting up traditional scientific trials as well. My view is that it would be much more economical, timely and efficient for institutions to re-evaluate their approach to RD&E and work closely with farmers to establish and verify scientific evidence that can support or refute the progress reported by our RA farmers.

While some American farmers have been paving the way in this space, there are Australian and local farmers whose efforts are gaining international recognition enjoying great success with their RA methods. Now, in America, a growing number of large corporations are looking for investment opportunities in RA as they see it as a viable, longer-term investment. This is good news, as investors are sensing that future food security will very much depend on a move away from the large-scale industrial agriculture to more relevant RA practices.

In WA though, it's the farmers who are driving the change; *RegenWA* is a social movement and irrespective of everyone else, the farmers are just getting on with making change. But as Walter Jehne said at our conference, if we can regenerate farming soils in WA, we can probably transfer those skills and industries to arid climates in other countries. It could be an incredible opportunity for us.

FDI – Are WA farmers changing their farming methods to incorporate more RA practices?

Keith Pekin – I think they are, even if they don't identify it that way. If the transition process seems slow, we need to remind ourselves that a few decades have passed since the pioneer farmers started demonstrating the benefits of 'Min' or 'No Till' farming and now it's a mainstream practice. Unfortunately, with our existing and rapidly looming productivity constraints, in combination with population growth, we don't have spare decades to identify and support the broadscale adoption of the more sustainable farming systems that are needed.

Farmers contemplating RA practices are seeking a roadmap for their attempts to implement change. They have a sense of responsibility and, for that reason, they look to also implement a range of risk mitigation measures – their farm represents their entire livelihood, and the future of their whole farm depends on the decisions that they make. They know they can't continue as they have in the past, but they really don't want to be the one responsible for mucking it up.

I do feel we are getting close to reaching a 'tipping point' where, though a small number of farmers have been 'doing' regenerative agriculture, the number is growing and if we can get support mechanisms in place, farmer participation rates will quickly rise. Because every farm is different with differing soil types, varying levels of soil carbon, and water retention for instance, support measures like 1:1 on-farm engagement with professional agronomists, mentoring and the provision of technical advice are needed in order to increase that uptake.

FDI – Are you recognising any form of positive or negative affect or outcome from implementing *RegenWA* that you hadn't previously considered and how will these affect its adoption over the next decade or two?

Keith Pekin - As it turns out, at the time we were setting up *RegenWA*, there was growing sentiment for change amongst the farming community. We are tapping into that. In truth we are not surprised by the amount of interest that has been shown. Absolutely for sure, there have been negative views and misinformation about the programme and what we're trying to counter. That said, *RegenWA* remains as a farmer driven initiative and we are working on measures to improve how we facilitate the connectivity and learning between the farmers in the network.

While our looming productivity constraints present a compelling case for real change, they are seen as problems for farmers to navigate. As the broader community and wider society become more aware that our food security concerns are inextricably linked to how farmers navigate these constraints, we will see a strong sense of shared ownership of the challenges. This will increase levels of understanding and acceptance for the need to change.

Driving the adoption of more sustainable farming systems like RA, *RegenWA* is investigating and supporting the development of options to establish a farmer owned market facing collective; food produced through RA has a ready and growing market appeal for preferential purchasing. For this we need to establish and understand metrics and outcomes that are verifiable, and which may include: demonstrating carbon drawdown as food is produced; recognising sustained improvements in Natural Capital; increased nutrient densities; nil-trace of chemical residues in soil and food; and, trusting in ethical and social license expectations.

About the Interviewee: Keith Pekin is employed as the Sustainable Food Systems Manager at Perth NRM, working to look to the future and taking a strategic, collaborative approach for solutions that lead to more sustainable farming and food systems.

Keith grew up on a livestock farm in Pinjarra and later, worked in varying roles in the mining and agricultural sectors. This included 15 years in the wine industry where he developed a passion for improving the sustainability of wine production. This led to further study in environmental management and working in the NRM sector. While at Perth NRM he draws on his industry and program development and management experience in combination with a passion for ensuring future generations have access to safe, nutritious and healthy food.

Any opinions or views expressed in this paper are those of the individual interviewee, unless stated to be those of Future Directions International.

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