

# FDI Feature Interview

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## Nick Kelly: Implementing Regenerative Farming on Hollands Track Farm

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### Key Points

- The cornerstone principles of regenerative farming are zero tillage, maintaining soil cover, ecological diversity and living biota in the soil and holistic management of livestock, on a year-round basis.
- Employing synthetic, chemical-based additives will not correct biological or soil health issues, needed are natural or organic ameliorants.
- Introducing changes to farming systems that incorporate the principles of regenerative agriculture must be made over time in order for soil to repair and adapt.
- Schools-based education programmes about regenerative farming will enable a greater understanding, awareness, acceptance leading to a commitment to implementing change in farming and agriculture.

### Introduction

An increasing number of West Australian grain producers are committing to changing their farming methods from past and outdated industrial scale systems featuring the use of synthetic chemicals combined with damaging, extensive tillage that ultimately damages and reduces soil health which leads to low productivity.

FDI recently interviewed Nick Kelly at his Hollands Track Farm near Newdegate in southern WA. Since the early 2,000s Nick has changed his farming from the traditional methods employed by his predecessors. Now, he now focuses on minimal or no tillage, a continuance of cover crops and, constantly nurturing his soil health by building and maintaining organic matter which, in turn, encourages and promotes biological activity in his soils.

## Interview

### **FDI – How do you see yourself as a regenerative farmer and what do you view are the principles?**

**Nick Kelly** – For us, it's about learning, understanding and implementing the principles of soil care on our property and in our farming environment. We started the process by looking at the natural environment in order to get a sense of what the elements were and, in my experience, and from speaking with other farmers and people researching soil care around the world, the principles are the same, though the implementation and the tools might vary. Those principles of regeneration, in a nutshell are zero tillage, maintaining soil cover, diversity and living biota in the soil, year-round and holistic management of livestock.

### **FDI – Was there a point in time where you made the decision to move to regenerative farming at your farm?**

**Nick Kelly** – I remember a time not long after coming home from university. We were early adopters of the concept of the '[minimum till](#)' and though we had some good success earlier on, the system is very reliant on the use of chemical-based fertilisers. At the time I was spraying in a particular paddock where the weeds were quite bad, and though we had been doing that for a number of years, the weed issue was just getting worse. I realised then I needed to do something different because I wasn't winning, and I was spending time and resources on the same problem; I was to realise later that it's not possible to fix a biological or soil care issue with chemicals. That was real turning point for me in deciding that we had to change the way that we were doing things.

I've always had an interest in soil health. I remember when I was very young, I was feeding the soil by throwing the kitchen and food scraps over a paddock when I was supposed to be feeding them to the chooks. No one had told me about doing this, it was just something that I did on my own. No one else knew either until it came up in conversation many years later. My transition to regenerative farming was when I started to conduct my own research and I was always asking questions – I couldn't get enough of it and made a commitment to learn and get as much information about the science as I was able.

The trigger for furthering my knowledge came to me during the late 90s to early 2,000s and it was from listening to people like Rolf Derpsch from Paraguay and Dwayne Beck from the [Dakota Lakes Research Farm](#) in the United States speak at the [Western Australian No-Tillage Farmers Association](#) conferences. Soil scientists and agricultural specialists really piqued my interest about ways to farm which were alternative to what we were actually doing. Those people were talking about things like cover-cropping and growing crops in the summer months. In our environment near Newdegate back then, those ideas were really unheard of and, is basically frowned on in the conventional chemical agriculture sense which, basically requires you to kill off everything in summer to conserve moisture and reduce the risk of disease.

### **FDI – Was there a particular time where you were able to discern that your changed farming methods were really working?**

**Nick Kelly** – It has been a really gradual process and that’s partly because we have been pioneering these ideas in our region. In our area there has been no-one else to ask questions of when it comes to implementing the regenerative farming principles. That meant we had to try and if that failed, we’d attempt something different until we got to where we are now.

We went to a zero-tillage system back in 2010 so that we didn’t disturb crop residue and other organic matter on the soils’ surface at all. Then in 2014, we got rid of our synthetic fertilisers and went ‘cold turkey’ which, is not something we’d recommend. Also, in late 2014 and early in 2015 we used very minimal amounts of Nitrogen, as a ‘start-up’ only, and to the point where we later stopped its use altogether. I think the big changes quickly materialised once we got rid of synthetic chemical compound fertilisers. I also had a sense that the changes occurred when we started implementing [cover-cropping](#) in summer by experimenting with sunflowers and millet and other species. These measures lead to sequestering carbon, retaining soil moisture, building depth of soil organic matter and other measures.

We now say to people who are looking to implement regenerative farming, to make the transition easier on yourself. Don’t just turn off the tap but rather, take gradual steps and do things like scaling back on synthetic inputs while at the same time, ramp up on your soil biology.

**FDI – How would you describe this concept you have developed and evolved through and where are we now in terms of numbers of farmers adopting regenerative agriculture practices?**

**Nick Kelly** – I was getting advice from international people who told me to try white French millet as a cover crop on my paddocks. Then we had to learn how to grow it in our dry environment and how to make it work in terms of seeding times, harvest times and things like that. As we became better at this type of farming, other people from around our region came on board and committed to making the same sorts of changes we were implementing. They also started to grow summer crops for harvest or for stock feed or just only as cover on their paddocks.

The interest is certainly growing because when we promote and talk about what we’re doing, we’re finding interest from people from a wider area of this state. These people are having a really good crack at growing diverse, multi-species cover crops in summer and, they’re getting good at it. Definitely the momentum for it is growing and a larger group of committed regenerative agriculture farmers is forming.

Although it seemed to us to be a lonely place, when we first started down this road to regenerative agriculture, I do suspect that at the same time, there were other people around the wider farming community trying to have a go at implementing the changes. We just didn’t know who or where they were, nor were we connected to them as we now are.

At the same time I do know other farmers were inspired by [Rick Bieber](#) and what he was advocating about zero tillage on their farms. They implemented his ideas but were disappointed with the results. As a consequence, a lot of people were put off by what they

found, and they ceased to continue with it. That in itself is a different discussion I think we need to have, to understand why we're doing it and to realise that it's not always a 'quick fix'; when you implement something you need to appreciate you might not achieve the outcomes you had hoped for. This is because you'll be radically changing a system that has previously been in place for a long time. When you start to talk about growing things in summer in our environment from a soil health perspective, it's as if your trying to turn the Titanic around; firstly you have to slow it down; then you need to turn it; and then you need to regain the momentum in the opposite direction. So, if you expect, just growing something in summer in an effort to sort out all of your problems and to change your system overnight, it just not going to happen. Likely, the changes will cost you something in the interim unless, you have a really wet summer and end up with a fantastic crop that you can harvest and sell.

Understanding crop rotations is important when implementing regenerative agriculture changes – the moisture retaining properties of carbon sequestration and nutrient cycling need active soil biology to develop over time.

**FDI – Is there anything that you could advocate that would cause what you are doing to be more widely accepted?**

**Nick Kelly** – Farmers are businesspeople. That's partly why they are still here. When you can show that regenerative farming really works, not from just a lifestyle angle but also from a financial aspect, then you start to gain more attention. It is important that you do something not from a 'feel good' aspect but that you are making money out of your farming practices.

I would say that many farmers in WA are doing some things consistent with regenerative agriculture practices because it's in their best interests to look after what they have and to be good stewards of it because that's how they make their living. I think what might separate someone who is doing aspects of regenerative farming without realising it and those who are pursuing it is understanding what are the drivers of the environment and how rejuvenation occurs in the soils and in an ecosystem rather than somebody simply doing the best they know how to from a management perspective to try earn a living from the soil.

It's also about sustainability and you can sustain bad farming practice for a long time. There's a big difference between sustaining a farming practice and actually regenerating and renewing something.

Another aspect which will drive the 'take up' of regenerative farming relates to education. I know of a school in Geraldton, *Strathalbyn Christian College*, that runs a course in regenerative farming. Education and teaching kids about regenerative farming will be a huge help that would enable greater awareness and appreciation. Knowing about regenerative agriculture will be extremely important but, that level and wider degree of knowledge is a generation away yet.

Enabling awareness and understanding about regenerative agriculture is one reason why the [Wheatbelt Integrity Group](#) conducts its annual open field days, to get the word out and getting our local area farmers to come along to hear about regenerative farming and what we're doing in the Newdegate area. We've been successful in this because every time,

people who attend, take away aspects of regenerative agriculture and use them on their own farms. The important thing that they do learn is that the knowledge they gain is based on our local conditions such as soils, climate and weather patterns but, the regenerative agricultural principles that we talk about however, don't change.

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**About the Interviewee:**

Nick Kelly has been pursuing regenerative agriculture for the last 20 years, before the term was adopted. His disillusionment with conventional agriculture, which had become expensive and was not yielding the desired results, led him to examine the natural environment with a view to achieving better results with more productive, efficient and cheaper farming methods.

Nick a leader in regenerative agriculture in the Western Australian Wheatbelt and he is active in sharing his knowledge and experience. With a group of interested farmers, business people and politicians, Nick formed the Wheatbelt Integrity Group to serve the interest of farmers in farming in an economically sustainable manner. The key focus is supporting support regenerative agriculture as the only system which will serve this end while promoting soil health, environmental health and human health.

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*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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