FARMS Year 1
Qualitative Research Analysis

Helios Design and Consulting
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Methods

Remote Qualitative Interviews
The FARMS team conducted 30-60-minute interview sessions with 24 producers to understand their needs, behaviors, and opinions. These open-ended conversations were guided by a discussion guide focused on key areas including how they heard about FARMS, challenges implementing regenerative practices, overall stress and wellbeing, coping mechanisms, job satisfaction and social networks.

Onsite Visits
The Helios team visited with 3 FARMS producers in Colorado and Kansas to learn about their operations, methods, and FARMS program experience. The team also attended a field day focused on composting.

Qualitative Analysis and Synthesis
The Helios team started with raw data from research sessions, and organized findings into themes based on trends in the research. These findings were then supplemented with behavioral data and synthesized into key insights.
FARMS producers were interviewed for this research. 4 on-site farm visits were conducted.

FARMS producers work with a variety of business models on irrigated and non-irrigated land which may include:
- Owning or leasing (cash or share) land to farm
- Grazing cattle for neighbors and themselves
- Cow-calve operations
- Farming corn and soybeans
- Growing vegetables
- Selling to the grain elevator, specialty markets, farmers markets or direct to consumers

FARMS producers, mentors and technical assistants are located in Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma.
Regenerative Practices

FARMS producers select which regenerative practices they will implement and on what land to implement.

Practices may include:
- Cover Crops
- Interseeding
- Living mulch
- Planting green
- Pasture cropping
- Double cropping
- Relay cropping
- Increasing crop rotation diversity
- Opportunistic cropping
- Heritage varieties
- Pollinator mix, permanent
- Integrate garden/produce in covers
- Perennial cool season pasture
- No till / strip till
- Annual forages
- Include legumes
- Integrate livestock
- Management intensive grazing
- Roller Crimper
FARMS Stakeholders
FARMS Environment

Annual Precipitation – 14-30in/year
Elevation – 3500ft

Town
40mi/45min
NRCS Office, Hospital
Grocery Store, School

In-laws/Family
10mi/15min

Home
Primary fields 10min
Furthest fields 25min

Neighbors
15-70mi/15-60min

Elevator
20mi/22min

Coffee Shop
15mi/20min

Town
40mi/45min
NRCS Office, Hospital
Grocery Store, School

In-laws/Family
10mi/15min

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Primary fields 10min
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15-70mi/15-60min

Elevator
20mi/22min

Coffee Shop
15mi/20min

Church
20-45mi/20-45min
FARMS Producer Persona

Goals
1. Highest yields of my cash crops and healthier soil
2. Undo some of the damage we’ve done to the soil
3. Reduce the amount of chemicals I have to pay for and create safer place for my kids to play

Pain Points
• Hard to learn about what to try and what will work, have to network and do a lot of my own research and experiments
• Managing the workload with my full time job
• Convincing people around me and in my family to try regen practices
• Being skeptical of new opportunities and think ‘what is the catch’ when folks come from out of state to promote things like carbon markets and wind turbines

Success Metrics
• Better cash crop yield, reduce costs, improved revenue
• Healthier soil, roots and less plating
• A successful experiment

[Slider Metrics]
AT A DESK IN THE FIELD
LOW STRESS HIGH STRESS
BIG PICTURE IN THE WEEDS

Custom Persona Metrics
HIGH
• High percentage prefer phones and texts over emails and spending time at a computer
• High percentage research online and use Twitter and YouTube to learn about new Ideas about regen ag

MED
• Med percentage adoption of FARMS mentoring

LOW
• Low percentage feel confident or 100% knowledgeable

Day In The Life
Mornings
• Breakfast, go to work off farm, take care of cattle or plan day’s work
• Spend the day outside working or get home from work

Afternoons
• Get to work outside, take care of animals, plan for the weekend

Evenings
• RAMP or FARMS calls, family time, online research

“I convinced my dad to let me try this on some acres and I see better water retention when we have a heavy rain and I’m cutting out a lot of spray jobs, I know this is working and I can see the difference between me and my neighbors.”

Innovator Curious Passionate
Paul Producer
FARMS Producer
## Summary

Analysis of the qualitative research led to several key insights.

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Insight 01

No one-size-fits-all for regenerative practices.
Insight 01
No one-size-fits-all for regenerative practices

“Things just don't work here like they do elsewhere—I don’t want to be one of them people that says that, but stuff just grows different here than it does anywhere else; trying to find information, because there’s nobody doing it in this area. It’s been tough. You try to take the information you have or you can get from people doing it in other places, whether it be North Dakota, South Dakota, Kansas, whatever, and try to fit it to this area. I don’t know what the deal is. It’s just different.”

THEMES

There are many conditions and goals that drive how practices are chosen and implemented by producers and their operations vary greatly from size, animals, and income sources.

Conditions are extremely local. Factors like temperature, elevation, precipitation and evaporation change dynamics and producers see local as very near their land (<50 miles).

Producers’ goals vary and may include things like reducing inputs, integrating grazing, composting, erosion control, nutrient density or increasing organic matter.

Producers use many factors to evaluate possible solutions. Because many things haven’t been tried in their conditions, they rely on others locally, research online or experiment and take risks.
Insight 02

What you see is not what you get.
Insight 02
What you see is not what you get.

“If I can treat the soil well enough to where it’s going to take care of me, I’m fine with letting the neighbors talk. They’re going to talk anyway, so they might as well have something to talk about. The other thing that’s really getting important for me, especially with new ground, is getting the landlord kind of onboard with it, so he comes rolling up there; doesn’t look like a bus crash happening in that field and it’s not getting taken care of. I need to be able to explain to him, hey, when you drive by here, it’s going to look like I’m not paying attention to this, but here’s what’s out there growing.”

THEMES

Communication is local and organic. Neighbors chatting in coffee shops, driving around and talking about what’s happening on other’s fields.

Producers can see improvements in their soil health when the land comes alive with insects, pollinators and more wildlife coming back into the area.

A field with cover crops might look chaotic and disorganized but what you see is above ground and doesn’t share the beauty of what is happening in your soil.

People can lose their lease. Folks or neighbors driving by might tell landlords what is going on when a field looks a mess and share that they could farm it better.
Insight 03

Changing minds and practices takes time and generations.
Insight 03
Changing minds and practices takes time and generations.

“I’ve been wanting to do cover crops on dry land for three years, and when we started the conversation with my father-in-law, he’s like, ‘yeah, we can do it,’ and then I go to order the seed and he’s like, ‘no, we’re not doing it.’ Other than last year, the two previous years we’ve had record rainfall. Why wouldn’t you do it when you have more rainfall than you’ve ever seen in your life? Now I’m pretty excited about it. We’re able to do some new things. New things excite me.”

THEMES

Decision making is very family-based; making choices involves fathers, mothers, grandfathers, father-in-laws, sons, wives and other family members.

Changing farming practices is very individual (and family) driven, a single person can decide to try farming differently, especially those with resources to take on risk.

Tight control of one generation leads to a willingness to relax the reigns for the next. A family that experiments together continues to experiment together.

Sons convince their dads to let them test on small plots where they’ll have more control. After they convince their dad (or others) they also convince other influencers like landlords and bankers.
Insight 04

Market using metrics that matter to drive change.
Insight 04
Market using metrics that matter to drive change.

“The reason I went no-till, I guess probably the biggest reason was labor. I could see that it was going to save me a lot of time and labor, because, at the time, I was farming with my brother, and I could see that wasn't going to last forever...then from there I could see the benefits from the no-till, significantly less erosion that I have on some of these hills that I farm.”

THEMES

Several producers mentioned wanting to see the data. They want confirmation of their soil health and nutrient density for themselves as well as for the market.

Producers want ways to save time and pay less for the labor they need to manage their operation. Tilling is seen as a big demand on time.

Spraying costs are one of the few fixed costs that producers can reduce through using regenerative practices.

Bringing back wildlife and having land that is safe for kids to play in is important to producers, they're family oriented and want to know their family and animals are safer.

Profit

Soil health data

Nutrient density data

Labor savings

Increased wildlife and diversity

Reduced input costs

Healthier and safer for families
Insight 05

FARMS is different; it’s flexible, personal and feels collaborative.
Insight 05
FARMS is different; it’s flexible, personal and feels collaborative.

“It’s kind of nice to have this FARMS program, because it’s pushing me to really experiment with this field differently than I do with a lot of my others, and I really think this is going to work...I did put this right on a highway, this highway on two sides of it, so everybody gets to learn along with me, and early on it looked horrible, and I didn't think it was going to work, and now I'm taking neighbors out in little tiny field, because they're so interested in what's going on.”

THEMES

FARMS program has a personal touch and the FARMS team is well known and supportive—their names were frequently mentioned.

Money is a key influencer in people wanting to join FARMS, money breaks down the risks of trying a new method and can take the sting out of failure.

There is flexibility and without a ‘5 year’ plan, FARMS doesn’t feel like your manager but like a close collaborator or an organization that enables innovation and risk taking.

FARMS producers already had an interest in regenerative practices. FARMS lowers risks but it didn’t reach producers that had no interest or had never heard of regenerative farming practices.
Insight 05
How they heard about FARMS and why they joined.

Where Producers Learned about the FARMS Program

- Neighbor / friend / network
- CCTA Newsletter
- NRCS
- Green Cover Seed email
- No Till Conference - Burlington
- Farming Evolution Booth
- Facebook
- Press release in Newspaper...
- Unknown email or website
- Soil Health Meeting Norfolk
- Twitter
- No-Till on the Plains email

Motivating Factors to Join FARMS

- Learning about Soil Health / research...
- Financial incentive / economics
- Mentorship / be part of a group
- Aligned to mission / current plans and...
- Support to complete project
- Soil test
- Flexible / progressive programming...
- Help with a new practice
- Build reputation for stewardship
- Systems approach

At interview time, have they interacted with others in their Hub

- Yes 65%
- No 35%

*Respondents may have provided more than one response*
Insight 06

There are critical institutional barriers to regenerative practices; this may keep these methods in the minority.
Insight 06
There are critical institutional barriers to regenerative practices– this may keep these methods in the minority.

“RMA, they’re an insurance company, so they are a risk-aversion company, so if you give them a hint to go lower risk, that’s the direction that they’re going to go, and so this is one of the things that’s been troubling to me is, if we’re going to save the planet with agriculture and you want farmers to adopt these principles, they’ve got to have tools to cover their risk, and RMA doesn’t want to do that. The government is talking out of both sides of its mouth, and that’s frustrating for somebody in our position.”

THEMES

Having land that isn't insurable makes seemingly risky practices even riskier. Crop insurance isn't available so producers may be hesitant to plant cover crops on more land.

Bankers are gatekeepers to funds critical to growth and regular operations. They have to be taught as they don't always know what regenerative farming is and see it as a risk.

Landlords have a say in how their land is farmed. This is especially true when it is a share rental agreement vs. cash rental agreement.

“Here in Colorado there's definitely some challenges when going to continuous cropping, because pretty soon you'll get kicked off of RMA and not be able to find insurance.”
New markets are needed, and market volatility is a major stressor for producers.
Insight 07

New markets are needed, and market volatility is a major stressor for producers.

“As far as the specialty crop thing, yeah, sometimes it is really frustrating. I like cover crop seeds because we have a negotiated contract before we ever start, so I know what's expected of me, and they know. But on some of those other ones, the edible beans and whatever, they can definitely be challenging, because they lure you in with big promises ahead of time, and come harvest time, they may only buy 10% of your harvest for that price that they were toting.”

THEMES

Producers want to be less dependent on commodities markets. Covid made this even more acutely felt but they want options and less stressful markets to work with.

It is hard for producers to manage their farms and also look for novel markets, they want help.

Producers want evidence that crops grown in FARMS programs may be higher quality and worth premium price. What evidence can they use (e.g., nutrient density)?

Crops grown regeneratively should bring a premium price but finding these markets reliably is difficult. Some producers are diversifying by selling cover crop seeds.
Insight 08

Producers have robust support networks in and out of the industry, but it isn’t always local.
Insight 08
Producers have robust support networks in and out of the industry, but it isn’t always local.

“…My dad, I go to him for a lot of advice for the farm itself. An agronomist is another big one that we really rely on. He’s been on our farm for a long time, so bouncing ideas with him. Now the soil health he’s new with, so sometimes we butt heads a little bit on that. Another thing is my wife. I really try to get advice from her. It’s good to have someone that’s not from the farming side. She’s really supportive of everything that I do, but it kind of gives you a different perspective of what you might be doing from someone that hasn’t grown up with farming. I guess it’s okay to say this, but I pray a lot, so religion and faith is a big thing for me.”

THEMES

Wives and husbands are key supporters of producers; they may also have second incomes that provide important financial support for the family.

Many producers have strong faith networks that provide emotional and professional support.

Many producers rely on Green Cover Seed and a network of individuals in their area and experts to ask questions, brainstorm and get suggestions from.

“Well, it’s not common right around me. I don’t have any neighbor support. I have asked guys, and they don’t even understand what I’m talking about.”
Insight 08
Producers listed 86 distinct resources for support and information.

Resources included individuals, social media, conferences, trainings, government organizations, neighbors, churches, industry experts, local resources and companies.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Influencers Mentioned</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GCS or Keith Berns</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabe Brown</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRCS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michael Thompson, Twitter</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KS/NE Soil Stewardship group</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kit Pharo</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>No-Till Farmer</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scott Ravenkamp</td>
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<tr>
<td>Successful Farming</td>
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<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agronomist</td>
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Not only did producers individually mention multiple influencers, but many influencers were named by multiple producers.
Thank you!