

How Big Ag Bankrolled Regenerative Ranching

BY

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Advocates of “regenerative ranching” methods claim they’re slashing the carbon footprint of the ranching industry — but they’re actually propping up a scam that Big Ag is bankrolling.

It was 1965. Historians would later call it the Rhodesian Bush War, but back then it was just tracking. Allan Savory wiped the sweat from his forehead, catching a bead of black dye before it hit his eyes. Four Zimbabwean independence fighters had shot up a police station, and Ian Smith’s rogue colonial government had tasked Savory’s Tracker Combat Unit with finding them. In his war memoir, Savory follows trail signs along the banks of the Zambezi, glimpses a camouflage jacket through the foliage, and kills them all.

Half a century later, Allan Savory stepped into the lights on a stage in Vancouver. He told the TED Talk audience that he had come to regret ordering the deaths of forty thousand elephants during his time as a Rhodesian wildlife officer. He didn’t mention his central role in developing the tracking technique of the Selous Scouts, who massacred thousands of civilians during the war, using everything from machine guns to anthrax. That was all beside the point. He was there to tell a story about how cattle farming could save the world from climate change. The world believed him.

The Evolution of a Myth

Savory called his theory holistic rangeland management, but today it's known by many monikers, including regenerative ranching, rotational foraging, and adaptive multi-paddock (AMP) grazing. Its central premise is that by putting cattle on the move, overgrazing can be prevented and, crucially, atmospheric carbon can be sequestered into the soil.

As evidence of the ranching sector's environmental impact has grown undeniable — climate scientists calculate that beef alone produces a quarter of all food emissions and ecologists estimate it causes more than half of global deforestation in some areas — regenerative ranching has become a popular counterpoint for the industry's defenders. Proponents assert that regenerative methods could turn deserts into grasslands. Some even claim it could reverse global climate change using a fraction of the world's soils.

Though Allan Savory developed his method in colonial Rhodesia and had published it by 1980, regenerative ranching remained a fringe theory until cattle baron Ted Turner broadcast Savory's talk on YouTube in 2013. The video went viral, the corporate world took notice, and the financial floodgates swung open.

Later that year, another film debuted, perhaps the first documentary focused on building soil carbon through ranching. It was called *Soil Carbon Cowboys*, and it had an interesting financier: Shell Oil.



Allan Savory when he was a military captain. (Savory Global / Wikimedia Commons)

Shell's interest in promoting regenerative ranching was a classic carbon offset scheme — in the words of the film's director, "What if these oil companies used their money to help ranchers transition to AMP grazing, and then shared in the credits for the carbon being stored in the soil?" With a pitch like that, he landed a grant. In 2016, a second \$500,000 grant went to *Cowboys* cast member and consultant Richard Teague, who has since published scores of academic articles on AMP grazing, but is not required to disclose his associations with Shell, not to mention other financial interests, such as McDonald's, Dixon Ranches, and the Savory Institute.

In an anemic university research system heavily reliant on grant funding, *Soil Carbon Cowboys* helped pioneer a new career pathway in academia. In 2018, its director, Arizona State journalism professor Peter Byck, brought in \$4.5 million from McDonald's to promote regenerative ranching through film, coupled with another \$1.25 million from corporate donors through the US Department of Agriculture's Foundation for Food and Agricultural Research. This money was distributed among at least fourteen professors from Arizona State and other land grant universities, including a Michigan State scholar named Jason Rowntree, who secured a massive \$19 million grant for regenerative ranching research from donors like Butcher Box and the Noble oil fortune in 2021.

To continue providing private research grants, corporate investors presumably prefer to see favorable results. In 2020, Rowntree served as principal investigator on a General Mills-commissioned study examining White Oak Pastures, a ranch claiming to draw down 3.5 kilograms of CO₂-equivalent emissions for every kilogram of beef. Despite some questionable statistical decisions — not replicating control samples, averaging scatter-plot data, and using a linear regression model that didn't account for soil carbon saturation — Rowntree's analysis nonetheless demonstrated the farm had been lying to consumers about generating net-negative emissions. Even then, Rowntree's team (and the press) put a positive spin on its conclusions.

Regardless, White Oak Pastures continues to advertise its meat as emissions-negative. And despite settling a wage theft lawsuit in 2021, its owner maintains a celebrated status among food media and NGOs.

The Regenerative Ranching Racket

Countless soil carbon NGOs and certification programs have sprouted up in the past decade, forming a veritable ranching public-relations complex, ranging from grassroots-flavored groups like Regeneration International to massive marketing academies astroturfed by conglomerates like Cargill, Nestlé, and General Mills. Ranching philanthropy has also crept into the coffers of charities such as the Nature Conservancy, Audubon Society, and the Union of Concerned Scientists, which published regenerative ranching research with funding from billionaire ranch owners Jeremy Grantham and Tom Steyer. Naturally, Steyer advocated for increased funding of public-private agricultural partnerships to build soil carbon during his run for president.

These kinds of partnerships are already highly funded and deeply entrenched in the meat sector — at their most blatant, they involve things like slaughter and meatpacking businesses on college campuses, such as Colorado State’s JBS Global Food Innovation Center and University of California, Davis’s Meat Lab.

Most university meat corruption, however, operates beneath the surface. The pipeline from corporate finance to public research is institutionalized through benign-sounding entities like the Foundation for Food and Agricultural Research (FFAR), an agency established in the 2014 US Farm Bill that distributes private research funding to public institutions. To date, FFAR has bankrolled nearly \$300 million of research funding from more than five hundred corporations, including McDonald’s, Pepsi, Kroger, JBS, Tyson, Monsanto, Amazon, and General Mills.

Similarly, the Department of Agriculture’s “producer-driven” Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program has funneled upwards of \$300 million into nearly eight thousand public research projects since 1988. Another Department of Agriculture branch, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), helps recruit SARE participants in rural communities. NRCS soil specialist Ray Archuleta toured all fifty states during his thirty-year government career before establishing his own organization, the Soil Health Academy, in 2017. Since then, Archuleta has worked with a nonprofit called Kiss the Ground.

Kiss the Ground was also the name of a documentary hit in 2020, bringing together a stacked cast of industry legends like Ray Archuleta and Allan Savory as well as Hollywood icons like Woody Harrelson. It was produced and directed by Josh and Rebecca Tickell of Big Picture Ranch, a film company as well as an actual avocado ranch.

Josh Tickell made his documentary debut in 2008 with a film called *FUEL*, using money granted from the Clinton Foundation to a charity he founded called BioDiesel America. A few years later, while fundraising for a film about fracking in his own neighborhood, he signed a fake nondisclosure agreement to secure a donation from a paid actor posing as an oil executive. *FRACKED* never made it to

reel, ostensibly due to lack of funding; the Tickells instead aired a film called *Pump*, which promoted fracked methane, after finding a donor in a lobbying firm called the Fuel Freedom Foundation. Tickell's career seems to suggest that for some documentarians, the hard truth is that following donors can take a story further than following leads.

More recently, the Tickells contracted with Kiss the Ground. A year before the film, the charity administered a \$650,000 grant from General Mills through Archuleta's Soil Health Academy. Similarly, Kiss the Ground's debut film, *A Regenerative Secret*, was produced in partnership with Belcampo, a boutique meat brand that shut down three years later after whistleblowers revealed the company was importing meat and marking up the price after repackaging with regenerative organic labeling.

In addition to Belcampo, numerous other standard-bearing regenerative meat and dairy brands have been exposed in recent years for false advertising, labor abuse, and animal cruelty, including Polyface Farm, Sylvanaqua Farms, White Oak Pastures, and Tillamook Dairy. And while regenerative ranching hasn't performed well in practice, the theory hasn't held up much better. Although many prominent academics swear by regenerative ranching in industry-adjacent fields such as Animal Sciences and Rangeland Management, international research bodies resoundingly disagree, with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change estimating that the world's agricultural soils can only sequester a few gigatons of carbon per year and the Food Climate Research Network concluding that soil carbon sequestration on cattle farms is "substantially outweighed by the greenhouse gas emissions these grazing animals generate."

A Convenient Untruth

The regenerative ranching phenomenon is not just exaggerated. It's fabricated, woven from a carbon-credit scheme for big oil, and is a marketing gold mine for big agriculture.

Yet despite the cracks beginning to show, the reel keeps rolling. Perhaps it's easy to believe. Like the oil companies, the meat industry would like us to think it just needs some tweaks and adjustments to solve our ecological crisis. In reality, it's going to take a lot more than that.

The evidence is clear that the carbon-negative cow is a fable and the ranching industry is a major contributor to global climate change. Worse yet, when assessing the bigger picture and considering its

prominent role in driving pollution, hunger, land theft, and species extinction, the ranching industry's regenerative rhetoric should be regarded as duplicitous as the fossil fuel industry's empty promises of transition fuels and emissions offsets. After all, they're financed by some of the same public relations budgets.

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