# GENERAL MILLS

This is part of a series of case studies about the transformational work happening in Canada's agriculture and food sectors and is designed to inform investment in the space. A closer look at General Mills' Regenerative Ag Northern Plains Pilot Project provides insights into the role that a global food company can play in supporting and investing in on-farm and supply chain transition.

## AT A GLANCE

**Project Name:** General Mills Regenerative Ag Northern Plains Pilot Project

**Project Participants:**

- General Mills
- Soil Health Academy
- Understanding Ag
- Ecosystem Services Market Consortium (ESMC)
- ALUS
- Farmers

**Location:** Canadian Plains

**Main Crops Addressed:** Grain cropping systems with and without livestock integration

**Farmers Engaged:** 40 (started with 45) with acreage ranging from 600-9500 acres

**Project Established in:** 2019

**Training Paradigms:** Based on work of Understanding Ag

**Regenerative Practices Used:**

- The 6 principles of soil health by Understanding Ag

## FINANCE SNAPSHOT:

**Original Project Funding:** General Mills in Soil Health Academy and Understanding Ag programming.

**Follow-on Investment that Generates Revenue Opportunities for Farmers:** General Mills in ESMC and ALUS programming.

## THE CHALLENGE:

General Mills is one of the oldest and most trusted food companies, with products in 90% of American pantries. Its diverse portfolio of brands include Annie's, Cascadian Farm, Cheerios and many others. In 2019, General Mills, was one of the first companies to publicly commit to advancing regenerative agriculture on 1 million acres of farmland by 2030, seeking to improve the health and resilience of agricultural ecosystems.

Achieving this goal requires a context-specific approach as each region from which General Mills sources has its unique barriers and opportunities to regenerative agriculture implementation. One of its key supply sheds is the Northern Plains, a sourcing region for grains like oats. General Mills Principal Scientist Steve Rosenzweig explains, "This region has a short growing season and cold climate; many practices that work in warmer climates will either not work or must be significantly adapted to work here. Farmers are extremely innovative and they have been figuring out ways to implement the principles even in this context. But innovation can be a difficult process – there are failed experiments and so much time invested in learning, though many innovators typically do not receive much support during this process." A key element in General Mills' work with (aspiring) regenerative farmers is technical support - both from professional coaches and peer farmers - and it has been found to be a game-changer.

## THE SOLUTION: A REGIONALLY SPECIFIC PROGRAM TO SUPPORT FARMER TRANSITIONS

Starting in 2019 with a grant to the non-profit, Soil Health Academy, the program provided Canadian farmers free access to multi-day regenerative agriculture workshops. More than 150 farmers attended these workshops and General Mills ultimately partnered with 45 farmers on a more in-depth program to offer:

- 1-on-1 coaching through Understanding Ag to support each farmer in implementing regenerative ag in their unique context
- Ongoing access to educational and peer networking opportunities for farmers to learn from experts and each other
- On-farm measurement and insights about how soil health and insect & bird biodiversity are changing on their farm
- Payments for ecosystem service outcomes beginning in 2023

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

**Project Origins:** In 2018, several General Mills employees attended one of the first Soil Health Academies (SHA) on a farm in Minnesota and saw first-hand the impact of soil health demonstrations and farmer-to-farmer learning. Soil Health Academy is a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization committed to empowering regeneration through education. Having seen the impact of this programming, General Mills decided to fund farmer training in the Northern Plains through a grant to SHA. This marked the start of a collaboration that, from 2019 onwards, grew into the General Mills Regenerative Ag Northern Plains Pilot Project.

The programming in the pilot project has evolved from farmer training and regenerative agriculture pilot programs to expanding impact through market opportunities and external partnerships.

**Project Rationale:** The foundation of the program is education. Rosenzweig explains, "Having a solid understanding of the regenerative principles and the importance of a healthy and functioning agricultural ecosystem to support the farm business is critical for having a clear 'why' as farmers start making changes. We also know that many farmers who attend workshops or conferences leave with more knowledge and inspiration but may need extra support identifying the right first or next step on their farm." This is why, in addition to workshops and training, the Understanding Ag consultants follow up with one-on-one coaching throughout the year and help farmers think through the specifics for their unique farm.

General Mills also knew that many farmers in the region were already experimenting with regenerative agriculture, but many felt as if they were doing it alone. "From what farmers and local partners tell us, farming differently from their neighbors brings peer pressure and social isolation that makes it difficult for farmers to continue to adopt regenerative agriculture," says Rosenzweig. "Perhaps the most important part of this program has been helping form a community of regenerative farmers who have provided each other with agronomic advice, confidence, and moral support."

**Project Evolution:** Since 2019, General Mills has evolved its programming from farmer training and regenerative agriculture pilot programs to expanding impact through market opportunities and external partnerships. The economic benefits of regenerative agriculture are a key piece of the puzzle for both motivating and maintaining adoption, so General Mills has piloted different ways of providing economic support - through payments for ecosystem services via work with the nonprofit Ecosystem Services Market Consortium (ESMC) and through practice implementation funding via the non-profit, ALUS.

In 2022, General Mills invested US$3 million with ESMC to scale their Eco-Harvest program that rewards farmers for the quantifiable impact they're having on the environment by advancing regenerative agriculture. The investment supported the scale-up in priority regions in the U.S. and Canada where General Mills sources its key ingredients.

Also in 2022, General Mills launched a partnership with ALUS, investing US$2.3 million to advance regenerative agriculture in Canada. ALUS's model of delivering financial and technical support through local hubs, led by boards consisting of farmers and other community members, represented a great opportunity for the General Mills program to scale. Several of the farmers in General Mills' program were working with ALUS on its program to support edge-of-field practices and wildlife habitat, prompting General Mills to pursue this as an opportunity to collaborate. Together, the two piloted a new program focused on in-field regenerative agriculture implementation called Growing Roots, which has enabled General Mills to scale its engagement and impact to many more farmers. With its success, additional expansion of the program was announced in 2024.

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**STEVE ROSENZWEIG**
PRINCIPAL. SOIL SCIENTIST, GENERAL MILLS

## OUTCOMES OF THE PROGRAM - BASED ON PARTICIPATING FARMERS' FEEDBACK

In March 2023, General Mills gathered all of the farmers in the project, along with their families, for several days to reflect and hear from each of the farmers on how their farms have changed in the four years since the program began. There were many stories about successful or failed experiments and learnings, but overwhelmingly, the message from the farmers was gratitude to the other farmers in the program for everything they've learned from each other, and how they've supported each other over the years.

Farmer surveys show improved understanding of regenerative principles, the benefits of one to one coaching, and that many farmers are talking to their neighbors about the benefits:

- 66% reported a reduction in fertilizer usage
- 69% reported a reduction in herbicide/fungicide/insecticide usage
- 70% of farmers reported being more profitable
- 91% of participants found the program's coaching useful
- 95% of participants plan to continue trying other practices in the future

## LESSONS LEARNED

### De-Risking Role of Global Food Companies:

While regenerative agriculture systems are more profitable and resilient in the long-run, the first few years of transition can be more costly and more risky. General Mills and other global food companies have an important role to play in helping farmers to de-risk the adoption of regenerative agriculture techniques, especially in these early years of experimentation. Through their own funding and partnership with other entities, General Mills demonstrates there are a multitude of ways to support farmers, including technical assistance and cost-share programs.

*Source: ALUS via iGrow News*

### Farmer Support Services Addressing Multiple Barriers Lead to More Resilient Outcomes:

General Mills kicked this program off as an education and technical assistance program with farmers in the Northern Plains region. As work with this community progressed, it was apparent that support services, such as technical assistance, should not be addressed in a silo. Creating holistic transition services that tackle more than one obstacle to transition will ultimately lead to more resilient results for farmers but also for those investing in the programs.

## LESSONS LEARNED (CONTINUED)

**Building Leaders & Advocates:**

The main goal was to support local innovation to generate the know-how for adapting the regenerative principles in their context, which is critical for scaling regenerative agriculture. But what came out was much more. Many of these farmers have now become leaders in their communities - helping other farmers in their area with regenerative agriculture, sharing their knowledge at conferences, and even starting their own regenerative ag support businesses.

## POINTS OF IMPACT

The original Northern Plains program has been successful in achieving its goals, and it has created ripple effects in the broader agriculture landscape. General Mills serves as a powerful example of how a global food company is able to advance regenerative agriculture in its sourcing region by working with farmers, developing and promoting regenerative agriculture practices.

Reduction in synthetic input use by at least 2/3 of farmers in program

7 of 10 farmers in program reported improved profitability

Building farmer capacity through education and connection, that can also be passed on

Serve as a model for other multinational food companies' engagement

## FURTHER READING & RESOURCES

- Results of economic case studies from farms in Regenerative Ag Northern Plains Pilot Project and the Kansas Regenerative Ag program.
- Results of a study in partnership with University of Manitoba showing that successfully established cover crops can reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 25%
- Video on Regenerative Ag Northern Plains Pilot Project with Collective Impact Carbon in Saskatchewan, which highlights a related program in a targeted region of the pilot not discussed in this case study.
- General Mills / ALUS 2022 press release and 2024 expansion press release
- Trusted Advisor Partnership press release

## CONTACT INFORMATION

Please contact Media.Line@genmills.com with any inquiries || Website: https://www.generalmills.com

To learn more about the transformational food systems work happening in Canada and to download other case studies, please visit: **https://rfsi-forum.com/rfsi-canada-2024/**

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