

Perspectives on regenerative certification in Australia

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

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Acknowledgements

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This research was performed with ethics approval from the Australian National University Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol number: 2019/188). It forms part of a Masters project.

Disclaimer

This report contains descriptive results of a research survey conducted by the author. It is provided for the interest of research participants and the regenerative agriculture community. Results have been analysed more extensively in a Masters dissertation by the author, which is available upon request. For more information, please contact Isabella.Zohrab@anu.edu.au.

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Summary

This report presents descriptive results from a survey of regenerative farmers in Australia in 2019. This information is intended to provide insight into the potential of regenerative certification schemes to contribute towards meaningful improvement in Australia. This summary highlights key findings, but for more details on methodology and results please refer to the following pages.

Definitions of regenerative agriculture generally reflected an emphasis on outcomes, particularly a way of farming that actively improves the landscape. However, the diversity of definitions was high, with some respondents listing specific quantitative criteria (e.g. ground cover) and methods, while others referred to broad principles.

Important motivations for farming regeneratively were environmental stewardship and lifestyle. Financial motivators were much less important for the majority, even though all respondents are professional farmers. Similarly, most respondents believed that consumers of regenerative food are driven by altruistic motivations (e.g. animal welfare) and food quality motivations (e.g. taste), and are less concerned with more self-interested concerns such as price.

Respondents tended to be either optimistic or pessimistic about certification; they believe the potential benefits are either all important or all unimportant, and that certification will have either wholly positive or wholly negative effects. The majority are optimistic about certification. The most important motivations for joining a scheme were improved understanding of farm health, followed by altruistic motivations (e.g. encourage consumption of healthier food, improve Australia's food security). The least important were financial motivations.

There was a fairly even distribution in respondents' level of concern about various aspects of certification. The largest concerns related to defining "regenerative" and government involvement in certification. Respondents also raised other concerns, including workload and the proliferation of similar schemes.

1. Introduction

This report presents descriptive results from a survey of regenerative farmers in Australia in 2019. My research aimed to understand perspectives on regenerative certification among Australian regenerative farmers. I was particularly interested in addressing:

- The diversity of understandings of what “regenerative” means,
- What motivates farmers to adopt regenerative practices,
- What motivates consumers to choose food from regenerative farms,
- And incentives and barriers to participating in a regenerative certification scheme.

This report is intended to communicate my findings to survey participants and the regenerative farming community in Australia. More extensive analysis is available in my dissertation.

2. Methods

2.1 Survey development

Data was collected using an online questionnaire. The survey content was informed by studies on the adoption of conservation and organic agriculture, research into the motivations of organic consumers, and research on community supported agriculture. These studies were based in Australia, Europe, and the United States but questions were adapted to be relevant to the Australian context.

Questions addressing farmer motivations were informed by and adapted from the following studies:

- Bellotti, B. and Rochecoste, J. F., 2014. The development of Conservation Agriculture in Australia—Farmers as innovators, *International Soil and Water Conservation Research*, **2**(1): 21-34. Available at: 10.1016/s2095-6339(15)30011-3
- Casagrande, M., Peigné, J., Payet, V., Mäder, P., Sans, F. X., Blanco-Moreno, J. M., Antichi, D., Bàrberi, P., Beeckman, A., Bigongiali, F., Cooper, J., Dierauer, H., Gascoyne, K., Grosse, M., Heß, J., Kranzler, A., Luik, A., Peetsmann, E., Surböck, A., Willekens, K. and David, C., 2015. Organic farmers’ motivations and challenges for adopting conservation agriculture in Europe, *Organic Agriculture*, **6**(4): 281-295. Available at: 10.1007/s13165-015-0136-0
- Greiner, R. and Gregg, D., 2011. Farmers’ intrinsic motivations, barriers to the adoption of conservation practices and effectiveness of policy instruments: Empirical evidence from northern Australia, *Land Use Policy*, **28**(1): 257-265. Available at: 10.1016/j.landusepol.2010.06.006
- Greiner, R., Patterson, L. and Miller, O., 2009. Motivations, risk perceptions and adoption of conservation practices by farmers, *Agricultural Systems*, **99**(2-3): 86-104. Available at: 10.1016/j.agsy.2008.10.003

Questions addressing consumer motivations were informed by and adapted from the following studies:

- Chang, H.-S. and Zepeda, L., 2007. Consumer perceptions and demand for organic food in Australia: Focus group discussions, *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, **20**(03): 155-167. Available at: 10.1079/raf2004103
- Lockie, S., Lyons, K., Lawrence, G. and Mummery, K., 2002. Eating 'green': Motivations behind organic food consumption in Australia, *Sociologia Ruralis*, **42**(1).
- Padel, S. and Foster, C., 2005. Exploring the gap between attitudes and behaviour: Understanding why consumers buy or do not buy organic food, *British Food Journal*, **107**(8): 606-625. Available at: <https://search-proquest-com.virtual.anu.edu.au/docview/225142366?accountid=8330>
- Pearson, D., Henryks, J. and Jones, H., 2010. Organic food: What we know (and do not know) about consumers, *Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*, **26**(02): 171-177. Available at: 10.1017/s1742170510000499
- Rana, J. and Paul, J., 2017. Consumer behavior and purchase intention for organic food: A review and research agenda, *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, **38**: 157-165. Available at: 10.1016/j.jretconser.2017.06.004

Additional questions were included to understand definitions of regenerative agriculture, expected effects of regenerative certification on Australia, and the likelihood of participating in a scheme. Early drafts of the

questionnaire were tested with regenerative farmers, academic advisors, and professionals in organizations supporting regenerative agriculture for feedback on questionnaire content, wording, and structure. Feedback was used to refine response categories and improve the structure of the questionnaire.

2.2 Data collection

The survey was distributed using the social media channels of Soils For Life, a nongovernmental organization that supports Australian regenerative farmers. It was shared on their Facebook page, Twitter, and in their Facebook group. From there it was shared in other regenerative agriculture social media groups. It was also shared in the newsletter of the Australian Institute of Ecological Agriculture, then through the database of Intuit Earth to increase responses from Western Australia.

Survey responses were anonymous. They were 94 recorded responses, with 18 screened out for failing to meet survey criteria (farming was not their full-time occupation, they did not farm in Australia, or they had no interest in regenerative farming). 23 responses were discarded because they answered very few questions. They were 53 remaining responses.

3. Results

The distribution of respondents, collected through postal codes, is illustrated by Figure 1 and summarized in Table 1. Most respondents were in the southeast of Australia. There was only one response from northern Australia (Queensland; there were no respondents in the Northern Territory).



Figure 1:

Location of

respondents. Map produced by the author using ArcGIS® software by Esri. The postal code basemap was created by Esri, Michael Bauer Research GmbH, and the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Table 1: Responses by state	
State	Number of respondents
New South Wales	18
Australian Capital Territory	1
Victoria	9
Queensland	1
South Australia	2
Western Australia	20
Tasmania	1
Northern Territory	0

3.1 Definitions

Respondents defined regenerative agriculture in a variety of ways. 17 respondents mentioned specific regenerative processes, focusing on reducing or eliminating chemical inputs and different grazing methods.

29 respondents mentioned principles of regenerative agriculture. These included working with nature, sustainability, animal welfare, community, managing holistically, the importance of being ethical, and a systems approach.

35 respondents emphasized outcomes in some way. Many respondents stressed soil improvements. Improving biodiversity was also frequently mentioned. 13 respondents emphasized that regenerative farming involves active improvement. 10 respondents mentioned productivity-related outcomes. 8 referenced food quality, and 2 mentioned resilience.

The diversity of definitions was high. For example, one definition focused on processes (inputs) and outcomes, specifically productivity and biodiversity:

“Minimise inputs, create & foster habitat and native flora & fauna... Maximise value of outputs”
(Respondent #3)

Other definitions were more specific and prescriptive and focused on processes:

“Animals [allowed] to express their range of animal experience free range with a close connection to the herd leader. Maintaining and restoring remnant vegetation on farm greater than 30% of total farm area. Utilising pasture effectively through grazing management. Maintaining 100% ground cover as much as possible. Increasing soil carbon and water holding capacity. Custodians of the land.”
(Respondent #52).

Finally, many definitions were vaguer and focused on general principles, for example:

“A Farm that can sustain itself with only Sunlight & Rain” (Respondent #27)

“Farming in a manner [that] gives more to our land under management than we take as yield.”
(Respondent #28)

“Stepping beyond ‘sustainable’ farming into a new paradigm of ecologically balanced abundance for future generations.” (Respondent #40)

3.2 Farmers

Respondents’ most important motivation for farming regeneratively was environmental stewardship. The second most important motivator was lifestyle. Financial motivators were much less important for the majority, even though all respondents are professional farmers. Responses are summarized in Figure 2 below.

Fig. 2a: Enjoying farm work

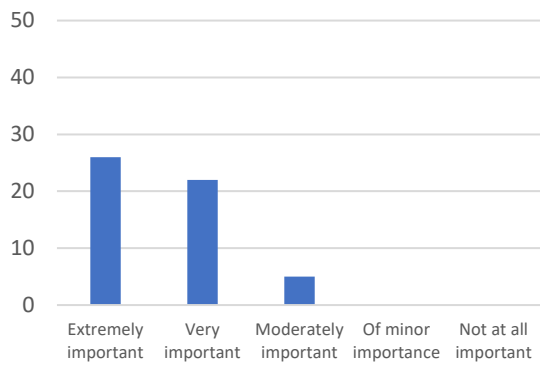


Fig. 2b: Increasing profits

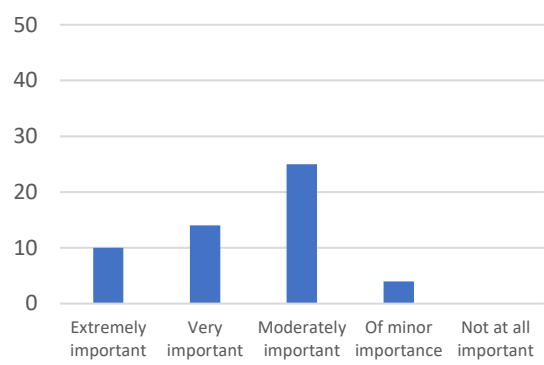


Fig. 2c: Improving soil quality

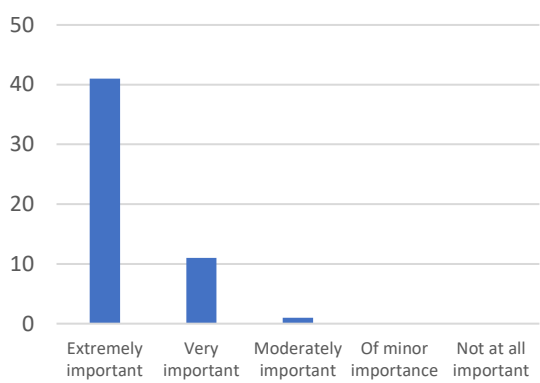


Fig. 2d: Producing high quality food

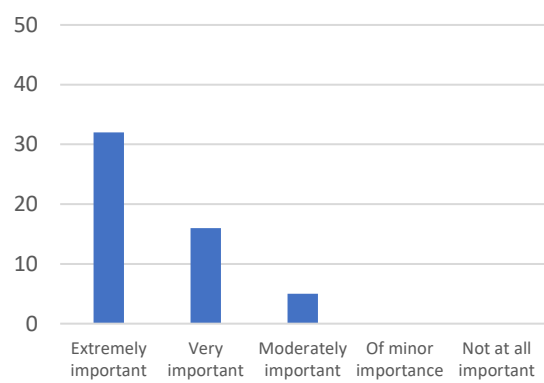


Fig. 2e: Limiting weeds, pests and diseases

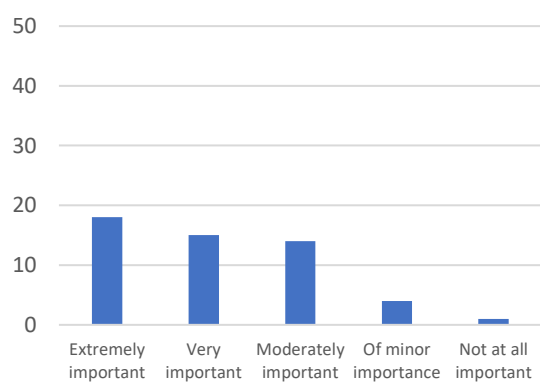


Fig. 2f: Protecting biodiversity

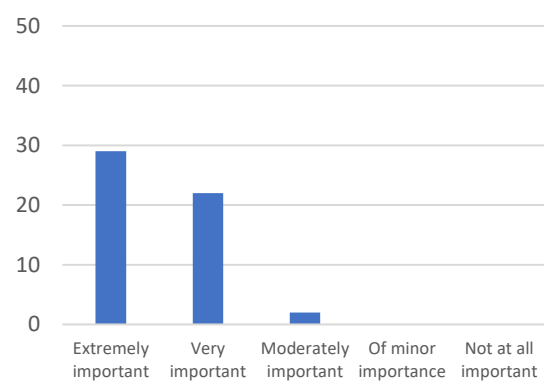


Fig. 2g: Reducing costs

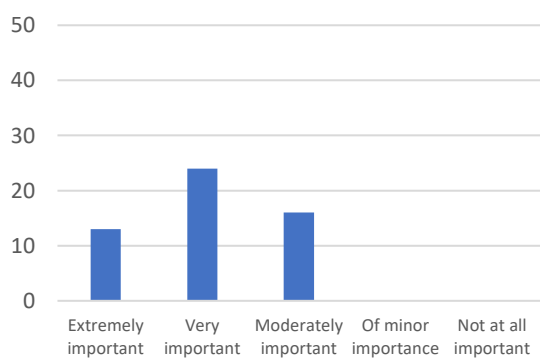
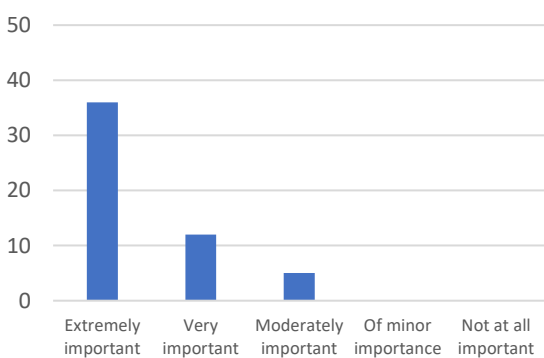


Fig. 2h: Passing on land in good condition



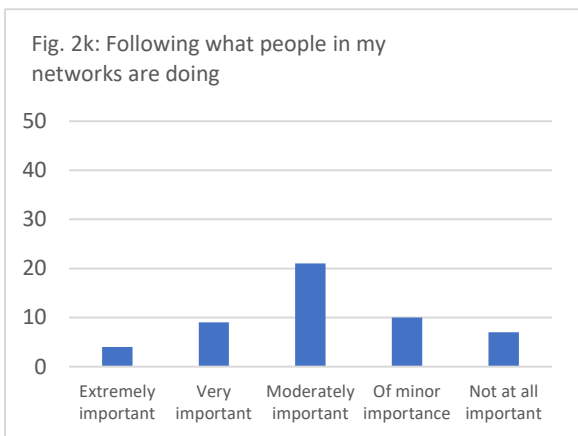
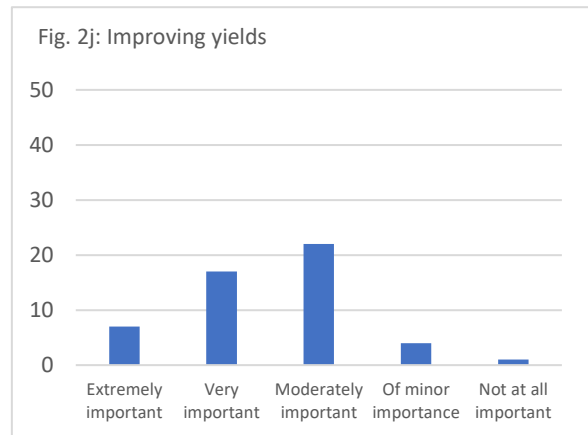
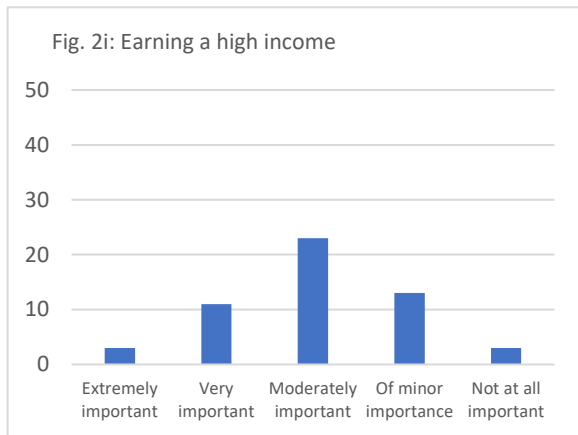
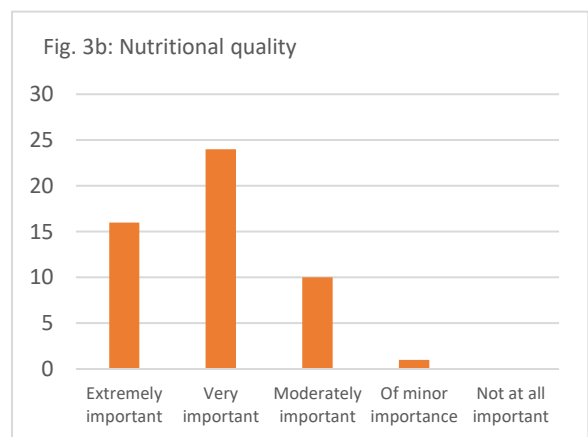


Figure 2: Importance of motivations for regenerative farming

Environmental motivators (improving soil quality (Fig. 2c), protecting biodiversity (Fig. 2f), passing on land in good condition (Fig. 2h)) tended to be the most important. Lifestyle motivations (enjoying farm work (Fig. 2a), producing high quality food (Fig. 2d)) were also important. Financial and productivity-related motivations (increasing profits (Fig. 2b), limiting weeds, pests and diseases (Fig. 2e), reducing costs (Fig. 2g), earning a high income (Fig. 2i), improving yields (Fig. 2j)) were generally considered to be less important. The least important motivator was following what other farmers are doing (Fig. 2k).

3.3 Consumers

Most respondents believe that regenerative consumers are driven by altruistic motivations and food quality motivations and are less concerned with more self-interested concerns such as price.



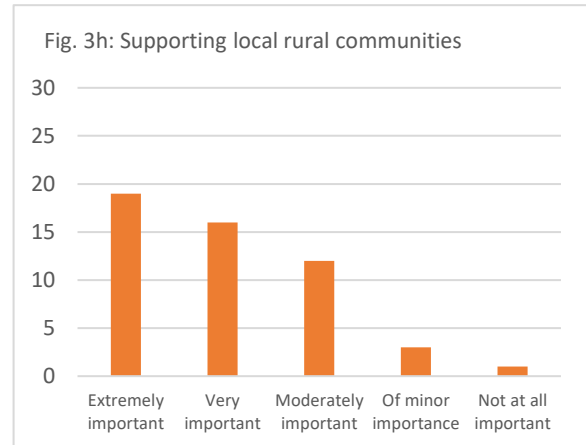
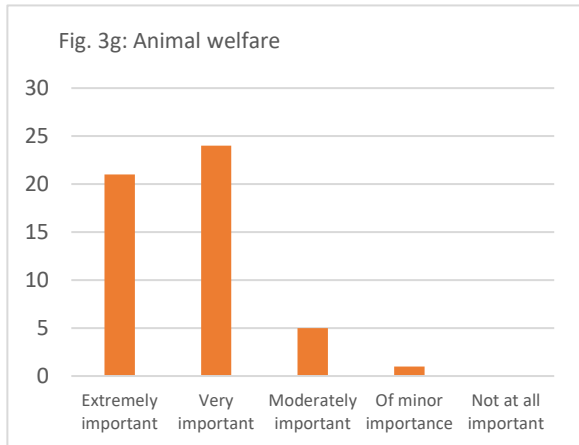
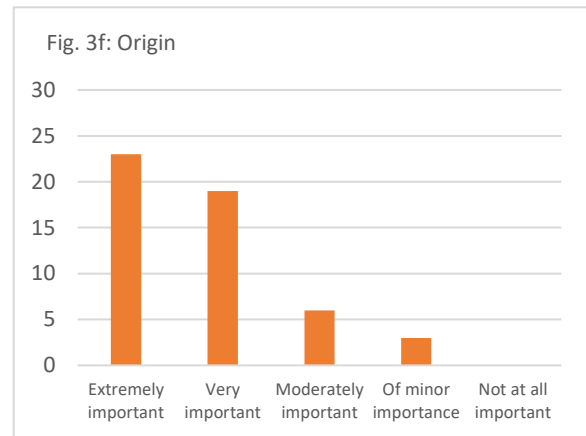
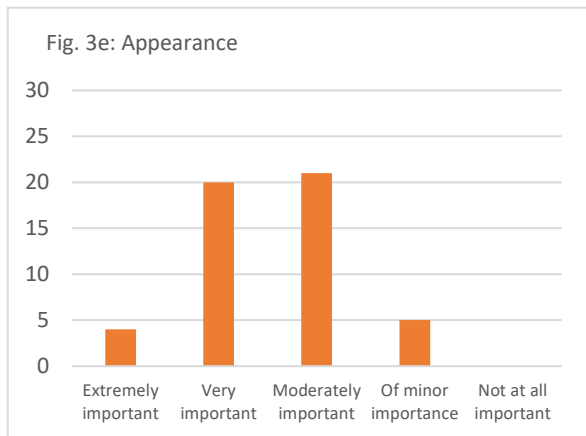
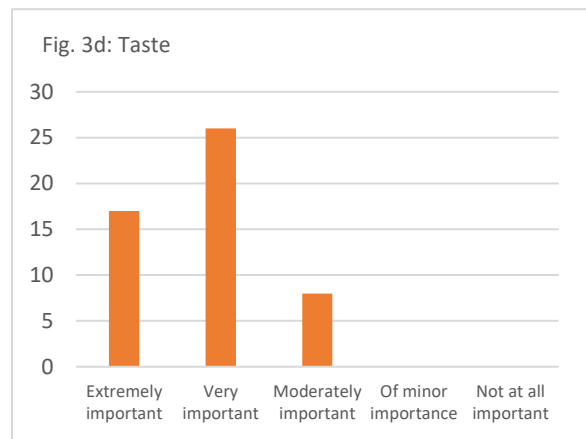
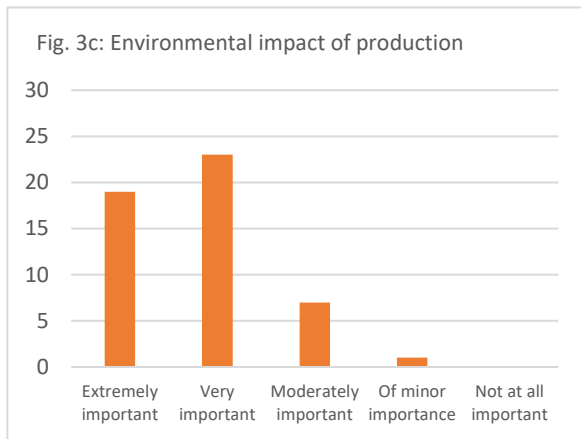
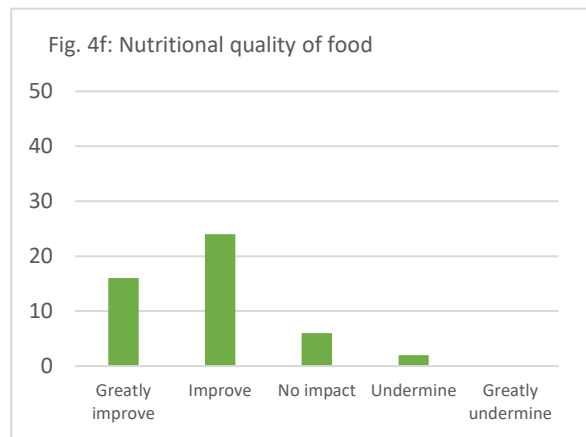
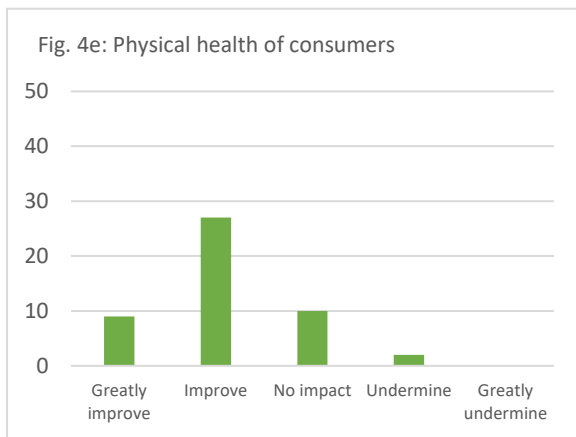
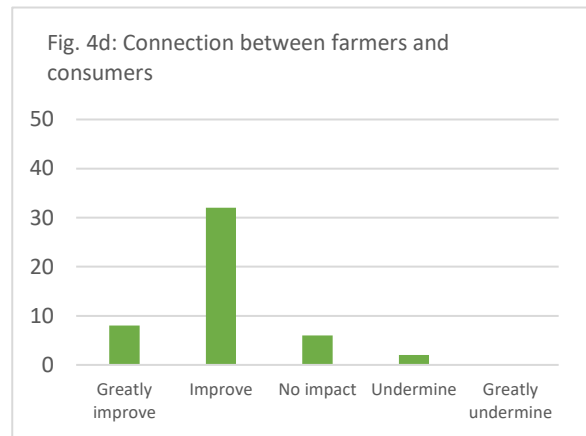
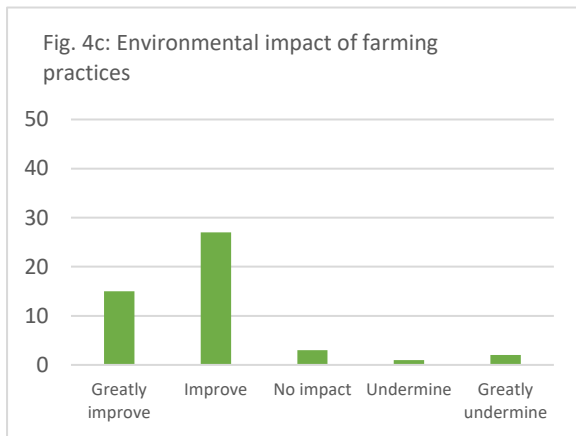
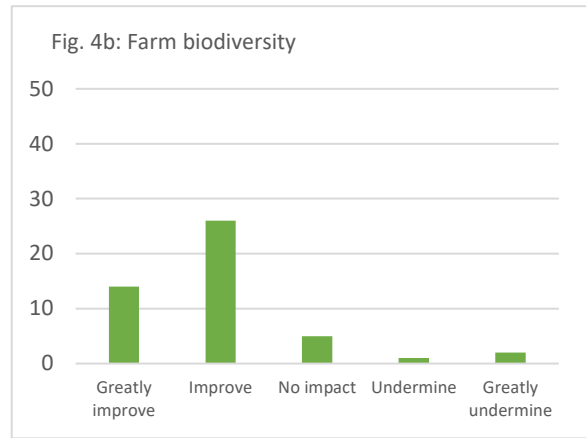
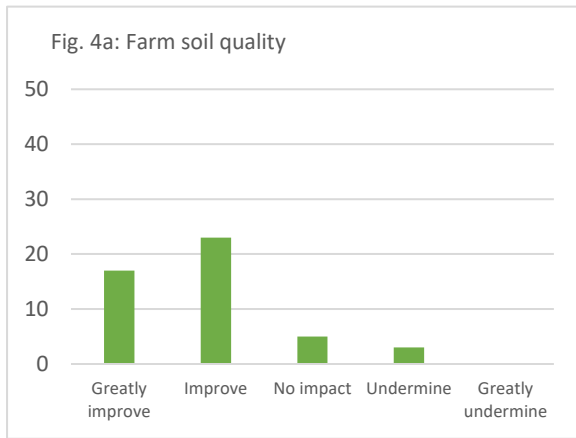


Figure 3: Importance of motivations for consuming regenerative food

Respondents believed that consumers prioritized animal welfare, taste, the environmental impact of production, origin, and nutritional quality, and supporting local rural communities to be important in choosing regenerative food. Price and appearance were believed to be the least important motivators.

3.4 Incentives and barriers to participating

Respondents tend to be either optimistic or pessimistic about certification; they believe the potential benefits are either all important or all unimportant (Fig. 5) and that certification will have either wholly positive or wholly negative effects (Fig. 4).



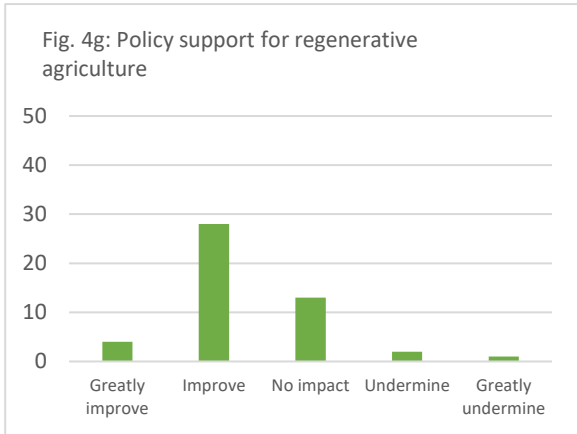
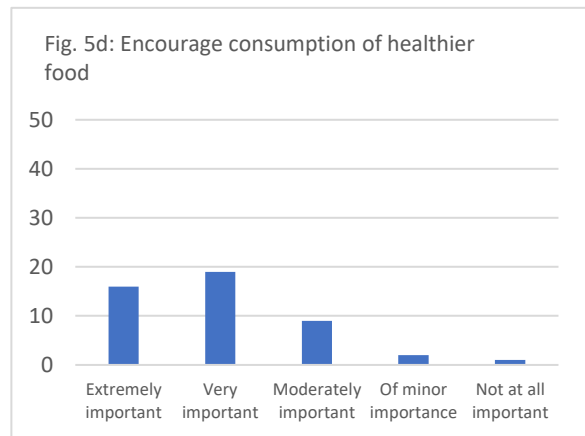
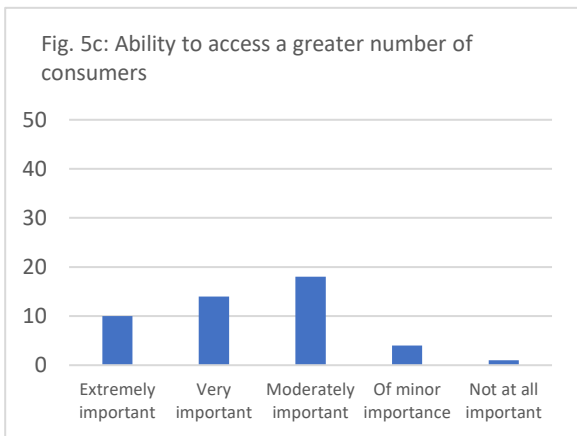
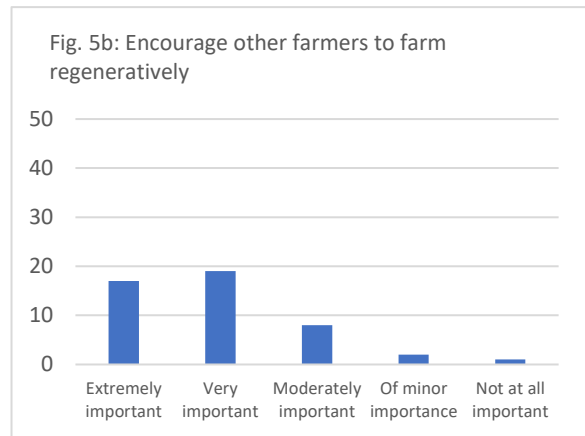
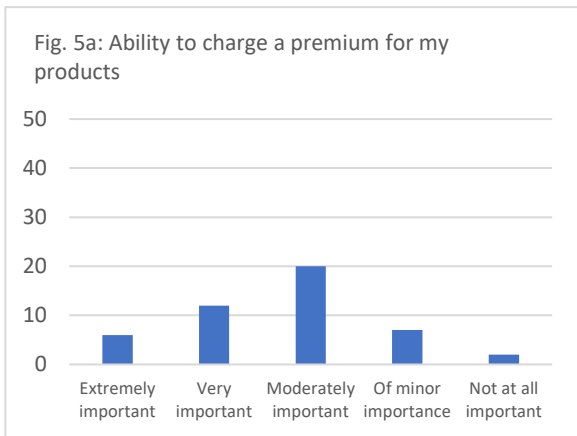


Figure 4: The expected impacts of a regenerative certification scheme

The majority believe the impacts will be positive.



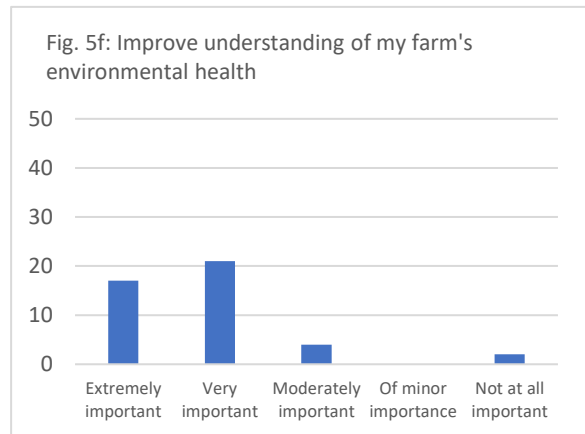
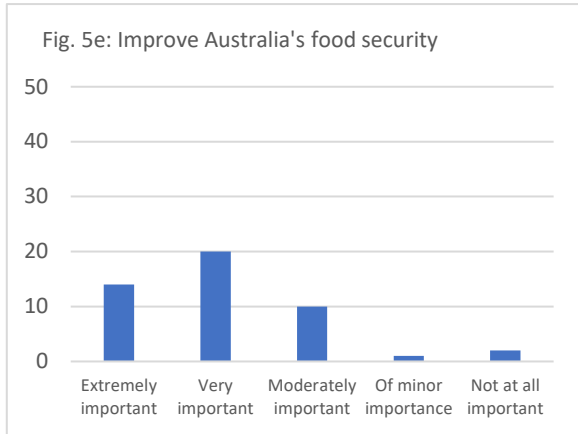


Figure 5: Importance of motivations for joining a regenerative certification scheme

The most important motivation for joining a scheme was improved understanding of farm health (Fig. 5f), followed by altruistic motivations (encourage other farms to farm regeneratively (Fig. 5b), encourage consumption of healthier food (Fig. 5d), improve Australia's food security (Fig. 5e)). The least important were financial motivations (charge a premium (Fig. 5a), access a greater number of consumers (Fig. 5c)).

Respondents tend to be concerned about either all or no aspects of certification. There was a fairly even distribution in respondents' level of concern.

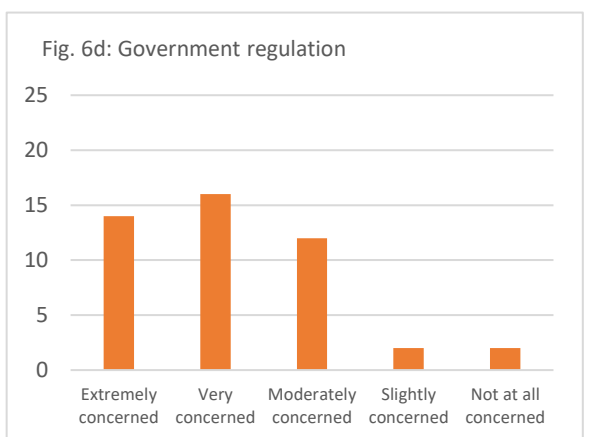
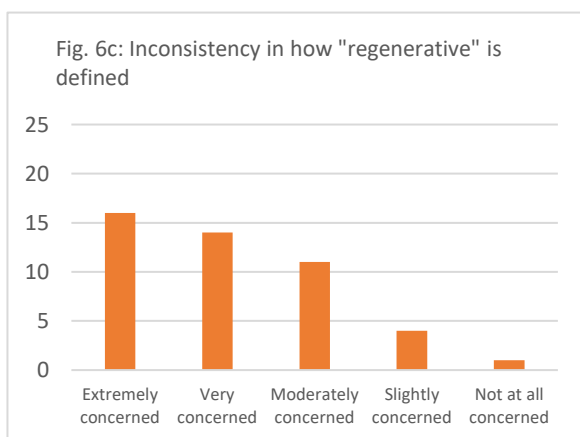
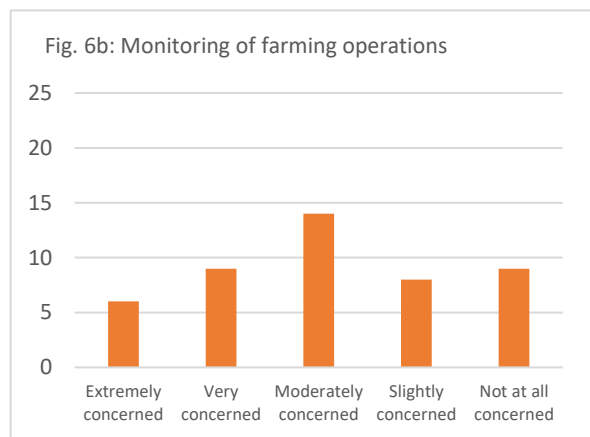
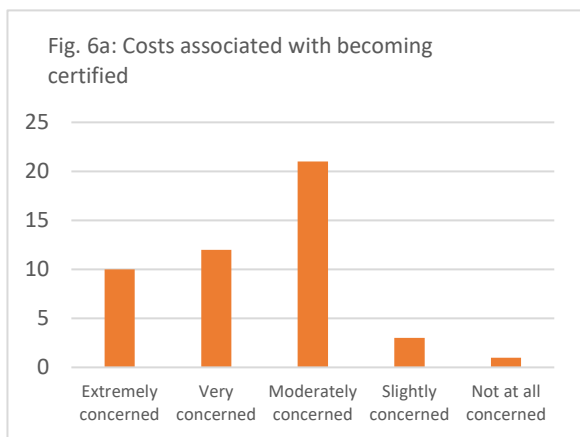


Figure 6: Concerns regarding regenerative certification

The largest concerns were to do with defining “regenerative” and government involvement. In the final open-ended question in which respondents were asked if they had anything to add, some respondents raised concerns which had not been included in the survey. One was workload:

“The greatest benefit to farming at the moment would be to reduce the amount of paperwork required of farmers” (Respondent #53).

Another concern was the proliferation of similar schemes. One asked whether regenerative certification could be “rolled in” with current certifications, such as organics or biodynamics (Respondent #6).

4. Conclusion

This study provides preliminary insights into the range of perspectives that exist surrounding regenerative certification schemes.

The key findings of this research and their implications are as follows:

- There is a high diversity of understandings of what “regenerative” means. This may present challenges to the design of a single scheme.
- A repeated theme is the low importance of financial motivations for both farmers and consumers. This raises questions about the need for a regenerative premium. Further research on regenerative consumers’ willingness-to-pay would be helpful.
- Respondents were most concerned about defining regenerative, reiterating the high diversity of definitions received. They were also concerned that the government not be involved.

It is hoped that this will be helpful to current and future scheme designers in identifying challenges and opportunities.