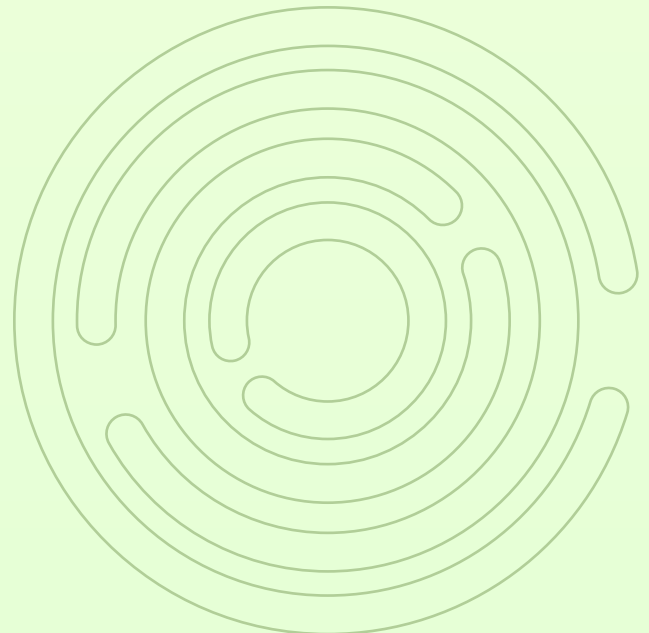


# Impact Report

**2023**

**Growing regenerative  
agriculture** through  
soil stewardship



## Our mission

Our mission is to support Australian farmers to regenerate soils, for resilient people, communities, businesses and landscapes.

### Our vision

---

We are working to realise a world where healthy, regenerated soils and landscapes support profitable food-producing businesses, thriving and resilient people and regional communities, and abundant and nutritious food.

*Soils for Life acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Australia and their continuing connection to land, sea environment, water and community. We pay our respect to the Traditional Custodians, their culture, and elders both past and present. We recognise and value Indigenous knowledge systems, and the imperative to listen to and work with Traditional Owners as we collectively learn how to heal country.*





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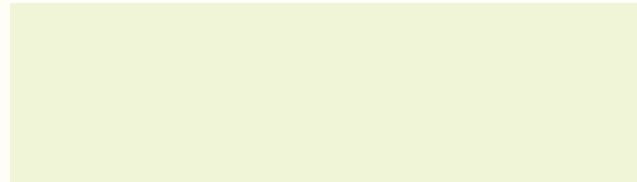
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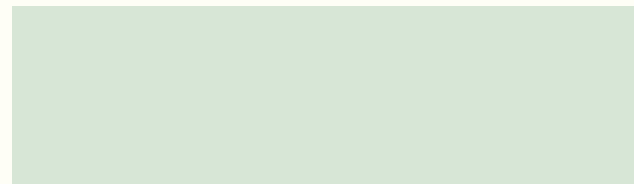


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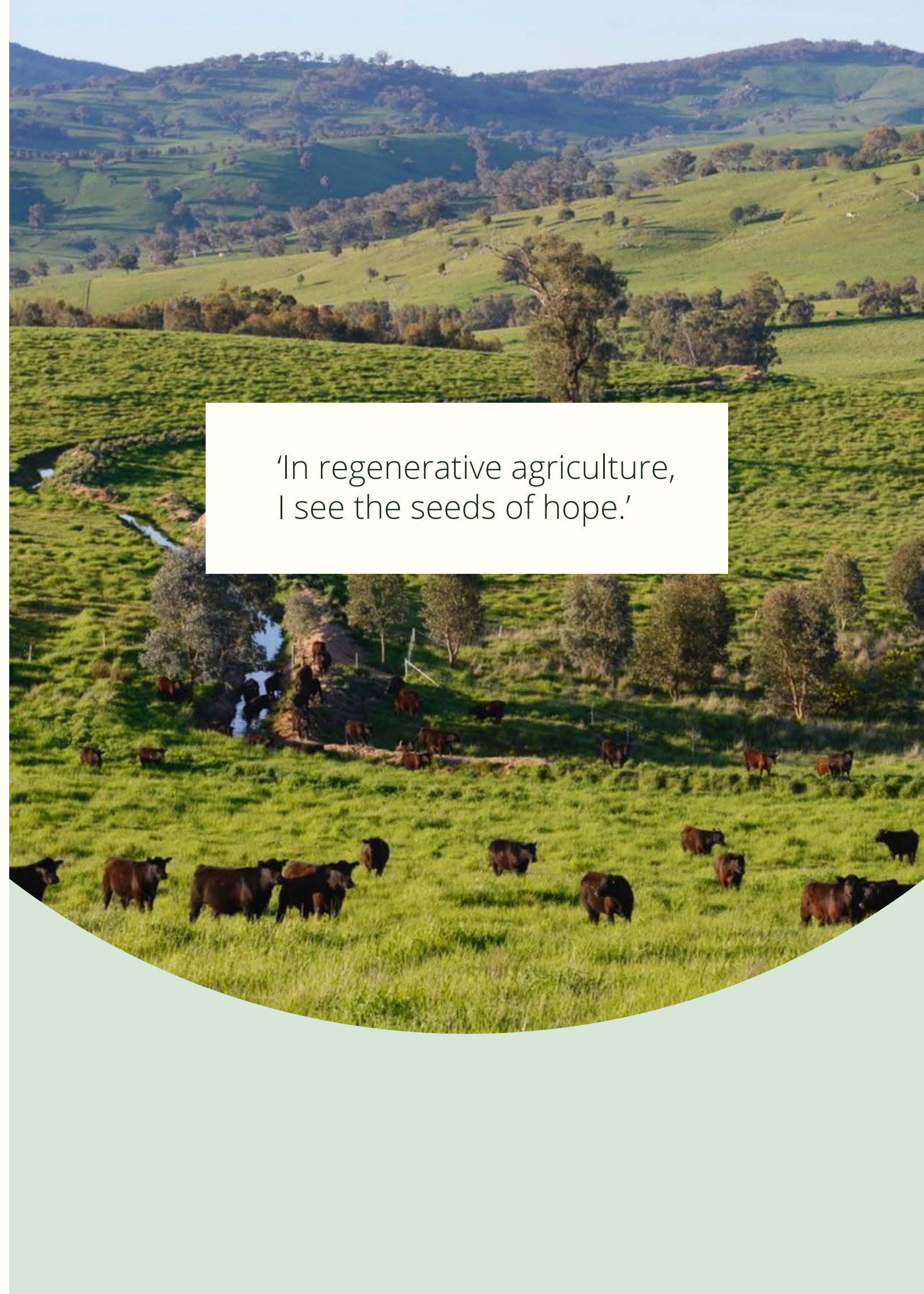


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'In regenerative agriculture, I see the seeds of hope.'



## Letter from the CEO



Upon retirement from public office, Major General the Honourable Michael Jeffery was concerned about what he described as ‘the world’s six existential challenges: food, water and energy security, climate change abatement, biodiversity protection and human health’.

Returning to his farming roots, Michael began to uncover stories of farmers doing things differently. These farmers were going further than simply reducing their environmental impact. They were using farming to actually improve the environment and, what’s more, they were often happier and more financially stable, with lower costs and improved resilience.

The common thread in these stories was soil, and so Soils for Life was born. Since then, the organisation has worked hard to show how building soil and landscape health through regenerative agriculture can be a solution to those six existential challenges. And this year, we were very proud to be named as a finalist in the National Banksia Sustainability Award for Agriculture and Regional Development for the impact our flagship case study program has had.

These case studies are stories of recovery. Of bringing land that was at rock bottom, sometimes literally rock bottom, as a result of hundreds of years of poor farming practices, back to health. They show that nature is incredibly resilient if given half a chance.

In regenerative agriculture, I see the seeds of hope. For saving the miracle that is this planet’s biodiversity. For reversing the terrible decline in mental health and wellbeing in farming families and communities. For producing healthier food. And for reminding us that we are the land and the land is us. That everything is connected, and what we do to the land, and each other, we do to ourselves.

Our recognition by the Banksia Foundation is a recognition of all the farmers who have, with great care and intelligence, sought a better way and who have generously shared their stories so that others may follow and find their own paths to regeneration.

I am honoured to be in the position to lead an organisation dedicated to supporting more farmers in their journeys to become better soil stewards. Please enjoy reading about our impact, and reach out to us to get involved or support our work.

Eli Court, CEO

## Impact by the numbers

# 57

We have published more than 50 case studies on amazing soil stewards.

# 217,000

Our case studies have been viewed more than 200,000 times.

# 320

More than 300 people have attended our in-person events.

# 5,100

Our soil monitoring resources have been viewed more than 5,000 times.

# 133

We’ve established 6 farmer groups with 133 members.

# 200

We’ve had more than 200 media mentions in 2023 alone.

# 32

We have helped 32 farmers to be featured in the media or in public roles in 2023.

# 22,000

Our podcast has been listened to more than 22,000 times.

# 41,700

More than 40,000 followers, subscribers and website visitors.

# 77%

of farmers reported that case studies helped them adopt regenerative approaches.

# About us

Soils for Life is an independent, non-profit organisation that works to support Australian farmers to regenerate soils, for resilient people, communities, businesses and landscapes.

We are an energetic and passionate team of soil scientists, agroecologists, researchers, and communications and engagement specialists.

Our work is possible thanks to the generosity of donors and grant-makers, and the commitment of our network of farmers.

In particular, we would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Macdoch Foundation, Rebecca Gorman and John Sevier, The Morris Family Foundation and Nick Fairfax, and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry.

## Our team



**Eli Court**  
CEO



**Dr Kate Johnston**  
Farm Stories Manager



**James Diack**  
Farmer Engagement Manager



**Esty Yanco**  
Operations Manager



**Chris Wieffering**  
Communications Manager



**Courtney Young**  
Senior Project Manager



**Dr Tania Leimbach**  
Integrative Research Officer



**Dr Katharine Brown**  
Soil Scientist



**Sarah Fea**  
Agroecologist

## Our board



**Alasdair Macleod**  
Chair



**Charlie Maslin**  
Deputy Chair



**Eve Crestani**  
Board Member



**Justin Borevitz**  
Board Member



**Garry Browne AM**  
Board Member



**Carmel Onions**  
Board Member



**Olivia Lawson**  
Board Member



# What we do

## Our approach

Soils for Life takes a collaborative approach to our work that puts the farmers we work with, and our partners, at the centre. We prioritise humility, constructiveness and credibility in all we do and say.

Our organisational values guide all of our work

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**We see soil as a fundamental resource** that underpins our food system and makes all life on earth possible.

**We value farmers' knowledge** and capacity for innovation, and aim to complement and support this.

**We take care to ensure that our work is credible**, informed by the best available science while recognising that soil science is rapidly evolving.

**We take a holistic approach** that values people and communities, the environment and the economy.





## People, front and centre

At the heart of our impact is our focus on people. We go out to find the people who are farming differently and take the time to get to know them so that we can really understand their context and get to the heart of why and how they changed. Our collaborations with farmers are successful because we build relationships on understanding and trust and ensure that our work together amplifies farmers' skills and experiences while also delivering value for participating farmers.

We also put people front and centre in all of our communications and engagement and work hard to ensure our materials connect with people so that they are motivated and equipped to make changes to the way they farm or to adapt the work they do in government, industry or research to support farming communities.

”

*'G'day guys. On the tractor tonight crimping our tillage radish. Listening to your podcasts. SENSATIONAL. I had a pretty negative day today, am I doing the right thing, etc. Feeling much better now being reminded there are so many farmers having a crack at this regen thing.'*

Podcast feedback from SA farmer



Case study farmers Maddy Pursehouse, Russell Young and Nick and Deanna Austin.

## Highly effective communications

We are acutely aware that the best research in the world will have limited impact if no one reads it. We invest in developing a range of impactful communications and engagement strategies that connect with our audiences, including interactive web pages presenting the case study content in digestible chunks, articles exploring themes emerging from the case studies, lots of photos from the farms, videos, podcasts, short social media 'snippets', field day events at case study farms, webinars, farmer discussion groups and more. In all of these approaches, we centre the perspectives and experiences of the farmers because we understand that farmers learn best from other farmers.

Our holistic approach to communication

### The right messenger

Our core strategy is placing our farmers at the centre of all of our communications.

### The right language

We work hard to ensure that our language is inclusive, constructive, practical, personal and grounded in a solid understanding of farmers and their needs and perspectives.

### The right mediums

We know that different people learn in different ways, and so we present information in many ways: written, digital, audio, video, web, social and more.





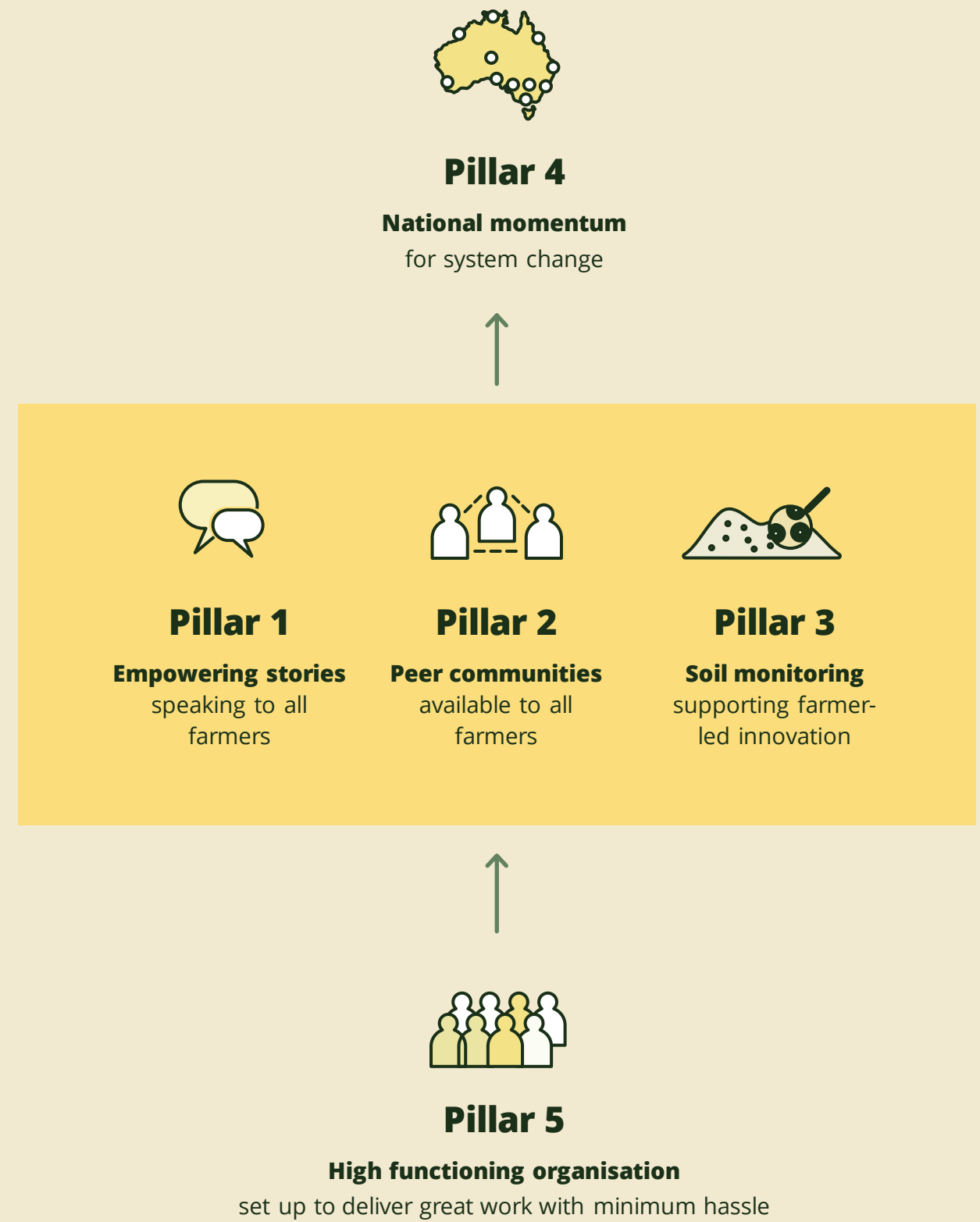
# Our strategy

Our work is guided by five strategic pillars.

**Pillars 1-3** are focused on direct, on-ground support for farmers.

**Pillar 4** focuses on using what we learn from our on-ground work to inform system-level decision making and drive systemic change.

**Pillar 5** focuses on the health and function of our organisation.





## Our work



### FLAGSHIP CASE STUDIES

Our world-leading case studies have uncovered the stories of the pioneers of regenerative farming in Australia and inspired farmers around Australia and the world to become better stewards of the land and soil. They are in-depth, holistic, trans disciplinary and evidence-based accounts of transformational change at a farm level.

We present farmers' observations alongside social, financial and ecological data and document their motivations, shifting mindsets, new practices, decisions they made and challenges they faced.

In a world where industrial and technological solutions dominate, our case studies provide an important reminder that refocusing on and supporting people can lead to much better, and more holistic, outcomes.



### PEER LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Farmer groups play a key role in mainstreaming regenerative agriculture. Our peer learning initiative aims to make peer-to-peer learning communities accessible to all farmers across Australia to facilitate the adoption of regenerative farming approaches.

Our approach involves setting up peer groups in strategic areas or sectors to support a critical mass of early adopters, with the ultimate goal of fostering self-sufficiency within these groups. Over time, we strategically shift our support to sectors or areas of greatest need or high potential for impact. These groups also provide an extremely valuable 'ear to the ground' for us when designing our project activities to ensure they are fit for purpose and impactful.



### SOIL HEALTH MONITORING

Increasing soil and landscape literacy among farmers is key to improving soil health across the country and increasing the uptake of regenerative farming practices. Our soil health monitoring initiative ensures that Australian farmers have ready access to the knowledge, skills and support networks to monitor and observe soil health and functionality over time, and the ability to use this to inform land management practices and decisions.

We employ various strategies, including publishing accessible monitoring resources, providing digital and in-person support and fostering a citizen science approach to data collection and experimentation.



### PARTNERSHIPS FOR WIDER IMPACT

To further embed the insights from our work into mainstream thinking, we have developed strong relationships and partnerships with government, industry and researchers. In addition to our project partnerships, we are a partner in the Cooperative Research Centre for High Performance Soils, co-convenors of the Parliamentary Friends of Soil, a member of the National Soil Strategy Working Group and a member of the National Farmers Federation, among others. We use these relationships to share our work and continually advocate for greater support for soil stewardship and regenerative agriculture.



## PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

**Case Study Program**

Our long-running case study program has been supported by the Federal Department of Agriculture for almost ten years, and has provided the foundation for much of our work.

**Soil Health Challenge**

A low cost way for farmers to learn about soil health monitoring in a community of peers, delivered in partnership with Soil Land Food.

**Cropping Resilience**

A two-year program supporting croppers to build soil health and drought resilience. Activities include online farmer discussion groups in three regions, on-ground field days, podcast episodes focussed on cropping and development of practical guidance materials, including practice guides. This is a Soils for Life led project in partnership with Vic No-Till, MacIntyre Ag Alliance, Perth NRM.

**Rangelands Living Skin**

A four-year project linking farming families, scientists and other collaborators to evaluate practices to regenerate the 'living skin' of the semi-arid rangelands. This project is led by NSW Department of Primary Industries and funded by Meat & Livestock Australia, with Soils for Life responsible for developing case studies and communications.

**Riverina Drought-Resilient Soils and Landscapes**

Led by Riverina LLS, this project supports 15 producers to adopt drought-resilient practices and enhance their landscape and soil monitoring capabilities. Soils for Life's role is to develop case studies and deliver soil monitoring training.

**Soil CRC Projects**

Soils for Life contributes to a number of Soil CRC projects involving activities such as the development of case studies to support research into the holistic benefits of regenerative farming, research and data collection and providing assistance in connecting researchers with regenerative farmers.





CASE STUDY HIGHLIGHTS



**Economic resilience**

Most case studies reveal improvements in economic resilience for farming families. For example, after eliminating synthetic inputs as part of his 'No Kill Cropping' system, Bruce Maynard's business Willydah saw an 80% reduction in variable costs. Modelling shows his combined gross margins are almost the same as a typical operation in average conditions, and much better in poor years. Similarly, after introducing a system of 'pasture cropping', Colin Seis' annual input costs dropped by over \$120,000 and his farm Winona recorded profit margins of 19.4% compared to the regional average of 3%. With minimal 'chips on the table', his system allows a high degree of flexibility to seasonal conditions, avoiding the boom and bust cycles often experienced in cropping.



**Climate resilience**

Many case studies also show improvements in climate resilience. For example, Martin Royds' property Jillamatong had water throughout the 2019-20 drought when his neighbours had none, even after the Shoalhaven river had dried up. When the fires came, his place provided water for firefighting helicopters, burned cooler than neighbouring properties and recovered faster.



**Soil and landscape regeneration**

Most case studies also highlight significant improvements in soil, land and water, and a rebound in biodiversity. For example, David Marsh's farm Allendale has seen tree cover increase from 3% to 20%, native perennial grasses spreading, and grass cover at 100% for many years despite highly variable conditions. This increased diversity supports a more complex ecosystem with more insects, small reptiles, 128 species of birds and a range of mammals, and has allowed David to manage weed pressure without requiring any herbicides for more than 20 years.



**Farmer wellbeing**

Wellbeing surveys with case study farmers show that as practice change progresses, so too does the farmer's wellbeing. They feel that they can cope more with difficult situations, achieve farming goals and make the right decisions, and they are more optimistic about the future.



Bruce Maynard with Katie Ross and Sarah Fea from Soils for Life, inspecting the soil at Willydah.



An aerial view of Martin Royds' 'chain of ponds', designed to slow water flow and rehydrate the soil.



David Marsh having a look at the native grasses growing at Allendale.



# Our impact

## Looking back: the past decade

### INSPIRING THE SHIFT TO REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE

We have produced more than **50 case studies** from around the country, covering 1.7 million hectares of land. With more than 217,000 views in the last decade, the case studies have collectively inspired, influenced and informed other farmers, policy makers, researchers and the general public to shift towards regenerative agriculture and improved soil stewardship. This in turn improves soil and landscape health and biodiversity, economic resilience, climate resilience, farmer wellbeing and ultimately helps to ensure food security.



Jody Brown from Latrobe Station, near Longreach, Qld.

### SUPPORTING AGRICULTURAL LEADERS

Our work also had an impact on the case study farmers themselves. Many of them have become widely recognised leaders, advocates, and mentors. They have engaged in a variety of public activities, including media, podcasts, webinars and field days. In follow-up surveys, case study participants reported that being part of our program helped them to build their own confidence to step up into these leadership roles.



*'I feel more confident and encouraged to follow my vision.'*

Case study participant

### INFLUENCING SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Our work has contributed to steadily growing awareness of the importance of soil in the broader community and the growing momentum behind the shift to regenerative agriculture. The case study program has also contributed to soils assuming greater priority in government policy,

with the establishment of the bi-partisan Parliamentary Friends of Soil group in February 2021 (Soils for Life is a co-convenor) and a National Soil Strategy in May 2021 (Soils for Life was on the Steering Committee).



Soils for Life's Farmer Engagement Manager James Diack joins a discussion panel at the 2023 Soil CRC Conference.



Eli Court, Soils for Life CEO, in conversation with Agriculture Minister Murray Watt at a Parliamentary Friends of Soil event.



## New seeds in 2023

In recent years, we have expanded our reach into new sectors, profiled a more diverse range of farmers in our case studies, diversified demographics (e.g. complementing our case studies of ‘trailblazers’ with new and young farmers), developed new programs aligned with our new strategy and expanded and refined our communications and engagement.



Guests hearing from Cavan Station Manager Matt Crozier at the 2023 Soil Stewardship Summit.

### 1. ENGAGING NEW SECTORS

We are pursuing a new focus on cropping and rangelands and we published eight new case studies on these sectors that have already been viewed more than 6,700 times.

# 77%

of farmers reported that case studies helped them adopt regenerative approaches.

### 2. CREATING PEER LEARNING COMMUNITIES

We've established six peer groups involving 133 farmers. These include four cropping groups across Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, and Western Australia, a pastured poultry group with members from around the country and a place-based group in the Riverina.

# 85%

report that their group helped build confidence and/or capacity.

### 3. BUILDING SOIL AND LANDSCAPE LITERACY

We started the Soil Health Challenge, with more than 150 farmers signing up to learn about soil health with their peers. We also delivered soil health workshops at field days in the Riverina and ran a cropping field day at a case study farm, with over 120 participants at these events.

# 78%

feel better equipped to undertake soil monitoring.

”

*The case studies create confidence by showing real outcomes.*

2023 survey respondent



4. SOIL HEALTH ADVOCACY

With the announcement that the Office of the National Soils Advocate will not be continued, our role advocating for soil stewardship has never been more important. We see our role as ensuring that the insights of the farmers on the ground are heard in the community, and in government, industry and research. In 2023 we presented at a range of events, including the Soil CRC Conference, the Wilmot Field Day, the World Soil Day Parliamentary Friends of Soil Breakfast and the VicNoTill Conference.

320

people attended our in-person events.

”

*'The positive repercussions from those two immensely stimulating and heartening days will continue for months and years ahead.'*

Alison Elvin, President,  
Yass Landcare Group



Opening panel at the 2023 Soil Stewardship Summit.

We continued to participate in industry discussions through our membership of the NFF and made strategic submissions to government, including on the Net Zero Plan for Land and Agriculture.

In October we proudly convened the Soil Stewardship Summit, which brought together more than 120 participants, including 40 case study farmers, to celebrate our achievements, share lessons and plan for the future.

We are constantly looking for new ways to reconnect people with soil. In September we funded a creative collaboration with UK macro photographer Frank Ashwood. He came to Australia to photograph the tiny creatures living

in soils on six of our case study farms. **The results were spectacular**, revealing the beautiful, complex, hidden underground ecosystem that is the foundation of life on earth, and which regenerative farming can support.

32

farmers supported to appear in the media.

200

mentions of Soils for Life in the media in 2023.



Potworm (Enchytraeidae), captured by macro photographer Frank Ashwood at Tas Ag Co in Central North Tasmania.



## Looking ahead

With more farmers now aware of soil health and regenerative agriculture and becoming curious about how they could become better soil stewards, we continue to expand our work to focus on supporting these farmers to make changes on their farm.

In 2024, our case studies will cover a greater diversity of themes, enterprise types and geographies to support a broader audience of farmers, with 24 case studies currently in the pipeline to be published this year. We will continue to expand our new streams of work focused on supporting peer-to-peer communities of farmer soil stewards and building soil health literacy amongst farmers. While we continue into the second year of our cropping work, we are also developing a new focus area on semi-arid rangelands and investigating opportunities to broaden our reach with soil health monitoring training. And we have a great lineup of events this year, with more than 6 field days in the works and at least 15 online webinars and other virtual events scheduled.

We are excited about the growing momentum behind regenerative agriculture, and looking forward to continuing to support Australia's hard working soil stewards through our work.





## From our partners and supporters



**REBECCA GORMAN**  
FARMER AND PHILANTHROPIST

'The very first field day I attended after starting down the eco-agriculture route, was organised by Soils for Life. They had just released their first series of farmer profiles. The stories were full of excitement to me - offering detail and description of how farmers had transformed their landscapes and their lives in tune with their environments whilst also improving their businesses. The stories showed me what was possible. As I progressed along my own journey, my now tattered Soils for Life compendium has remained a constant reference for the vision we are seeking on our own land.'

It is clear that the job of repairing agricultural landscapes is ultimately carried out farmer by farmer, community by community. This job needs support, inspiration and practical knowledge.

I regard Soils for Life as a key organisation in this drive to repair agricultural landscapes, with a clear mission and a practice, evolving with the needs of land managers. I highly commend their body of work and their future plans.'



**MICHELLE GORTAN**  
CEO, MACDOCH FOUNDATION

'Soils for Life is one of the Macdoch Foundation's longest-running investments, and we are proud to have supported their work over the past four years. The organisation has been a significant contributor to the Australian regenerative agriculture ecosystem and has become an important source of support to producers seeking to shift their ways of operating.'

Soils For Life's case studies are not only useful learning resources for producers, but they've also showcased the impressive work and stories of Australia's regenerative agricultural pioneers both domestically and internationally.'



**DR MICHAEL CRAWFORD**  
CEO, CRC FOR HIGH PERFORMANCE SOILS

'Soils for Life has emerged in recent years as a national catalyst for innovation with respect to farmers transitioning to more sustainable agriculture practices, providing support and guidance from an economic, environmental and social perspective.'

There is a growing awareness and appreciation from both producers and consumers, domestically and internationally, of the importance of soil, and the need to protect and sustain soil for future generations. As a result, many farmers are embarking upon a journey of discovery as they adopt a 'soils-first' attitude to their farming business planning and operations. However, this does not come without challenges, be they biophysical, economic or social, and the assistance and support provided by Soils for Life gives farmers the confidence and certainty they need to move forward.'



**ANG HAMMOND**  
LANDCARE FARMING, LANDCARE AUSTRALIA

'Soils for Life has been able to, via their case studies and face-to-face activities, provide support and encouragement for Primary Producers in the sustainability space by providing a forum to discuss and share success stories in their soil management strategies.'

The Soils for Life community is a confidence building and sharing space and is supporting producers to engage in understanding and managing their soils in a sustainable manner. Landcare Farming groups have benefitted from the extension work that Soils for Life has done in the soils space - the case studies and Field Days have been excellent places for producers to collaborate and work with soils scientists to build their capacity and capability to manage their soils in this ever-evolving Agricultural management space.'





## CONTACT US

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Published by Soils for Life  
Canberra ACT, 30 April 2024  
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## ABOUT US

Soils for Life is an independent, non-profit organisation that works to support Australian farmers to regenerate soils, for resilient people, communities, businesses and landscapes.



The Soils for Life team at the Soil Stewardship Summit.