

# One Size Fits None

A Farm Girl's Search for the Promise of  
Regenerative Agriculture \* STEPHANIE ANDERSON



## LEADER'S GUIDE

FOR READING GROUPS & CLASSROOMS



## **KEY TERMS**

**family farm**

**United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)**

**stewardship**

**industrial agriculture/conventional agriculture**

**specialization**

**agrochemicals**

**agribusiness**

**treadmill of industrialization**

**fallacy of composition**

**get big or get out**

**fencerow to fencerow**

**piece system**

**subsidence**

**erosion**



# **PART ONE: CONVENTIONAL**

**How would you describe Ryan Roth's job? What is daily life like? What is your impression of Roth Farms?**

**How do thinkers like Thomas Jefferson and Wendell Berry define the term "farmer"? What does the term mean today in most cases?**

**What stood out to you about the history of agriculture in the United States? How does this history influence food and farming today? In particular, how does the legacy of Earl Butz continue to haunt agriculture?**

**How does Anderson describe the adoption of industrial agriculture by farmers?**

**Anderson claims that inputs versus outputs is an inaccurate measure of a farm's efficiency (24). Why? How do you think we could measure efficiency more effectively?**

**What kind of farm have we built in America, according to Anderson?**

**Why did Roth Farms build a packinghouse, and what were the results?**

**Why does Anderson claim that "Farmers aren't growing for the consumer, but for corporations" (36)?**



## **PART ONE: CONVENTIONAL**

**What is the historical relationship between agriculture and rural communities, and how has industrial agriculture damaged that relationship?**

**How did you feel when reading about what it's like to be a farmworker? What could we do to improve working conditions?**

**Why is soil loss a major problem for agriculture?**

**Anderson writes that "One or two well-intentioned acts, done in isolation rather than as part of a holistic philosophy of sustainability, barely mitigate the damage caused by other decisions" (48). Is this an accurate assessment in your view?**

**Ryan Roth points out that most conventional farmers cannot set their own prices for crops and livestock. How did this happen, and why is it an issue?**

**What forces or beliefs prevent many conventional farmers from changing their operations? Do you agree with Anderson when she claims that most are good people trapped in a bad system (49)?**

**How would you summarize the argument in Part One? What does Anderson convey through the story of Roth Farms?**



# **PART ONE: CONVENTIONAL**

## KEY TERMS

**holistic management**  
**conventional grazing**  
**brittle to nonbrittle land continuum**  
**desertification**  
**animal impact**  
**law of return**  
**cool-season grass/warm-season grass**  
**monoculture**  
**ecological whole**  
**biodiversity**  
**symbiotic relationship**  
**concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO)**  
**cow-calf operation**  
**industrial-grain-livestock complex**  
**megaslaughterhouse**  
**shallow organic/industrial organic**  
**Rule of 150**  
**food disparagement law**  
**synthetic nitrogen**  
**organic soil matter**



## **PART TWO: HOLISTIC REGENERATIVE**

**Summarize Allan Savory's arguments and evidence related to holistic management. Why do his insights challenge mainstream ideas?**

**Anderson claims that humans "cannot just leave the grassland alone" (61). Why? What role does she believe humans and livestock should play?**

**Why are desertification and climate change major threats to food production?**

**How has the American prairie changed, in a physical sense, because of conventional grazing?**

**What natural processes does Phil rely on to keep his ranching functioning? Why does he prefer to ranch this way?**

**Describe the connection between healthy grassland, healthy animals, and healthy consumers. What do these connections suggest?**

**Outline the consequences of the CAFO system. Is the system truly efficient? Is it ethical?**

**Were you surprised to learn about the extreme consolidation of animal slaughter in the U.S.? Is such a system good for consumers, people, or the environment?**



## **PART TWO: HOLISTIC REGENERATIVE**

**Make a comprehensive list of the differences (practices, costs, beliefs, results, etc.) between holistic management and conventional grazing. What do you notice? What makes holistic management a form of regenerative agriculture? After reading Part Two, what is your opinion of current organic standards?**

**Why does Anderson argue that regenerative agriculture could eliminate the CAFO system? What evidence does she have?**

**How does Anderson view the relationship between food and each of the following: politics, corporations, and capitalism?**

**Beyond money, how might farmers and ranchers measure their profit or success?**

**How did the advent of synthetic nitrogen transform agriculture?**

**Why does Anderson argue for a transition to sun-based energy rather than oil-based energy to power food production?**

**What can consumers do to aid the transformation to regenerative agriculture?**

**What is your overall impression of Phil and Great Plains Buffalo? Is this type of regenerative agriculture viable?**



## **PART TWO: HOLISTIC REGENERATIVE**



## KEY TERMS

phytonutrients

intercropping

cover crops

cash crops

dominion narrative

organic agriculture

genetically modified (GM) seeds

glyphosate

superweeds

ethanol

edge tillage

ecological modernization theory

treadmill of production theory

subsidies

Cooperative Extension Service (CES)

agriculture of the middle

commodity crop

community supported agriculture (CSA) program

food shed



## PART THREE: ORGANIC REGENERATIVE

**What is the connection between how food is grown and its taste, nutritional content, and effect on human bodies?**

**Anderson describes Kevin's use of plastic as "a balanced approach to modern regenerative agriculture" (117). Why does she say this? Do you agree?**

**How does our understanding of humankind's place/role in the natural world affect how we use (and abuse) land?**

**How does Kevin's take on organic certification differ from Phil's? After reading Part Three, have your views about organic certification shifted? Why or why not?**

**What environmental problems are associated with the use of GM seeds that resist herbicides and kill or tolerate pests? What about human health risks and the persecution of scientists who study GM food?**

**Should the U.S. continue to produce ethanol? Why or why not?**

**What are the important lessons from the Rodale Institute's Farming Systems Trial? What does this long-term study suggest for the future of food production?**

**How does Kevin's work life differ from that of conventional farmers like Ryan Roth or Anderson's father?**



## **PART THREE: ORGANIC REGENERATIVE**

**Anderson writes that modern consumers and farmers are divorced from each other (141). What does she mean by that, and why is it a problem?**

**What forces shape agriculture, research, and the food market? How might society redirect agriculture, research, education, and markets to prioritize regenerative agriculture?**

**What issues (economic, social, environmental, health, etc) currently surround the price and availability of organic food? How can we make regeneratively grown food affordable, attractive, and accessible for all?**

**In making her argument for a one-size-fits-none agricultural model, Anderson writes that "Our ideal should be diversity, just as nature's ideal is diversity" (159). What does she mean?**

**How does climate change threaten agricultural production? What can we do to mitigate the threat?**

**How does Fidel's approach to urban farming differ from Kevin's? How are they similar?**

**Why is emotional well-being, in addition to financial well-being, important for farmers and ranchers?**

**Are "agriculturalized" cities feasible or desirable? What would it take to agriculturalize more American cities?**



## **PART THREE: ORGANIC REGENERATIVE**

## KEY TERMS

**regenerative agriculture**  
**diversification/diversified farming**  
**no-till farming**  
**soil biology**  
**drylands**  
**multicropping**  
**crop rotations**  
**burn down a field**  
**summer fallow/fallow field**  
**beneficial insects/neutral insects**  
**pesticide**  
**herbicide**  
**mob grazing**  
**stacking**  
**limited enterprise model**  
**inputs**  
**bale grazing**  
**polywire fence**  
**hay mentality**  
**rhizomes**  
**Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)**  
**Brix system**  
**eggmobil**  
**corn and soybeans ideology**



## PART FOUR: DIVERSIFIED REGENERATIVE

**Go back to Anderson's definition of "regenerative agriculture" on page 188. How does regenerative agriculture go beyond what's commonly called sustainable agriculture?**

**Why does Gabe say that soil needs "something living all the time" (195) to be healthy? How does this relate to Anderson's statement that monocultures are harmful, even on organic and sustainable farms (196)?**

**What prevents many conventional farmers (and even some organic and supposedly "sustainable" farmers) from planting cover crops? What benefits do cover crops provide, and how are fields of them similar to native prairie?**

**Describe Gabe's approach to managing insects in his fields. Why are his methods preferable to conventional methods? How does monoculture farming exacerbate pest problems?**

**Anderson returns to the question of organic certification once more in Part Four (202-204). What does she conclude? How do you feel about the issue?**

**What are the drawbacks - environmental, financial, production, social, and so forth - of the conventional, limited-enterprise model? How does the regenerative practice of stacking address those shortcomings, particularly the CAFO problem?**

**How does regenerative agriculture conserve water?**

**Describe Gabe's approach to managing and feeding grass-fed cattle. What regenerative strategies does he use, and how do they differ from conventional practices? How are Gabe's and Phil's operations similar to and different from one another?**

**Why does Gabe see his land and its crops and livestock as an ecosystem, and how does he put that into action? Why is his approach beneficial?**



## **PART THREE: ORGANIC REGENERATIVE**

**Both Roth Farms and Brown's Ranch were involved with building food processing facilities (packinghouse and slaughterhouse, respectively). How did the two experiences differ?**

**Gabe believes that farmers can and should create markets for alternative crops and livestock. Is his argument realistic?**

**Why is soil Gabe's primary focus? How is soil connected to everything else on his operation, and to many of the problems we face as a society?**

**What does Anderson mean when she writes that consumers "will have to reject standardization at the grocery store and be open to new things" (247)?**

**Gabe believes that people from urban areas, especially young people, can and should lead the transition to regenerative agriculture. Why? How do Kevin's and Fidel's stories speak to Gabe's beliefs?**

**Why is it important that farmers and ranchers be able to set their own prices?**

**Why does Anderson argue that conventional "farmers have more in common with the poor than they realize" (257)?**

**Gabe addresses the many objections conventional farmers often have about switching to regenerative agriculture, as well as the social criticism they usually face if they do. How do you feel about Gabe's answers to these common objections? In the end, do you believe America can convert to regenerative farming and ranching?**

**After finishing Part Four, how would you summarize the meaning of and rationale behind "regenerative agriculture" and Anderson's belief that, when it comes to agriculture, one size fits none?**



## **PART FOUR: DIVERSIFIED REGENERATIVE**

**Anderson's conclusion reads like a call to action for farmers and consumers. Make a quick list of the main ideas she sets forth for farmers and another list for consumers.**

- **How can we make progress on these issues?**
- **Where do the actions of farmers and consumers intersect?**
- **How does one group support and nourish the other?**
- **Where do government and private organizations fit in?**
- **By the end, do you feel the same hope Anderson does that we can change agriculture into "a regenerative, life-sustaining act that works hand in hand with the natural world" (266)?**



## CONCLUSION