



JOHN MCHUGH

GENERAL INFORMATION	
Location of farm	Portlaoise, County Laois
Name of the farmer	John McHugh
Size of farm	94 hectares
Permanent staff	1
Main products of farm	Organic Dairy, Small bit of Beef, Community Garden Allotments. (He used to produce oats and pork)

CURRENT REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE PRACTICES ON THE FARM

Farmland cultivated with RA practices	All land (He recognises that 'Regenerative' can be a subjective term, but in his opinion he is farming his land regeneratively- focusing on regenerating nature, the environment, the soil).
Crops produced with RA practices	Forest Garden & Community Allotments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not making profit from the community allotments; for John, this part of the farm is not about profit, but about human exchange and people working together.
Duration of using RA practices	Since 2015

Description of RA practices used in the farm

- Zero chemicals
- Multispecies swards
- Reduced stocking rate of his dairy cows to put less pressure on the land (moved from 200 cows in 2014 to 90 cows by the end of 2016).
- More spaces for nature
- grass-fed system for his cows (no meal or grains)
- Grazing: Constant low grazed and grass constantly growing- dense grass.
- Root density holding the cows up- cows constantly moving around- they aren't having a big impact on the soil anywhere as they are constantly moving



Image 1: A happy John with his healthy soil!



STARTING AND MOTIVATION BEHIND REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE

Main motivation	<p>His main motivation was to be more resilient:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When he started farming it was all about achieving higher profits, But he felt he was vulnerable. He felt the change coming- economic crash, environment etc. He wanted to be out of debt . Sparked him to research organic and becoming more resilient. 'I couldn't run away quick enough from what I was doing' - conventional farming. It's not about profit maximising, he is much more resilient now- sustainable thinking.He no longer wanted to 'blindly follow advice'. Wanted to work out what was best for him
Learning the RA farming practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A lot of reading: Newman Turner, Alan Savoury, Christine Jones 'Liquid Carbon Pathways', Hugh Lovel, etc. - Reading on the internet - Trial and Error - Farming for Nature charity in ireland very helpful; attending environmental farm walks - learning from other farmers was crucial - Looking at nature, observing nature and figuring things out
Did the farmer receive training?	<p>Indirectly, yes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Holistic management course with NOTS in 2020 - Organic training had some overlap - Permaculture training - 3LM – linked with the savoury institute online course in 2020 <p>The explanations of carbon and soil from reading and training really helped John to visualise the science behind soil and the importance of crops.</p>
Did the farmer receive financial support?	<p>Indirectly through EIPs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Farmland Pollinators EIP - DANU EIP Biological Farming project



Image 2: Hens and Pigs foraging together



Image 3: Integrating the Beef Herd with the Pigs

RESULTS OF REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE

Benefits of using RA practices

- *Economic status has improved- no more debt!*
- *Financial resilience*
- *Cash strong position*
- *reduced input costs*
- *Workload difference is huge- much more relaxed, easier way of life.*
- *Start working with nature rather than controlling it!*
- *Hasn't topped a field since 2015*
- *Many farmers top fields to stop flowers going to seed*
- *less stressful way of farming than constantly trying to maximise yields*
- *his paddocks and grazing land is much more resilient to changes in the weather: drought or heavy rainfall does not affect him as much as neighbouring farms*
- *His grass remained green throughout a period when other farms were orange with drought*
- *Huge improvement in animal health*
- *Cow lameness tend to disappear- heavily linked with grains and nitrogen application*

- *More rewarding – more time for his family*
- *The farm is a safer place for his kids*
- *Community garden brings more people to the farm- farming can be lonely*
- *On a sunday- a small campfire and have sausages with everyone*
- *A lovely social side to this*
- *Spare time for innovation and experimentation*
- *Nature has greatly benefitted*
- *More earthworms live below the soil*
- *Allowing plants to seed- not mowing*
- *Always flowers in the field year round*
- *Allowing 'weeds' to flower- birds and insects and butterflies- nature is a huge benefactor to this as well*
- *Huge health benefits for animals and humans with RA farming.*

Obstacles of using RA practices

- *Social pressure!*
 - *We all live our lives through the eyes of someone else*
 - *Ideas of 'good farming'- largely based around control*
 - *E.g. fields weeds free and high yields*
 - *Farmers feel this social pressure to farm a certain way*
 - *feeling judged!*
 - *Taking risks that you don't know will work with regenerative!*
 - *A lot of farmers; a fear of finance*
 - *We inherit a certain situation (debt from previous generation) and it slowly evolves*
 - *People afraid to make big change*
 - *Afraid of the unknown – afraid to make changes*
 - *People have diff levels of debt, land, other incomes, etc*
 - *He had a sense of security so he could afford to make mistakes*
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- *Policy obstacles*
 - *Previous CAP- penalised for having no productive areas of land- ie spaces for nature*
 - *+ Risk of losing some of your basic payments*
 - *reductionist or black and white regulations can be a barrier*
 - *Regenerative is safer than people realise*
 - *John urges farmers to chase resilience and think for themselves.*
 - *there are no clear black and white answers to regenerative farming; you must think for yourself and try through trial and error*
 - *Mob Grazing did not work for his land:*
 - *When you rotate animals every day- animal performance can suffer.*
 - *A lot of animals put into a small piece of land- carbon lost quicker- soils didn't get healthier for John*
 - *He noticed the stress on his cows quickly due to lower milk yield.*



Image 4: Happy cows foraging in the scrubland

Is the farmer happy overall with RA?	Yes extremely happy, its a much more rewarding way of farming.
Does the farmer intend to continue RA?	Yes
Does the farmer intend to introduce changes in RA methods or crops?	Yes, there are constant tweaking and reassessments going on in the farm.



Image 5: Overhead image of the Community Farm, from Farming for Nature. Design based on the Ogham Tree Calendar



Image 6: Herd grazing on mature, diverse pasture.



Image 7: Young organic calves (weanlings) at feed time

Regenerative agriculture.
 An innovative approach towards mitigation of climate change through multi-tier learning.

