

Healthier farm, healthier life



Ranch Foods Direct is part of a movement across the country of farmers and ranchers changing the way they farm and market their crops. Kansas Gail Fuller has been at the forefront of adopting soil health practices for many years. He was a featured speaker and facilitator at the first Advancing Food-is-Medicine Summit held last year in Colorado. He recalled that when he launched his own on-farm educational field school in 2012, it was the first time he attended a farm meeting where anyone actually talked about food or health. Getting to that moment was part of a journey that included missing a family celebration for what turned out to be his dad's last birthday, because he was too busy to leave the field. "That's what the modern system of farming does to us," he said. He paid a price for pioneering the adoption of cover crops and other soil health practices, when his drought claims were denied by the federal crop insurance program. Although he eventually prevailed in the dispute, the 20-month appeals process took a heavy toll; he lost his operating line of credit at the bank and was forced to sell off assets to stay afloat. Eventually he made the agonizing decision to sell what was left of the family farm and make a fresh start. Now he and his wife Lynnette run Circle 7/Fuller Farms, raising diverse livestock and food crops on 60 leased acres for direct-to-market in southeast Kansas. Lynnette also works for the Ecdysis Foundation, an ambitious research project studying how to expand regenerative farming across North America.

YOU'VE SAID YOU STOPPED USING THE TERM "REGENERATIVE" TO REFER TO HOW YOU FARM. IS THERE A DIFFERENT TERM YOU PREFER TO USE INSTEAD?

I'm a farmer, an agro-ecologist. How did we screw up the labels so bad that now we have to call corn "non-GMO corn?" It's corn. The stuff we call corn today is not.

YOU MEAN BECAUSE IT'S GENETICALLY MODIFIED TO BE HERBICIDE TOLERANT, WHICH DOESN'T NATURALLY OCCUR IN NATURE?

Right. I want to take my label back. I'm just a farmer. Farmers grow food. That's what I do. Language, labels, all that — until we put integrity back in the system, all of it is just words. They don't mean anything.

ARE YOU SUGGESTING SOMETHING LIKE USDA'S OLD TAG-LINE, "KNOW YOUR FOOD, KNOW YOUR FARMER?"

Sort of. But the consumer has to be educated enough to ask the right questions too. That's where the term "greenwashing" comes in. Does the system really want people to educate themselves? Because if they do, that's a form of empowerment.

WHAT GIVES YOU OPTIMISM?

Watching my grandkids explore nature instead of watching a video game. That gives me optimism. People asking questions. That gives me optimism. Seeing young people that don't know why the system is broken exactly, but still have a better vision for how to live. Am I seeing enough of it? No. I need to see more. I'm not a very patient person.

I UNDERSTAND YOU FOLLOW RANCH FOODS DIRECT FOUNDER MIKE CALLICRATE ON SOCIAL MEDIA. WHY? WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ABOUT WHAT HE'S BEEN ABLE TO DO?

When the large cattle processors took the industry over in the 1990s, it was Mike who stood up. By himself. And he was taken out. I was feeding cattle at the time, and I lost thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars during a very short time-frame, like a lot of us did. But nobody stood up with Mike. Back then he was just a manager running a feedlot, he wasn't the Mike Callicrate he is now. Up until then, he was just another rancher. I had the same thoughts he was having, that this wasn't right, but I just turned it into anger, and took it out on my farm, and on myself. I didn't have time to stand up, or at least I didn't think I did. I saw what they did to Mike. Why would I want to stand up? But in fact, I did go through the same thing when I stood up against the crop insurance agency. So I ended up going the route Mike did. It's easy to see how depression can set in when you live through something like that.

But look at what Mike is doing today. I know, for me, losing everything is the best thing that ever happened to my career. I wouldn't be thinking about food, or living the way I am now, if it weren't for that. We needed that push. I don't think I would have ever been brave enough to do what I've done. I look at Mike, and I see the same thing. It's a pretty cool story, what he's built from the ashes. I would guess he's a lot happier today, doing what he's doing now, than he was back then.

Am I happy now? Yes. Farming is way harder than it should be. There's still too much stress. But I feel like I'm in a good place. The farm and I are healing together.