

How McDonald's Supplier Partnerships Are Sowing the Seeds Of Climate-Resilience

The restaurant giant is proving that support and shared knowledge are key to scaling regenerative practices

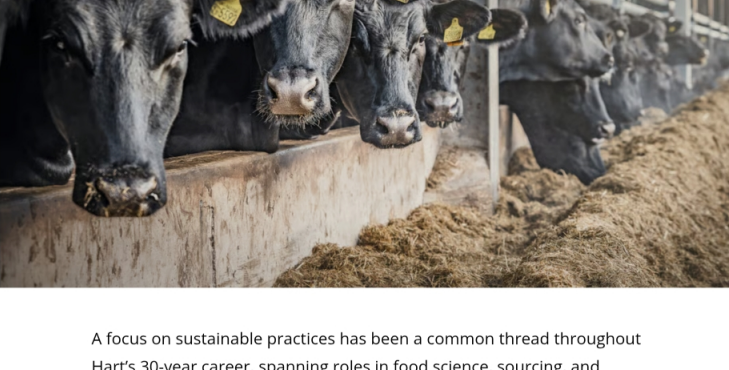
Farmers are inherently future-focused. They work their fields and pastures strategically, rearing livestock and planting crops not just for next season's harvest, but for the success of those who'll steward the land in years to come. Yet, today, there is growing need for an even longer-term, more resilience-oriented outlook – one that embraces innovation and adaptation to meet the accelerating challenges of a changing climate.

"Farmers are increasingly focused on soil health management, ensuring their land is fit to farm today and long into the future,"

explains Beth Hart, Chief Sustainability and Social Impact Officer at McDonald's. "This is where the idea of 'regenerative agriculture' comes from – adopting practices designed to protect the integrity and longevity of food and farming systems. It's a necessity for our business - to foster environmental sustainability, food security, and our suppliers' livelihoods."

While the concept of regenerative agriculture has been around since the 1980s, only in recent years has it truly come to the fore, driven by mounting concerns around the impact of global warming. With more frequent droughts, floods, and extreme temperatures, farmers are facing unprecedented obstacles to maintaining the condition and productivity of their land. Regenerative agriculture offers a way to build resilience in the face of these challenges.

At its core, the practice is about nurturing farmland back to health and restoring harmony with nature; to regenerate topsoil, increase biodiversity, and enhance ecosystem function. Farmers achieve this through a variety of techniques, from crop rotations and planting cover crops to using fertilisers more judiciously.



A focus on sustainable practices has been a common thread throughout Hart's 30-year career, spanning roles in food science, sourcing, and supply chains. As McDonald's Chief Sustainability Officer, she is a driving force behind the company's commitment to promoting regenerative agriculture within its value chain in Europe and beyond, cultivating partnerships with suppliers and producers committed to a more sustainable way of working. For Hart, this mentality isn't simply a boardroom talking point, but something championed in the field, wellies on, alongside farmers – the only place the true scale of the challenge can be grasped.

"We are talking about a full food system transformation, which means asking farmers to change the way they produce and rethinking how they can farm in a more sustainable way. Now, as weather patterns shift and environmental agriculture regulations tighten, producers really need our support to keep pace with the changes they need to make."

McDonald's has a remarkably lean supplier base compared to other major food companies, with a select number of core partnerships built over decades. So the requisite trust and understanding is there to drive meaningful, long-term change. In a practical sense, this means McDonald's stepping up to the plate to develop new pilots, providing technical assistance, training, and critically, a secure market for partners as they trial and learn from new, more sustainable strategies.



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One such partner is Farm Frites, a manufacturer of potato products that has been providing McDonald's its French fries for over three decades. The company takes pride in its commitment to quality and sustainability; and, at Farm Frites Poland, close collaboration with 200 dedicated Polish growers. Like many in the agriculture sector, Farm Frites is grappling with problems posed by climate change – particularly when it comes to water supply, with most of the annual rainfall now arriving after the growing season.

In response, Farm Frites' is building its own regenerative agriculture programme, with critical input from McDonald's. Its farmers have turned to technology-driven regenerative practices - GPS-guided sprayers ensure that pesticides are applied with greater accuracy, while crop rotation and cover crops reduce soil erosion. Water is managed with the utmost care – soil moisture monitoring equipment ensures that every drop is used wisely, while an array of probes and weather stations allow for more effective, data-driven irrigation. Soil analysis is used to create soil fertility maps which ensure precision in fertiliser application, and a 'no-till' cultivation technique is maintained to preserve the soil's water-holding capacity.

"McDonald's is always challenging us to deliver on the regenerative agriculture front, as well as providing a long-term commitment as our farmers transition to different methods," explains Hens Gunneman, Farm Frites' sustainability manager. "They're guiding us in the right direction, providing support and knowledge, and we're involving our farmers in that process."

This sort of knowledge-sharing is at the heart of McDonald's wider sustainability approach, exemplified by its Flagship Farmers Program in Europe. The initiative serves as a farmer-to-farmer forum, bringing McDonald's producers together to exchange experiences, successes, and failures. Fostering a collective learning environment to explore what sustainability means for producers' individual operations, and the broader agricultural community.



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McDonald's commitment to driving sustainability extends beyond its own supply chain. As a founding partner of FAI Farms in the UK, a collective of farmers, scientists, and consultants, the company is working to deliver solutions across regenerative agriculture, animal welfare, and the wider food industry. A prime example is the McDonald's FAI AMP project, looking at the potential impact of Adaptive Multi Paddock (AMP) grazing on a successful commercial UK beef system. This regenerative technique aims to mimic natural processes by integrating cattle into the natural environment, fostering more resilient farming systems that work in synergy with nature.

Similar collaborative efforts are underway at Brongain Farm in Wales, where McDonald's and partners such as OSI are supporting the family-run business with its Net Zero Beef Pathway; an ambitious goal of reaching net-zero emissions on the farm by 2030. By providing tools and resources to trial innovative approaches to animal nutrition and carbon counting, the restaurant giant is helping to establish Brongain as a hub of sustainable best practice.

McDonald's acknowledges they don't have all the answers, the scale of the challenge can be daunting, and they can't take it on alone. But by calling for industry wide collaboration and creativity, the company believes that building a more climate-resilient farming system – one capable of providing food and livelihoods far into the future – is within reach.

"We haven't solved the problem yet. Regenerative agriculture is not something that can be implemented overnight, but we're committed to continuing on this journey and are making incremental progress," Hart reflects. "It's all about the art of the possible – taking steps, learning, and then taking more steps. By working hand in hand with our farmers and suppliers, by focusing on the long-term, by being willing to innovate and adapt, together we can make a real and lasting difference."