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Regenerative ag pioneer to present workshop in Fort Pierre

By Stan Wise

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PIERRE, SD – Producers and land stewards who practice regenerative agriculture often enjoy learning about what is happening under the ground. In August, they'll have a chance to learn from a visitor from Down Under.

Australia, that is.

Regenerative ag pioneer Colin Seis, a producer from New South Wales, will present a workshop on Aug. 6 in Fort Pierre, SD.

Seis didn't set out to help reinvent agriculture. Instead, he changed the way he farmed in 1979 because he had no choice.

"I started down in this direction quite a long time before it was called regenerative agriculture. I changed because we had a major wildfire here which destroyed the whole property, and we'd lost almost everything. And so, I changed. And the reason I changed, I had no money," Seis said. "I had to survive somehow without any income, really. So, I adopted low input agriculture – without inputs, or with very little input at all. And that is what drove everything. That created the change."

Regenerative ag practices have allowed Seis to drastically reduce his fertilizer inputs. "I haven't used fertilizer on pastures or on grasslands for 45 years. I do use fertilizer with crops but at a reduction of at least 70% of what we used to put on the crops," he said.

Seis runs 4,000 head of Merino sheep, sells stud rams for other breeders, and at times he runs a cattle finishing enterprise. His livestock are grazed rotationally. He says his most profitable enterprise is growing seed for grasslands. He sows about a quarter of his 2,000-acre farm to crops annually. Some of those crops are harvested for grain, including oats, wheat, and cereal rye. He also seeds multi-species crops which are grown as forage for his livestock. The multi-species mix also helps to improve his soil health, restoring the soil ecosystem and increasing soil carbon levels.

Seis developed a technique called pasture cropping. He plants his crops directly into his grasslands which have gone dormant for the winter. He plants crops that will grow over the course of the mild winter in his area, with his grasslands serving as a cover crop. He then harvests or grazes his crops before his grasslands come out of dormancy in the spring.

The changes Seis has observed in his soil health since adopting regenerative ag practices are significant, he said. “We have far more nutrients available for our crops and growing plants. Once we restored the soil ecosystem, everything started to drop into place. The obvious thing that’s happened is soil structure has improved. Soils are darker in color,” Seis said. “Soil carbon levels have increased by about 200 percent.”

He has also experienced an increase in profitability. “We’re far more profitable than we ever were,” Seis said. “In my father’s era and my early era in agriculture, we were spending \$100,000 each year in today’s figures just to maintain things. That was fertilizers and pesticides and that type of thing. We don’t spend that anymore here. I haven’t spent that for 30 odd years, so we’re saving \$100,000 every year. Interestingly, our crop yields are about the same. They’re not less. Certainly, our animal production is greater, and all of that is with less cost.”

The advantages of Seis’s land management practices have been scientifically verified. “A lot of people think there’s no science in regenerative agriculture,” Seis said. “My farm is actually one of the most researched farms in Australia. We’ve had scientists all over this property. We have a lot of data on regenerative agriculture, of how it works and why works. So we do have the data to back this up. It does work, and we do have the data here to show how profitable it is.”

Seis cautions producers who want to transition to begin slowly. “Do it very carefully and slowly on smaller areas at a time. Don’t rush in. And do your own farm trials,” he said. “I decided to start to reduce the fertilizer when sowing crops. One year, I reduced the fertilizer by 10 percent. I just put some strips through the paddock and identified where it is. I checked the yields to see how the yields were going. If they were no different, next year I’d reduce it again – another 10 percent. So, I gradually wound the fertilizer back over time. That’s very low risk because you’re only doing a small area with your trial.”

He also tested his grazing practices. He compared the body weights of his livestock grazed on a multi-species forage crop to the weights of animals grazed on a single-species forage crop. “So for the two months they were grazed, the weight gained was doubled on a multi-species crop compared to a single species.”

Seis is aware that his management practices are different from what producers in South Dakota may choose to implement due to their colder winters and shorter growing season. However, he knows the principles of regenerative agriculture will work to improve farms and ranches on the Northern Plains.

“I don’t think it matters on the type of soil you have,” he said. “You can improve any soil.”

To register for Seis’s workshop on Aug. 6 in Fort Pierre, visit <https://tinyurl.com/2024SeisWorkshop>.

For more information about the benefits of soil health practices, visit www.sdsoilhealthcoalition.org or contact the South Dakota Soil Health Coalition at sdsoilhealth@gmail.com or 605-280-4190.



Courtesy photo

Colin Seis adopted regenerative agriculture practices in 1979 after a fire devastated his farm in New South Wales.

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Courtesy photo

Pasture cropped oats are harvested on Colin Seis's farm in New South Wales. Seis pioneered the pasture cropping technique in which grain is grown in a pasture over the winter when the grass is dormant.

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Courtesy photo

A mob of 3000 Merino sheep are being moved through a gateway on Colin Seis's farm in New South Wales.

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