

LIVING

# *City Farm SEO*

A NEW WAY OF FARMING



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San Luis Obispo's little urban farm has been serving its community for years, but these days, its service looks a bit different. The farm is stretching beyond its long-held mission of sustainability and taking things a step further, to regeneration.

To City Farm SLO, this new mission means regenerating the earth, regenerating what "farming" means to young community members, and -- as farm manager Shane Lovell put it -- "regenerating human connection to the land, and human relationships among each other."

It's a lofty goal, but one well worth the effort. And this new chapter of City Farm SLO's story starts in the soil.

#### CITY FARM SLO

City Farm sits on 19 acres, just off the bit of Highway 101 cutting through San Luis Obispo.

Most of that land is leased out to local organic farmers -- City Farm sets aside only 2.5 acres for its own direct use. But on that 2.5-acre slice of heaven, magic is happening.

Regenerative farming methodologies aim to improve the environment, Lovell explained -- not just sustain it.

"It tries to reinvigorate land that's been overfarmed and overworked and depleted," He said. "You're basically working with nature, rather than removing nature."

Most regenerative farmers focus their energy on the soil. According to Lovell, good soil needs three main components to thrive: structure (being its physical qualities), organic matter (namely carbon), and biology (or organisms, such as bacteria, fungi, and protozoa). Once you build and maintain this "tripod of healthy soil," the entire ecosystem begins to improve.

"You're trying to take the powers of the plants and animals and microbes in the soil, and

utilize all of it in a way that helps the plants you're growing for food," Lovell said. "But it also helps the soil and ecology that surrounds it, so birds, lizards, insects, all of that. You're really trying to make everything thrive, rather than removing it and adding a farm."

Regenerative farmers do not till their soil, either, which would disrupt the microbes living in it. Instead, they start with a heavy application of compost, which also acts as a growing medium and mulch, protecting the soil and soil life underneath it. After harvesting and before starting on a new crop, farmers simply add a bit more compost -- no tilling required. Over time, the soil beneath should grow healthier.

While soil is the star of regenerative farming, it's not the only actor. These farmers also utilize livestock and recycling methods to keep their lands healthy. For example, City Farm SLO uses four sheep to graze in rotation around the farm's and its tenants' land, resulting in



weed remediation and soil-building. Ideally, a farmer would also incorporate other animals -- such as cows and chickens -- to increase the regenerative effects and overall production of the farm.

"When the animal eats down the grass to make it bare, it gets rid of all the dead material, too, so the new growth has more sunlight," Lovell said. "That kickstarts the natural system that's supposed to happen on the prairie."

## A HEALING PROCESS

Regeneration is necessary in the first place because most farmlands are fatigued, withered, and hooked on synthetic substances.

Lovell explained that following World War II, chemicals used to make weapons -- such as nitrogen and phosphorus -- were found to help plants grow better. However, these chemicals also damage soil in the ground.

For that reason, though farming with such chemicals might yield great crops in the beginning, the yield decreases over time, unless farmers continue buying and applying the chemicals in larger quantities. Before long, whole swaths of farmland become addicted.

And the damage doesn't stop there -- after killing life in the soil, these chemicals often enter rivers and streams, creating hazardous effects.

"The farmer's making money, but the entire community is losing out overall," Lovell said. "There isn't a whole lot of farmland left that is healthy, so you have to look at it with a regenerative mindset: to transform that land back into a naturally productive system, without synthetic and harmful chemicals."

On the other hand, regenerative farming entails a lot more manpower (and thus more labor costs) than conventional farming does -- at least in the beginning.

"Once you get the system healthy enough, it lowers the input cost so much that you make a lot more money," Lovell said. "But it's difficult to compete head-to-head against a conventional farm."

So, Lovell said, don't try to compete. Instead, produce food at a much higher quality, and sell it to the consumer in much lower quantities. And for City Farm SLO, these regenerative efforts include another critical mission: community education.

"We're focusing on doing a little bit of everything, and we're educating people on that, so hopefully we'll plant the seed in their head and they'll go off and do something similar,"

Lovell said. "Regenerative farming in general doesn't just talk about the plants and the ecosystem. It includes people into that system. It's all one holistic natural viewpoint."

Steven Marx, City Farm SLO board president, added that most people don't get to experience farming the way they can at City Farm.

"It's sheer joy to be able to see crops growing and participate in the activities of planting and harvesting," Marx said. "That's one really significant gift that people experience when they come to the farm."

## INVOLVING YOUNG PEOPLE

At City Farm SLO, community education starts with kids.

City Farm's current education initiative, the Youth Empowerment Program (YEP), aims to strengthen relationships among students on the Central Coast, the land, and their food -- all while building critical skills for kids' daily lives and future careers.

YEP, available in English and Spanish, got off the ground in spring 2021 with a 10-week pilot program, during which participating students met on Saturday mornings for educational workshops and time on the farm.

Each YEP session is a bit different. The kids start at 9 a.m. with an icebreaker and a rundown of how their day on the farm will look. They then complete a 30- to 45-minute workshop, with subjects rotating week by week and covering resume-building, goal-making, nutrition, and other vital skills. After a lunch break, YEP students get started on farmwork: planting, transplanting, harvesting, pulling weeds, and setting up irrigation, all through a regenerative

lens.

"I think a lot of people think agriculture is some form of punishment, like, 'Oh, go pull weeds,'" YEP facilitator Gissel Neri Corcoles said. But this program helps students grow, become leaders, and learn about their food system.

Plus, YEP participants receive compensation for their work at City Farm -- \$25 for each 90-minute session of farmwork. YEP graduates qualify to apply for a paid internship at City Farm SLO as well.

City Farm SLO executive director Kayla Rutland said she received excellent feedback from YEP's spring cohort. In a participant survey, 100% of students said they felt more prepared for employment opportunities thanks to YEP, and 90% said they felt better equipped to make healthy choices.

"But program results went far beyond these figures," Rutland said. "On the first day of YEP, students were shy and reserved. After 10 weeks, they were confidently performing farm tasks, asking lots of questions, and had made great friendships. And parents noticed the difference, too. One parent told me that her son was initially anxious about attending YEP, but as sessions continued, he became increasingly eager to participate."

After seeing such success with their pilot cohort, Corcoles said she looks forward to what the next cohort will bring. YEP's summer students met for the first time on July 10.

"They were all asking questions, they were engaged," Corcoles said. "To me, it's not just that they were having fun, but that they were learning while having fun."

YEP is open to all students ages 14-17, but the

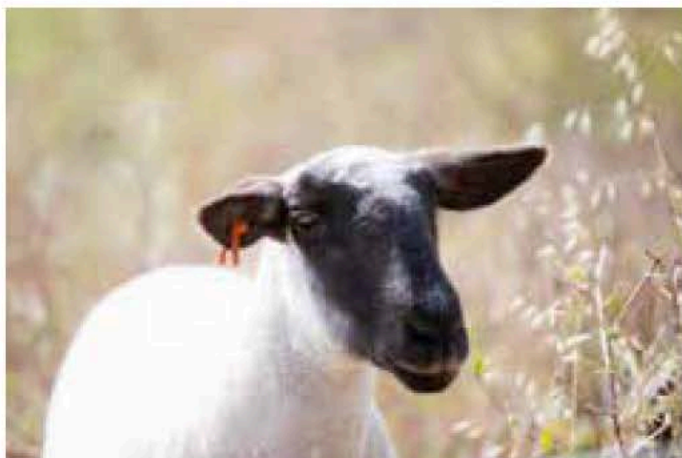






farm specifically aims to educate kids from low-income backgrounds. Alejandra Mahoney, director of education at People's Self-Help Housing, helped build the foundation for YEP and find participants through her connections with low-income housing communities on the Central Coast. Now, YEP enrollment relies primarily on word of mouth

"These students learn about the importance of not only farming and where their food comes from, but how important it is to be informed on those topics," Corcoles said. "They impact

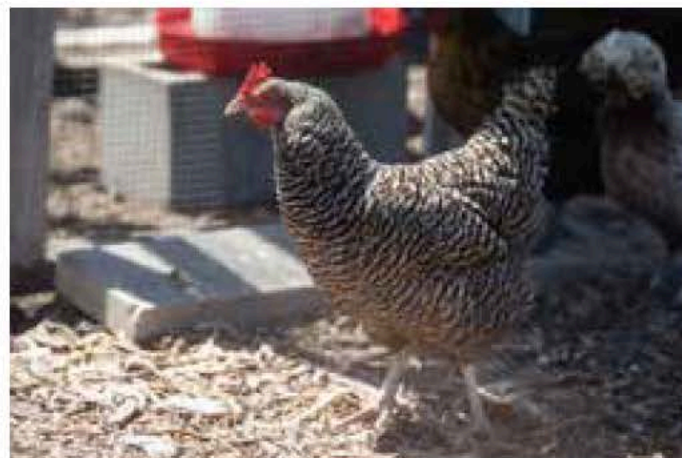


our environment, they impact our lifestyle, they impact our day-to-day lives."

### FEEDING A COMMUNITY

YEP's efforts give back to the community at large, too. Kids participating in the program plant on 1.25 acres of land at City Farm SLO, and all of the produce they grow goes directly to the SLO Food Bank.

When YEP first started, City Farm representatives reached out to SLO Food Bank, offering to contribute all proceeds from



the program to the food bank. SLO Food Bank operations director Emily Hansen said that while City Farm has always had a good relationship with the food bank, YEP helped turn their relationship into a proper partnership.

"We love the gesture," Hansen said. "We love what their program is doing."

Food bank staff were able to request that YEP grow, harvest, and contribute food items that the food bank wasn't able to purchase and didn't typically receive through donations. These items included garlic, tomatoes, cucumbers, broccoli, tomatillos, hot peppers, and zucchinis.

"Clients are always incredibly excited to get local produce," Hansen said. "It's usually items that we can't source through any other avenues, so they're really excited to see the new variety."

SLO Food Bank's clients get even more excited when they learn about the program producing these foods.

"That connection to the community is really important to the clients, because it's giving them that care," Hansen explained. "Someone was willing to put in the time to get it to them."

Hansen added that she wanted the food bank to benefit San Luis Obispo's community members in the same way that City Farm SLO does.

"What they're doing with YEP is going so far beyond just growing beautiful produce, saying, 'How do we get young kids involved in it?'" she said. "I think they're doing an amazing thing, and I look at their partnerships with different organizations and individuals within the community, and I want the SLO Food Bank to echo that. Because I think that's what makes SLO such an amazing place."