

White Oak Pastures: A Conversation About Climate Solutions That Build Community with Jenni Harris

Summary

It might be hard to believe that a single family farm in Bluffton, Georgia, is helping regenerate farmland, revive a small town, produce nutritious food, and scale climate solutions in our state, but that's exactly what's happening at White Oak Pastures. Blair Beasley of the Ray C. Anderson Foundation talks with Jenni Harris, a member of the Drawdown Georgia Leadership Council and part of the fifth generation to raise livestock at White Oak Pastures, about the farm's climate smart agriculture journey, its carbon sequestration data, a new solar grazing partnership, and the changes she's already seeing on the land.

Key Takeaways

- White Oak Pastures pasture-raises ten species of livestock, including grass-fed cattle, goats, sheep, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, guineas, hogs, and rabbits, and also processes, slaughters, and butchers on site, distributing to grocery stores like Whole Foods, Publix, and Kroger as well as directly to consumers.
- Jenni's father, Will Harris, began shifting the farm away from industrial agriculture in the mid-1990s, before grass-fed beef was widely known, building the business through in-store demos and years of educating customers on what grass-fed even meant.
- A 2018 life cycle assessment conducted by Quantis found that for every pound of White Oak Pastures beef sold, 3.5 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalent is sequestered, making the farm a carbon sink and demonstrating that regenerative agriculture can be a legitimate climate solution.
- White Oak Pastures partners with Silicon Ranch on solar grazing, letting sheep manage the vegetation beneath roughly 415 acres of solar panels, eliminating the need for mechanical mowing while keeping the land in active agricultural production.
- Jenni has observed real, tangible signs of ecological recovery on the farm, from the return of toads, lightning bugs, and dung beetles she never saw growing up, to an unexpected downside: the farm now hosts more than 80 bald eagles at a time, whose predation has become a real challenge for the pastured poultry operation.

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Blair Beasley: Well, Jenni, it's really wonderful to talk to you today about all the exciting work going on at White Oak Pastures. For those who haven't heard of your family's farm, or haven't had the chance to visit, can you describe White Oak Pastures for us?

Jenni Harris: Of course, thank you, Blair, for having me. My name is Jenni Harris, and I'm a member of the fifth generation of White Oak Pastures, our farm in Bluffton, Georgia, in Early and Clay County. On our farm, we pasture-raise ten species of livestock, grass-fed cattle, goats, and sheep, and pasture-raised chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, guineas, hogs, and rabbits. We're really focused on the symbiosis that exists between the animals, and the benefit animal impact has on land regeneration, but we're also fiercely proud of our resiliency as a food production system. So in addition to pasture-raising those ten species, we also process, slaughter, and butcher on the farm. We market and self-distribute to grocery stores like Whole Foods, Publix, and Kroger, and also directly to individual consumers through our website, whiteoakpastures.com.

Blair Beasley: That's great, your farm and your family are really leaders in the regenerative agriculture space, and I'm wondering if you can walk us through how you got there, what your journey looked like exploring regenerative ag on your land.

Jenni Harris: Sure, and you used the word "leader," that wasn't my word. We were probably among the first to take hold of pasture-raising livestock and market it to consumers who cared a lot about animal welfare, land regeneration, and the rural revival of ghost towns like Bluffton. As I mentioned, my sister and I are the fifth generation of Harrises to return and make a living on the farm, but really, it's a return to the way we once farmed. My great-great-grandfather came to Early County in 1866. My grandfather, born in the 1920s, is actually the one responsible for industrializing the farm, and not because he was a bad person, that was simply when chemical fertilizers, combustion engines, and other tools science gave us made meat production more efficient and more profitable. That's when those changes happened, and he, like everyone else, adapted to those mainstream ways of thinking.

It wasn't until his grandson, who happens to be my dad, focused on the unintended consequences of industrial agriculture and started transitioning to something different. That happened in the mid-'90s, before grass-fed beef was really even a thing. The funny story I tell is that our business was built one meatball at a time, my dad spent tireless hours doing demos in grocery stores like Whole Foods and Publix, and in his very thick Southern drawl would say, "Excuse me, ma'am, would you like to try some of my grass-fed beef?" And people would look at him and say, "Try what? What even is that?" There was a tremendous amount of education that had to happen, that's how far we were from grass-based meat being something people understood. Fast forward 25 years, probably more, and now we host many of those same customers on our farm, for workshops, overnight stays in one of our cabins, or a meal at our restaurant. We've gone from pulling back the curtain on industrial agriculture, when consumers didn't really know or care how their food was produced, to today's uber-conscious customer,

who cares deeply not just about what they eat, but its effect on the environment, and that matters a lot to us.

Blair Beasley: So what does regenerative agriculture actually look like on your land? Can you give us some examples?

Jenni Harris: If you Google "what is regenerative agriculture," you'll get a lot of definitions, and like everything else, it means something a little different to everybody, I think that's actually special, I don't think we should try to mainstream it too much. For us, regenerative agriculture means restarting the cycles of nature. Linear production systems break those cycles, we tend to believe we can control inputs to maximize outputs, and while that's true to a point, it has a lot of unintended consequences, borne by the animals themselves, the land, or the consumer. Regenerative agriculture means embracing the naturally occurring water cycle, mineral cycle, energy cycle, grazing cycle, and carbon cycle, and working with those cycles to produce products that are genuinely good for the animals, good for the land, and good for communities like ours, which were really robbed of people and productivity by the industrialization of agriculture.

Blair Beasley: I know you've actually done some studies looking at how much carbon is being sequestered in the soil at White Oak Pastures, can you tell me about those studies and what you found?

Jenni Harris: In 2018, we had a life cycle assessment done on our farm, a very expensive process that we didn't have to pay for ourselves. We were, and are, a customer of Epic Provisions, a subsidiary of General Mills. The people who started Epic are excellent marketers, people like me really look up to how eloquently and succinctly they can talk about their products and what makes them up. But the General Mills team wanted to validate the claims Epic's marketers and founders were making, they said, essentially, if we're going to say this product helps save the planet, we need to be able to prove it. So they sent soil scientists from Quantis, I believe based in Minnesota, out here, and they ran a series of samplings. We sent over hundreds of records and invoices, a lot of data went back and forth. When it was all said and done, the life cycle assessment found that for every pound of White Oak Pastures beef sold, 3.5 pounds of carbon dioxide equivalent is sequestered, making us a carbon sink, and making regenerative agriculture a legitimate option for reversing climate change and fixing some of the destruction we've brought on ourselves.

Blair Beasley: That's really exciting that you have that data. One of the projects you're currently pursuing that I find really exciting is solar grazing, could you tell us more about it, and how you're partnering with the solar industry right in your neighborhood?

Jenni Harris: Absolutely. Inarguably, one of the most exciting things happening at White Oak Pastures is our partnership with Silicon Ranch on solar grazing. My dad learned a couple of years ago that we were going to be neighbors with Silicon Ranch, a solar company based in

Nashville, Tennessee. Being the businessman, visionary, and forward-thinking person that he is, he approached them and said, "If y'all are going to put up panels around our farm, I really do think I can manage the vegetation underneath those panels in a far more natural way than you're accustomed to." That made its way up to the CEO, who ultimately agreed to meet with my dad, and being that same kind of visionary, forward-thinking person himself, he said, "All right, let's do it." So in April of 2020, if I remember correctly, these last 18 months have all run together, so forgive me if I'm a little fuzzy on it, we turned loose a few hundred ewes underneath about 415 acres of solar property, about six miles from where I'm sitting right now, and we've been managing the vegetation underneath those panels ever since.

We believe it's a true relationship of healthy symbiosis. The panels above are a really powerful way to keep the land in agricultural production, produce something healthy and nutritious for consumers, and provide clean electricity, all at once. It's a win-win, honestly, we haven't found a loser in that system yet.

Blair Beasley: That's great. Well, I want to say we're so thankful you've joined the Drawdown Georgia Leadership Council. As you know, Drawdown Georgia highlights solutions in the agricultural space that can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, things like conservation agriculture and silvopasture, which is just the planting of trees on pasture and farmland. I was hoping you could share your thoughts on the need and importance of having the agricultural community at the table during discussions about how to reduce emissions in our state and build resilience to a changing climate.

Jenni Harris: That's a pretty hard question for a farmer to answer. We proclaim to be experts in animal welfare, land regeneration, and the rural revival of towns like Bluffton, we know how to do that, and we tend to stick to our own space. But I will say, if we believe we're degrading our resources through food production, then it's incumbent on us to investigate ways to reverse that. Evidence of that shift is that the word "sustainable" really lost traction, fifteen years ago, sustainable was the buzzword, it took every ounce of restraint in me not to put that on our label, because every customer cared about whether something was sustainable, without necessarily understanding the nuance. Fast forward to today, and sustainable isn't enough anymore, we're not at a point where just sustaining what we have is going to be okay, it's not going to be okay, we're headed to a pretty dark place if we don't do more than just okay. And if agriculture is contributing to that, it's incumbent on us to find ways where agriculture doesn't contribute to that. One system is teeming with life, ecological biodiversity, production of nutritious food, and right next door, there's a desert of erosion, it's just very obvious.

I'm grateful those obvious observations are finally being made, and I think agriculture has got to be part of the conversation. There are lots of ways to draw carbon out of the atmosphere and put it back into the earth, but carbon is just one piece. All of the cycles of nature have to be functioning together, we need a clean water system, we need a lot of different cycles working together to create and maintain life. We're really just scratching the surface of what all this looks like, whether you're a consumer or a producer, and I'm very excited to be doing what I'm doing.

Blair Beasley: Before we close, I'm curious if you can talk about how a changing climate has impacted White Oak Pastures, and whether any of the practices you've leaned into are helping build resilience to some of the changes you're seeing.

Jenni Harris: In changing the way we farmed, we've noticed a lot of really positive things, and some negative ones, so let's go through both. On the positive side, there's been a real resurgence of things that weren't around during my childhood. You never ask a woman her age, so I'll just get right to it, I'm 35, born in 1986, and growing up through the '80s and '90s, I never saw big toady frogs on our farm, I don't know the official name, somebody watching this is probably an amphibian biologist and can correct me, but big toads, lightning bugs, dung beetles, those things just didn't exist here during my childhood. My dad talked about them, but I don't remember them. My wife and I have a five-year-old now, and his favorite thing is looking for bugs, and we're finding big toady frogs, lightning bugs, and dung beetles on the farm now, things I never had growing up, that my dad used to talk about having when he was a kid. I have to think that's a really positive reflection of the life returning here at White Oak Pastures.

I mentioned some negative things too. In a natural production system, there's both predator and prey. We've found ourselves home to 80-something bald eagles, a predator species that's gathered on and around our farm, because we raise our livestock outdoors, and that gives them the opportunity to be predators, to feed in a very natural way. I was telling this story just yesterday, a couple of bald eagles showed up one October and left once it got hot. The next year there were four or five, and they migrated on too. The year after that, eight or ten. Then twenty or thirty. Once we got to twenty or thirty, it became a lot less cool. When you're waking up, drinking your coffee on the front porch before heading into work, there's nothing more refreshing and American than watching a couple of bald eagles soar over your pastures, that was really special. But once we got to twenty or thirty, the damage they did to our pastured poultry operation specifically became substantial. And it didn't stop there, in one sitting, we counted over 80, one person counted 82, another counted 85, so we just say "over 80" bald eagles at one time, which means there are far more than 80 living here in total. That's not good for our production system, it's genuinely destructive. But it's also evidence that this natural production system exists, with real predator-prey relationships, we're just badly out of balance right now, because it's basically a bald eagle buffet at dawn and dusk every day. Still, the evidence is there, those eagles could choose to live anywhere, and they choose to live at White Oak Pastures.

Blair Beasley: Wow. Well, I want to thank you so much for your time and for sharing your stories, I know so many of us have a lot to learn from what you're doing at White Oak Pastures, so thank you so much, Jenni.

Jenni Harris: You're welcome here anytime.

Blair Beasley: Thank you.