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A meeting of minds

Groundswell preview

It remains as popular as ever and this year Groundswell promises to bring a host of international perspectives to the field to share knowledge and inspire. *CPM* speaks to Alex Cherry for a flavour of what’s to come from one of farming’s favourite festivals.

By Janine Adamson

Groundswell has become a unique proposition — the combination of rich knowledge transfer with the chance to attend a mini Glastonbury-type festival. And during one of the trickiest years that agriculture has experienced for some time, the industry undoubtedly deserves something to look forward to.

So with the bar already set pretty high, what does this year’s event have in store? According to event director Alex Cherry, one aspect that Groundswell will always strive to deliver on, is quality content. “We have around 275 speakers across the entire show including the 10 session tents, on-stand demonstrations, safaris and plot tours, with many being new faces.

“In particular, there’s an international flavour to this year’s speaker programme — there’s so much inspiration to be had from different global perspectives — it’s a way of breathing new life into UK farming,” he says.

Among the global voices is Amish farmer John Kempf, founder of regen agronomy consultancy, Advancing Eco Agriculture. John is from Northeast Ohio in the United States and says he’s passionate about the

potential of well-managed agriculture ecosystems which can help to reverse ecological degradation.

As quoted on his website, John states: “I dream of a world where the process of growing food regenerates the land, revitalises rural communities, and facilitates a world where food improves our health.”

Top tier speaks

He’s also the host of the regenerative agriculture podcast, where he interviews leading farmers and scientists involved in ‘cutting edge practices and science to accelerate the healing of soil, crops, livestock, and our relationship to the land’.

Alex says although John is a big player in the global regen ag space, he doesn’t undertake frequent international travel therefore having him on the bill is a true highlight. “I’d say if you can attend only one presentation at Groundswell, this should be John’s first talk entitled ‘Untapped potential in regenerative ag’.”

Then, providing a Canadian perspective, is veteran soil scientist and agricultural engineer, Odette Ménard from Quebec. Odette will be delivering lectures during the show as well as demonstrating the rainfall simulator which displays the effect of rainfall on soils under different management regimes.

But for something completely different, Derek and Tannis Axten will share their experiences of creating routes to market for their 240ha farm in Saskatchewan, Western Canada. This includes building a food-grade seed cleaning plant, flour mill, and packaging line on the farm to add value to their grains.

Derek and Tannis say their goal is to take care of what Mother Nature gave them so Axten Farms is sustainable and can continue

for many more generations. Commenting on their approach, Alex says he’s amazed at what the family can achieve given the farm’s remote location. “It really is in the middle of nowhere,” he adds.

However, it’s not just about America and Canada, Groundswell is welcoming a host of speakers from Europe too, including Josef Holzer. Since 2009, Josef has been responsible for developing the Krameterhof farm, a world-renowned permaculture showcase project in the Austrian Alps.

During his talk at Groundswell, Josef will discuss his expertise in water management, and in particular, understanding its flow through landscapes. He has a fitting talk title of ‘Where water runs, make it walk’.

Aside from the extensive speaker programme, Alex says the team has been working hard to improve a rather less glamorous side — the infrastructure of the



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event. This includes increasing access to fresh drinking water by laying new pipework across the site.

The event's layout has also been reconfigured to improve visitor navigation and reduce the time required to travel from one end of the site to the other, and ultimately, minimise walking between exhibits.

There are more camping and glamping facilities — an aspect of Groundswell which arguably makes it stand out from other trade events. And an update which will be a relief for local residents — time and effort has been spent laying new tracks in and out of the site to help improve traffic flow and reduce congestion.

"This year will be our biggest yet but that's not through aiming to expand, it's more about making Groundswell the very best it can be," stresses Alex.

As for hospitality, he says the team is proud to welcome a greater range of independent food outlets which will be open from 'sunrise to sunset'. "There's an increased interest from the food industry in regenerative agriculture, whether that's

start-up brands or large organisations such as Unilever. We have a full spectrum of involvement and it's important to discuss the opportunities and threats such interest has for regen ag."

Something which the Cherry family is passionate about is the event's focus on education and encouraging new entrants into farming. This year, this is being realised through a new hub for educational institutions known as 'The Study'.

"We'll be bringing 100 agriculture lecturers from universities across the country to share research results and hear from farmers, getting them out of the lab and lecture theatre, exposing them to fresh ideas."

Critical thinking

"We're teaming up to make sure agriculture degrees are bang up to date and that we're equipping students with the know-how, critical thinking and inquisitive mindset that farmers at Groundswell have in spades," explains Professor Tom Macmillan, who's helping to coordinate The Study.

Also new at Groundswell 2024, the team have established a seven-year regen rotation trial using field-scale plots, which will be unveiled at this year's event. "The aim is to showcase a potential rotation which will include no-till potatoes, strip-till vegetables, a two-year clover ley and winter wheat. By setting this up in the demonstration field, we can begin to measure the soil health and other benefits of such an approach which is really exciting," explains Alex.

But what does he think of the other regen-themed events which have recently appeared on the scene? Does he perceive these as a threat to the success of Groundswell? "We're here to inspire so it's fantastic to see other events out there which



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share similar messaging, it's all positive.

"In many ways it echoes the mantra of the industry in that it's a collaborative space; we welcome more to the party. Groundswell Festival is designed to bring all strands of the industry together to discuss a better farming future, you won't find a more suitable place to do that and you can have fun at the same time," he concludes.

Groundswell is taking place 26-27 June at Lannock Manor Farm in Hitchin and is hosted by the Cherry family. For further information and to enquire about tickets, visit www.groundswellag.com ■



Improving the site's infrastructure and layout has been a priority for show organisers.

To give a flavour of what's in store, CPM has selected some of the sessions from day one of the festival. The full programme for both days can be found online – <https://groundswellag.com/sessions>

Title	When?	Where?	Who?
Untapped potential in regen ag	26 June 10:00 – 10:55	Big Top	● John Kempf – founder of Advancing Eco Agriculture and KindHarvest.ag
Managing blackgrass in arable rotations	26 June 11.15 – 11.40	The Study	● Dr Stephen Moss ● Lynn Tatnell ● Garth Clark
CROP concept and soil compaction	26 June 12:00 – 12:55	Big Top	● Odette Ménard – soil scientist and agricultural engineer
Regen ag: what's the evidence?	26 June 12:00 – 12:55	Soil Tent	● Prof Jonathan Storkey ● Nicola Randall ● Andrew Neal
Where water runs, make it walk	26 June 1:45 – 3:10	Big Top	● Josef Holzer – water management expert
Living mulches: the future for arable?	26 June 3:15 – 3:40	The Study	● Matt England ● Matt Smee
Loyal to the soil	26 June 4:00 – 4:55	Big Top	● Tannis and Derek Axten – Canadian farmers
Transforming the food landscape at scale	26 June 5:30 – 6:25	Big Top	● Andy Cato ● Henry Dimbleby