

FARMERS' COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY

INTERVIEW WITH **BRYCE CUNNINGHAM**

Interview by GCU

CASE STUDY: AGRICULTURE AND CIRCULAR ECONOMY



Bryce Cunningham

Farming is one sector that can do much to promote sustainability and the circular economy. It provides us with meat, cereal and dairy products and the cyclic nature of farming, where the land is used in the past, present and in the future, means farmers need to ensure their practices are sustainable.

Farmers are at the start of the food supply chain and in the growing processing transporting and consuming of food it's thought to represent 30% of our Global greenhouse gas emissions. Thus farms play a significant part in promoting a more circular approach from the materials used, the farm practices which can improve and maintain soil quality, promote local produce and manage farm waste through good land

practices such as composting and digestion of waste. However, the emergence of large-scale farming can lead to practices that involve industrially produced fertilizer and pesticides - a far cry from how farms were once operated and the drive towards efficiency can take its toll on the local ecosystem through the destruction of a biodiverse environment.



One farm that sees the opportunity to rethink current practices is Mossgiel Farm. Located in Ayrshire in Scotland, Mossgiel is embedding sustainability in everything they do. The farm where Scotland's most love poet Robert Burns wrote many of his songs, aims to be sustainable.

One area of circular opportunity is the containers used for the milk. Milk is delivered to the customer in green or blue plastic containers, or glass bottles and returned to the farm. Bryce Cunningham runs the Family Farm which is principally an organic dairy farm, delivering 1.5 million litres of milk annually.

MOSSGIEL FARM NO LONGER USES SINGLE-USE PLASTIC. HOW DID YOU ACHIEVE THIS GOAL?

In 2019, we decided to stop using single-use plastics entirely. The reason for that was that becoming an organic farm, we had transitioned to grazing outside, from inside all year round and we felt we were doing a lot for the environment through all these different ways of dairying and all the milk was ending up the single-use plastic bottle that, 10 days after use, was ending up either in landfill or if lucky, in a recycling bin.

So we decided to ban single-use plastic at that point and moved to sustainable glass packaging which can be used endlessly until they break. We also have a large BPA-free plastic container that can be reused 50 times as well and at the end of the day they are recycled buckets to start with and recycled during their lives as well. So we use these 50 times and the glass bottles endlessly until they break overall we have saved 26 million pieces of single plastic since we started that plan.

Our customers are interested in the recyclable approach. Since 2019 we have grown the business by four times, so the volume is increasing.

One of the main aspects of what we do is a single-use plastic-free part of it and a lot of customers are asking us for that side of things we're now attracting customers like Baxter Storey for example that supply Glasgow Caledonian University and they have seen a massive reduction of their single-use plastic waste since moving to us.

Farmers often cooperate through the shared use of major equipment through machinery rings, a recognized circular economy business model.

WHAT ARE OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEIGHBOURING FARMS TO WORK CO-OPERATIVELY IN PROMOTING ORGANIC DAIRY FARMING?

We brought five other organic farmers here to Mossgiel so far and the big aspiration we have is to grow the business to 10 million litres a year and support a further 10 Scottish organic dairy farms.

The whole aspect of that is so that we can supply sustainable food prices to farmers and keep food prices sustainable for consumers as well, to link that food chain up from grass to glass to ensure sustainability at every step.

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS THAT CONSUMERS MIGHT HAVE ABOUT INTENSIVE MILK PRODUCTION?

So here at Mossgiel, we operate a cow-with-calf system. We're one of only two dairy farms in Scotland. So there's ourselves here and Ethical Dairies in Dumfries.

What we try to do is keep cows and calves together - something that's very unusual in our industry. And the reason we've done that is actually for two reasons.

First of all, there's an ethical concern from some dairy consumers about calves being removed from their mothers.

We wanted to see if it could be done within the industry and yes it can be done.

That's why we've done it.

Second of all, we want to encourage new entrants into dairy farming and use new and innovative ways of farming to do so.

But also people who are perhaps closer to retirement age - they don't want to have hundreds of cows anymore and they want to do something a little bit different.

They can have a smaller herd and operate the cow-with-calf system and have a premium through ourselves as a platform, to engage with consumers and follow that way of practice. So as we enjoy our milk and all the other products that farms produce remember circular economy thinking has an important role in making our farms sustainable.