John Bryant

Old Tavern Farm - Quinton, Virginia

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Sarah Rodriguez: This is Sarah Rodriguez with the Southern Foodways Alliance. I'm here in Quinton, Virginia. It is November 8, 2024. Do you mind introducing yourself for the recorder?

John Bryant: Sure. My name is John Bryant. I am a farmer, and we grow primarily produce and fruit. We also raise livestock as well and have laying hens for egg production. The name of our farm is Old Tavern Farm. It has been in my family for four generations since the early 1900s, but the farm itself, in terms of European settlement, has been here since the mid-1650s. There was a tavern originally, or an ordinary, on the farm, that was built in 1693, but as evidenced from all of the arrowheads that we find as we toil in the fields and knowing that the native population was agrarian, this land has probably been farmed for thousands of years.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Could you go back and tell me when and where you were born?

John Bryant: I actually was born in 1967, so I'm 57 years old I think. And I was born in Fairfax County, Virginia, so northern Virginia right outside of DC. My mother was a teacher, and my father worked for the federal government for the Department of State, but we spent, in my childhood, a lot of time at this farm. It's where my grandparents lived on my mother's side is how this farm traces back.

Sarah Rodriguez: Who else did you grow up with in your home? Was it just your mom and dad and you?

John Bryant: My mom and dad and my sister, Sarah, who also lives on the farm I

currently.

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Sarah Rodriguez: How long were you growing up in Fairfax? Did you spend most of your childhood there?

John Bryant: I pretty much spent until I was 18 years old, and then I went to college, returned a little bit during college obviously, but my sister, Sarah, who's five years older, she had moved to Richmond, and of course this farm is just 13 miles outside of Richmond, so we always had a connection with Richmond. But from visiting her after she graduated college while I was in college, and having a disdain for traffic, and growing up during all that time spent in northern Virginia always wanting to be a farmer, I moved to Richmond immediately after college. I lived in Jackson, Mississippi for three years in my late 20s but then returned to Richmond and have been in Richmond or here at the farm ever since.

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Sarah Rodriguez: Where did you go to school?

John Bryant: I went to Radford University, so Radford and VCU.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit what food was like in your family growing up? You said you came here to visit your grandparents pretty often. What was food like at home? Was there an identity of food when you came to visit the farm? Tell me a bit about that.

John Bryant: I come from a long line of excellent cooks. A lot of people say that. It's true to some degree. My father, though he cooked limited in a limited basis, was also a good

cook, but my mother was an excellent cook. So was her sister Shirley, her mother—my grandmother, Alice Wayer Fisher—were excellent cooks, so food was central in our household.

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We ate out. Growing up in northern Virginia we had the luxury of a lot of ethnic foods before they really became popular in less dense areas of the country. But if we ate out once or twice a week, all the other meals were home prepared. And my mother, very much southern influence to her cooking: fresh vegetables, meats, cured hams, homemade biscuits, homemade cakes. And I think also with my age, we've shifted as we've gone forward in time to the way we prepare foods, or how many prepared foods we buy at the grocery store that kind of simulate home-cooked meals but definitely aren't.

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There were definitely home-cooked meals: green beans that were simmered with pieces of country ham, greens that were cooked with ham hocks, all of that was what I grew up with. Coming to the farm for visits and Sunday dinner, which was Sunday meal after church, was dinner. The 5:00 p.m. or later meal was supper, but Sunday dinner was always extended family and also usually neighbors or friends. The farm table usually was filled with 12 adults, and then there were one or two children's tables off of that where we ate.

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And my grandmother used to love to say that "Everything you see before you, except for the salt and pepper, came from this farm," so there was definitely a connection. My grandfather was a

partner with his brother-in-law, my grandmother's brother. So, my great-uncle and grandfather were partners in the farm business; my great-uncle was the true farmer. My grandfather did more of the business side of the farm, but he also was an avid gardener, you know, huge garden plots where he grew all kinds of fresh vegetables. In addition to raising vegetables at a commercial scale, that farm also was a row crop operation: corn, soybeans, wheat, barley during that time, but primarily we produced hogs.

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There were hogs here on this farm very similar to how we have them now, where they are outdoor housed and rotated through different pastures or woodland paddocks, but we also shifted in the early '70s to confinement production. That's where the marketplace went. But part of that aspect of our previous farming, my grandfather was noted for his country hams. The old smoke house, which has now been converted into our office for the farm business, still smells of those hams, and I have such fond memories of those thinly sliced Virginia country cured hams and the smell that just resonated all around this farm when he was smoking and curing hams.

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Sarah Rodriguez: I imagine that's great. So, you went to school at Radford and VCU. What did you study over there?

John Bryant: I took the path of easiest resistance. Even though I wanted to be a farmer, I learned on the job as a child and a young adult. Learning on the job influences were from my great-uncle Edmond Wayer and my grandfather Lynnwood, and I did not feel a huge need for math and science. I could always write well, and I had a pretty good understanding of and

enjoyed reading and those sorts of things.

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So, when I went to college I actually chose my college to play a sport, not necessarily for the education, and then was like, "Wow, I like reading! I like writing. English sounds good, I'll just do that for four years or so." And then of course I graduated from college, and I moved to Richmond and actually moved here to the farm. My grandparents had passed away. My great-uncle was still living, so I started farming. I farmed for a few years, and then life completely changed, as it does, and I had an entire corporate career doing nothing related to farming or agriculture whatsoever; still having the farm, the connection, loving being out here in the rural setting, but my life took a whole different path.

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To when we were talking before we started recording, I kind of semi-retired and started an artistic endeavor because I always enjoyed working with my hands. I liked being able to produce something and seeing the results in a relatively quick turnaround. Oftentimes in a corporate job we toil away and the results aren't particularly tangible, so I was never satisfied, but I didn't really understand why I wasn't satisfied. And I had hobbies that kept my hands dirty or my hands active and my mind active. But one of those first endeavors in semi-retirement was pottery, ceramics.

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And I quickly realized that when you start making glazes, it's all chemistry. Everything that goes

into a glaze is on the periodic table of elements. Then I started farming and realized, "Wow! Chemistry plays a big role in that as well." So, I have become self-taught again in a lot of those aspects. And that's one of the neat things about agriculture as well: being that it is a science, being that food production is so vitally important to our survival, there's a lot of research. Every state has at least one if not multiple land-grant universities where they study agriculture, they have their state extension service that's linked to the universities, and that sole role is to get new information and educate farmers in best practices and production and everything like that.

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So, education is interesting. I think, with me certainly, some people say, "Oh, you can't live with regrets," and I'm like, "I don't know if I buy that." If I had it to do over again, I probably would have chosen my college and my path in college a little differently, but I also might not be where I am now had I done that and had those other life experiences.

Sarah Rodriguez: That makes sense. So, you came here to live on the farm, and you said you started farming after school?

John Bryant: Correct.

Sarah Rodriguez: How long were you doing that before you switched to your corporate work?

John Bryant: About probably three years, maybe four years, somewhere in that time frame, so not a really long time.

Sarah Rodriguez: Do you remember kind of what it was like those first few years learning,

what that process was like?

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John Bryant: Yeah. Growing up, from the time I was a very small child, whenever we were here, which was pretty frequently—here at the farm—I was with the farmers, with the folks driving tractors, tilling the land. As I got older, I was driving a tractor, or driving a grain truck or a seed truck, things like that. And that was back in the day when—well, I think some farms still do this, is I think I was driving a truck I probably shouldn't have been driving when I was about 12 or 13 years old, but also it was a much more rural area than even it still is.

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But I think that experience growing up, there wasn't a huge dramatic transition to when I was farming full-time after college and looking at it as, this is what I want to do. This is going to be my career. I'm going to take over the farm from my uncle and proceed forward. But there were certainly aspects that I had not been involved with which is where you get into seed purchasing, inputs, planning, equipment purchases, things like that that were certainly the business end that I had no real exposure to. You know, doing a payroll and things like that. So, that certainly was a learning curve with those aspects of it.

Sarah Rodriguez: And then what kind of work did you go into once you started doing corporate work?

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John Bryant: I moved to Mississippi following a woman—the classic story—and that

woman ended up being my first wife. But she went to Mississippi to attend law school, so that's why we were there for three years and knew that we were there for law school in all likelihood—we made wonderful friends and had a great experience, but ultimately knew we were going to return to Richmond to pursue our careers. So, I was essentially leaving the farm to go somewhere and find a job. And this was back in the day where it was pre-Internet, and pre-online-job-searches, and pre—and see, I have an account but I can't remember what it's called. The thing that everybody has, the networking where you update—

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Sarah Rodriguez: LinkedIn?

John Bryant: LinkedIn, yes! I think I actually still have a LinkedIn account. So, it was pre all of that, so it was open up the Sunday newspaper and look for a job. And there was a hospital in the area hiring for a recruiter to hire people, and I was like, "You know, I kind of have some experience with employees and that sort of thing," so I went and interviewed and got the job. And I kind of started interviewing people to work in a hospital, and I enjoyed it because I enjoy talking to people. I also tend to be very competitive, and in hiring you have to fill openings timely, and depending on the economy there may be a lot of people looking for work, but not many jobs, or there may not be many people looking for work, and a lot of jobs; and the pressure is still on to fill those positions.

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And being that my partner was pretty much tied up with a lot of hours going to law school, I had a lot of time in a new place where I started to meet some people, but I didn't have the same

distractions, so I could really focus on work, is what I did, and I became good at it and successful. So then, that natural progression when we left Mississippi was, "Okay, I've got three years doing this work. Let's look for the same work but with a company in Richmond." I had a friend that I'd known from college that worked at Circuit City, a now-defunct electronics retailer that was a Fortune 500 company and nationwide.

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So, I'm like, "That's a good company. It's a big company. It's growing. Let's see if we can get a job with them." And I did, and then I started managing other recruiters. That was during one of those periods where there was a lot of jobs available, a lot of companies growing, but not a lot of people. Unemployment was low, so there were other opportunities, and I went to work for a company here in Richmond in the financial services and very quickly realized that the margins of profitability are much higher in the financial sector than they are in the retail sector. And not that the salary, there was differential, but the perks that go along with it were huge, so I stayed in the financial sector for the rest of my career and evolved from me directly hiring people, to managing folks who were doing the hiring, but then shifted into a lot of...

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Now I'm blanking. What is the term we used? Well, doing labor planning was one part of it—figuring out if we grow the business here, how many employees do we need? And then compensation was the other part of it. So, I kind of got into the analytics of it and started doing executive compensation and some of those different things.

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The executive compensation part was interesting because it was amazing, but then it also became souring when I started to learn and manage and put together salary packages that involved deferred compensation, country club membership, and all of these things that executives got, and started to see the disparity there especially when we were also part of labor planning was dealing with layoffs. I was like, "Well wait a minute. This isn't very equitable here, what's going on?" And then also managing layoffs where you see—because every company I've ever worked for, when there were times they were laying off, they were laying off certain sectors of the business but growing other sectors, which is certainly capitalism and the way businesses grow, but there also wasn't a lot of effort to retain employees.

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And layoffs are a mode to get rid of people you want to get rid of: poor performers, or people who don't fit the culture, and things like that. So, that was part of that progression, I think, where I was starting to become a little disenchanted. I was never 100 percent satisfied because I wasn't doing what I needed to do for me as a person. It was just literally a job. So then I started my own business, which was actually an insurance brokerage, which tied to my HR background because I was doing primarily the employee benefit side of it, so health insurance, disability, life insurance, even a little bit of 401(k) planning and things like that.

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But working with typically much smaller employers, anywhere from 10 to maybe 500 at the bigger end of it, but a lot of those small- to mid-size companies, which was enjoyable, and starting my own business, also meeting other entrepreneurs that had stayed, because that's who I

was often working with on the benefit packages. And then, again, I picked another industry that got a little disheartening, starting to see and learn first-hand how bad many employee benefit plans are and that health insurance companies were raising their rates which certainly caused financial hardship for employers. So, their first reaction was, “We need to keep the money the same, so how can we cut the benefits to make the money work?"

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And you’re like, “Well, higher deductibles, higher copays, higher"—and this was a little bit pre-Obamacare. And then I was certainly involved still in that business during the shift to the Affordable Care Act, but it wasn’t long after that, and it wasn’t certainly due to that. It really didn’t change the insurance brokerage business that much. But I was fortunate that I had gotten a lot of accounts, I had a steady stream of income, I had some employees, and I decided, “I’m going to do pottery.” I took a class, and that class became a passion, and then it became obsessive, which I tend to sometimes get hyper-focused on things.

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And then it was through starting to sell pottery, and one of the outlets was at a farmers market. And then that farm-market manager who I got to know very well, she had come out to the farm where I was not living at the time but still was out here often, and she was like, “How do you have all this land and you’re not farming?” And I was like, “Yeah, you know, I had been there done that. I’m at a different place in my life.” And she stayed on that for about a year, and she a couple times said, which I naively believed, she’s like, “And those farmers at the markets, they’re making bank!” Well, that was the first untruth, ’cause there is no farmer, I think,

anywhere, that I know anyway, that "making a lot of money" [laughs] and "farming" are two things you use in the same sentence.

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Sarah Rodriguez: That's funny. As you were doing these other things with work, did you continue dabbling into farming, gardening? Or did you totally take a break?

John Bryant: Yes and no. There were periods where I had the opportunity to do a little bit of gardening. I think I always grew some herbs. I can say my house in Richmond was well landscaped. For projects we dug a big fish pond, a little waterfall and stuff. A beautiful place to sit out. But I think I'm one of those people who needs to do something. That's the central theme. And actually what I've learned is I like to do physical work. I like to be mentally challenged. I like to be an entrepreneur.

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I like to be a business owner. And I do not mind sweating, and I do not mind getting my hand dirty. So, throughout my life those were always there, and I incorporated those tasks in different ways. Sometimes it was being competitive, setting a goal, and exceeding that goal in a corporate setting. Sometimes it was I could have gone to Lowe's and bought a little plastic cutout mold and dug it in the ground as a fish pond, but I was like, "No, I can do this better. I'm going to dig the hole and I'm going to look," 'cause now we were in the Internet age, "I'm going to look online and see what they have for pond liners and roll rubber rolls," essentially.

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And I can mold, and I can dig and shape and make my own design of a fish pond, design the waterfall, install the pump, and do all that stuff. And that's that labor that I like. That's where I'm going to work at a corporate job, and I'm like, "Maybe I could build a business doing fish ponds." I probably would have made more money than farming [laughs] because people will pay a lot for a fish pond. Most of us don't want to pay much for our food, or at least the actual value that it often costs to produce and benefit the farmer part of it. So yeah, I think there was a lot of that there. And it's why, even though I resisted Karen a little bit, the farmers-market manager, it wasn't necessarily a hard sell.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me a bit about that transition too? Did you start full-time farming right away? Did you slowly get into it?

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John Bryant: Well, we didn't start with 50 acres which is what we currently grow on. And we've been fortunate; the business has grown. Next year we're going to pick up an additional 12 acres for vegetable production. But if you're listening to this, you've probably guessed, "He's a little bit compulsive and competitive." So, I didn't start with a little garden and growing one or two or ten things. I was like, "If I'm gonna farm, I need to be able to do a farmers market and sell this stuff or set up a farm stand here." So, I had two—as I mentioned, my grandfather who was an avid gardener, he had several garden plots, and over the years we had basically let 'em grow back in grass, so we had to till the soil and get it prepared again, but I essentially had two half-acre fields.

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So, when we started it was one acre, which for a market farm—that term “market farm"—is not uncommon. An acre to three acres, sometimes as small as a quarter acre, sometimes five acres or so. It just depends. What it depends primarily on is how much land does a person have access to. That’s a huge limiting factor for farmers, particularly folks who grow produce on a small scale in the market farm kind of segment.

Sarah Rodriguez: Had the land continued to be farmed from when your grandparents owned it up until when you started taking over?

John Bryant: Yes. Yeah, as I’d mentioned, my grandfather passed away right before I got out of college, and then I came into the operation with my great-uncle Edmond.

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But then three or four years later was when he passed away, so then we rented the farm. It was primarily row crop. We had wound down the hog business as my uncle Ed had aged out. And we still had a few hogs when he passed away, but we essentially liquidated that part of the business. And then being a farming community, it was going to be other farmers we knew that basically submit bids on the property to be able to rent it, to pay a rental fee to farm the property. And that’s still much of this farm. The total acreage is about 163 arable acres of farmland. I farm about 50, and the balance is still farmed by the son of the person we rented it to back in whatever that was, ’98 or ’97, somewhere in that time frame.

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But two brothers now farm the property and pretty much grow exclusively corn and soybeans on

a rotation.

Sarah Rodriguez: Could you tell me when you came across the idea of regenerative agriculture? Do you identify with that word? What does that word mean to you in terms of your practice?

John Bryant: What's interesting is when I first started—I'm not sure—at least in my circle and my knowledge base, the term "regenerative" was there. That's been something really that we've heard more of in the last three to five-ish years, and more so each year as we go forward.

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But never wanting to necessarily take the easy route, when I first started I was going to grow only heirloom vegetables and buy heirloom seeds and blah blah blah blah blah. And I was going to farm organically and move towards organic certification. We had some success, but there's a big learning curve. And there's also, as many farmers will say—and hybrids have been around for years—hybrid seed—I mean years and years. In fact, there's a lot of hybrid seed that is considered heirloom because there's a lot of definition around heirloom too.

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But I realized there is a reason that people hybridized seeds and plants, because—and it's what we still do today—we're looking to improve them. And one way, not only improve flavor which we think about, but also to improve their disease resistance. If we are growing one cucumber that just naturally, for whatever reason, we notice that powdery mildew or anthracnose doesn't harm

as much, still will produce fruit even though the plant is infected, and then we've got another variety that maybe yields more but it gets decimated by those diseases, maybe if we cross them we can come up with something a little bit better. So, that transition kind of changed, saying like, "Okay, let's keep organic, but let's look at some not-just-open-pollinated heirloom varieties, and go from there."

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And I think that is something that's not only true with me, but agriculture, and it goes back to when I mentioned the extension service at the land-grant universities: as farmers we are constantly learning. When you think you know it all, you don't know anything. I almost used a different word for that. But you get stuck. And one of the things that I've learned from a lot of fellow farmers in my area is that we have to keep learning. There are a lot of resources out there for us to take advantage of, not only online but in person. There are a ton of resources available to farmers that are specifically designed to get information to farmers to make them better, and that's where a lot with regenerative agriculture.

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One of the tenets of regenerative agriculture is to improve soil quality, and honestly I don't know a single farmer—that's not exclusive to every farmer in the world—but I don't personally know a farmer who is not interested in improving their soil. And it doesn't matter how they farm, whether they are 100 percent organic, whether they're using compost, cover crops, whatever it may be. Every farmer, whatever their practice is, they want to see their land improve. They care about it. Whether it's their home farm that they own, property they own, or it is property they

lease, they want to improve it and are willing to learn.

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Like these crop fields out here: in my memory, we really shifted heavily to no-till on our row-crop land in at least like ’82, ’83, and a lot of that was allowed because technology. We started to get planters that could cut through the residue. Love it or hate it: Roundup, glyphosate. The reason farmers could start to no-till was because they could spray in the spring and kill the weeds, which tillage does. So, to replace tillage they needed something, a herbicide, that could kill weeds. They needed a planter that could cut through all the residue that’s left on the soil surface.

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People smarter than me can argue both sides and make convincing arguments of, “Should we go back to tillage? Should we stay with no-till?” But what allowed no-till to start were burndown herbicides like Roundup, which is still much of the practice today. Now, technology is still moving forward. Now we are starting to see laser-guided self-propelled vehicles going across fields that, with AI cameras, can identify the weed from the intended crop and zap the weed and kill it.

Sarah Rodriguez: Wow!

John Bryant: So, that’s pretty impressive technology. The hard part for a farmer with technology is it’s expensive.

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As a business owner, any business owner, you put pencil to paper and you have to figure out, "What's my return going to be? Does it make sense?" And typically, over time, like with technology across all sectors, it does start to make financial sense and it starts to get adapted. It's just oftentimes a slow process. One of the things we are extremely proud of is in 2023 we received an award for a clean-water farm in Virginia. It starts off that we were awarded it for our district, but then by the district award we went to the state level which is in Virginia broken up by the river drainage basins, so for us it's the James River watershed.

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And we won! And I'm like, "How?" [laughs] And I know we do a lot. We listen to a lot of people who tell us a lot of great things to do, and we implement them. We get help implementing them. But there's a lot of farmers doing a lot of stuff, so in some ways I'm dumbfounded. I am definitely humbled because there are a lot of great farmers out there doing what we're doing. We received the recognition, but we're exceedingly proud of it. From the vegetable side of it, it's an interesting challenge. Some of the other key components to regenerative agriculture are cover cropping and crop rotation, which are implemented by us. We use those.

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Crop rotation is the number one defense we have against insect and soil-borne disease pressure. If we do not rotate our crops, if we plant a cucurbit, cucumbers, squash, melons, plants in that family in the same field even two years in a row, that second year we will see unbelievable disease pressure with fungal bacterial diseases. If we rotate, we do not see that pressure, which means we don't need to take some sort of mitigating action, whether it's an organic chemical,

whether it's a synthetic chemical, whether it is losing the crop, whatever it might be.

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Crop rotation is huge. Insect pressure—the plants in the brassica family: your kales, collards, broccoli, broccolini, cabbages, those sorts of things—one of our biggest pests is, and it comes in different forms, the white caterpillar moths which then lay eggs, which the larva can attack the roots, which then become a caterpillar which eat the leaves. So, [laughs] it's one pest three different ways and three different timing and areas that it affects. But if we manage our crop rotation, we can almost eliminate that. Or we get to the point where when we start to feel that insect pressure, the crop is far enough along that it's not going to hurt it, that we're not going to have an economic loss because of the insect pressure. And then because we move it, the larva that's in the ground can't figure out where it is next year or the next growing season.

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And then cover crop. We've always done cover crop no matter the scale—when we were one acre or now that we're 50 acres—but as we grow and as I've talked to other farmers that are our model farm, our use of cover crops increases dramatically. And part of the reason is one of the first and foremost things a cover crop does is it protects your soil from erosion, whether it's water erosion or wind erosion, you have something growing on it that's growing how you want it to grow, and you've seeded it at the populations that you want to get a stand that's thick enough, dense enough to protect your soil. The roots lock the soil in place; huge benefit right there, if nothing else.

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But the cover crops we plant—which we even got information on new cover crops or suggested blends this year from our soil and water district colonial—we get a nutrient credit from our cover crops. For example, if we plant Australian winter pea or some of the vetches that grow during the winter, they're also legumes, so they pull nitrogen magically out of the air—it's actually not magic, it's science—but they pull nitrogen from the air. They also pull it from the soil. They bind it and tie it up either in their root nodes or in the plant itself. It's sequestered. It's not going anywhere. It's not going in our water; it's not going in the atmosphere.

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When we till and turn that cover crop back into the ground and it starts to compost, it releases that nitrogen back. That's where the folks smarter than me at the universities—the grads and postgrads and doctorates—they know, they figured out exactly based on our seeding rate, based on the growth stage that we terminate the crop, we're going to get X amount of mass which is going to contain 40 pounds per acre of nitrogen, let's say. Well, if the next crop is cucumbers and we need 90 to 120 pounds of nitrogen per acre for that crop to produce, we've already got 40. So now our input of nitrogen, no matter what form it is, whether it is from manure, an organic form, blood meal, whatever it might be, whether it's a synthetic form, we're putting less in the soil 'cause we've gotten a credit from the cover crop.

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And that ties in—there's a lot of acronymy stuff, but we have a nutrient management plan that we have updated by a soil scientist every year, and we show him our rotations, what's going in those fields, and they make recommendations for our fertilization. The other thing that's

important—and the reason I say, "every farmer I know," and I would say most farmers—if you can plant a cover crop, protect your soil, increase the soil health, and get a nutrient credit, that is less money you have to spend on the nutrients.

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And farmers, if nothing else, we watch our bottom line. And if I can do this to save money here and it happens to benefit, that's a win. Even farmers who are like—and I don't know any—but if a farmer is like, "I don't care about the environment, screw it," they care about the money 'cause they wouldn't be in business if they didn't. So, there's those benefits.

Sarah Rodriguez: How often do you do cover crops on different plots of land?

John Bryant: Mother Nature plays a role in this with timing. But what I like to say that I heard from an old multi-generation or farmer—and this guy didn't have a corporate life. He farmed from the time he was a kid until the time he retired. He was educated at one of our land grant universities here in Virginia, Virginia State University.

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He was an extension agent and a farmer, grew produce, lots of things. And he said—we used to use the term "fallowing" land where we would let it rest. Well, that term "fallowing" typically meant you just didn't do anything, you just let it sit there; and if you let it sit there, weeds are going to grow. What we have learned is if you plant something intended, you can not only get benefits from it, but one of the benefits is weed control. So, what Cliff said was, "We are always growing something on our land, and if it's not something we can harvest, it's something that is

going to benefit the land and help us and make our lives easier."

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So, when we pull a crop out, when we've got a field of tomatoes that that particular secession is done, we try and pull that crop out as quickly as possible, get the land turned over. And if it's going to be—say this is August first and we're not going to plant a crop until the end of September, that's 60-ish days, give or take—buckwheat will reach maturity and flower in 45 days. Buckwheat, one of the most prized flowers for pollinators, for honey bees. So, not only are we benefiting our pollinators which we need. We need pollinators to grow produce; much of our produce relies on bees or other pollinators. So, we're keeping them healthy, and fat, and happy, and all that good stuff, but we're also growing something that's going to give us some green manure.

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So, we've got the biomass that's going to go back into the soil, and compost that's going to help with water retention, soil tilth, and a myriad of things, but also that crop is probably going to give us back to that nutrient credit as well. So really, farming is one of those, if it rains for two weeks and we can't get on the ground, there's not much we can do; but, as quickly as possible, we want to turn over and start growing something else on that ground whether it's a crop intended for a harvest or it's going to be a cover crop. And then that's where we get into a lot of specific types, because there's our cover crops that we use primarily in the warm season, and then there's the cover crops that we use in the cold season over the winter.

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Sarah Rodriguez: What are some other regenerative practices y'all do at Old Tavern Farm, or practices that could be seen as regenerative now?

John Bryant: One of the biggest things, and I kind of alluded to it a little bit, is no-till. Vegetable farming and no-till, it's difficult to marry those practices.

Sarah Rodriguez: Why is that?

John Bryant: Because the crop residue that's left behind from the previous crop, we don't necessarily have the equipment to plant behind it. And because so many of our plants are bedded with the use of what we call "plastic mulch" where you see the rows that are built up and then covered in black or white, or even red or green plastic.

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Barring the fact that it's plastic, which is not great, there are also benefits to it because it offers weed suppression, it conserves water, it provides a warmer or cooler soil which benefits the plant. When you're using plastic, you are almost 100 percent of the time using drip irrigation, which not only allows us to put the water right to the roots of the plant and it uses a fraction of the water that would be needed for overhead irrigation, we can also put our nutrients in the irrigation water. And then we're actually micromanaging our nutrients, so we're only putting the nutrient that the plant can uptake because we can do it so frequently.

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So, we're really basically doing a prescription for what does the plant need, and then we can get into soil testing, but we can also do tissue testing to tell us exactly what the plant needs and to be

able to provide it the nutrients that it needs. But those practices, in order to build that row, we can't have a lot of trash. We need to be able to go in and till it to make that row. Even if we're doing bare-dirt rows, like for our carrots for instance, we need a clean seed bed. Carrot seeds are so small that they're barely covered with soil, so you need a more prepared seed bed. So, growing vegetables and no-till, it is a very hard practice to do. Now, there are certain crops that lend themselves to it.

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We grow a lot of pumpkins, and we are moving towards no-till with our pumpkins. And there's tremendous benefits because instead of using plastic we can grow rye, so we've got a cover crop growing. We can get a nutrient benefit from it. We can actually let that rye grow taller than we normally would, because then we're going to roll it or crimp it and lay it down, and because there's so much mass it literally forms a mat that suppresses the weeds and retains water. And we can use the same planter that the row-crop farmers use to plant soybeans and corn no-till that was specifically designed for that function, because it will cut through that residue and plant those pumpkin seeds. So, there are areas where no-till is very much something that we are doing, can do, and want to expand on doing.

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There's other crops where we can utilize it. There is no doubt that no-till offers greater benefits to the land than tillage does. It's just night and day. There's no question to it. The technology is not there. I get on my high horse sometimes when—the great thing about YouTube, Instagram, and all those other social media is you see a million different people posting stuff to it, and

whether it's true or not is left to the viewer if you even question it and decide to do some research. But I love when I see the no-till or no-dig farmers in their permanent beds with a broadfork tilling the land, and they're like, "No, we're no-till."

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They're just using a tool that they step on and use physical force, where at a larger scale it's a tractor and a disc, or a chisel plow, or something like that; it's the exact same thing. Basically if you disturb the soil surface, you're not no-till. So, it's a pet peeve, and it's a controversial thing, and it gets into marketing, which marketing can be truthful or it can be completely untruthful. And if you just think about putting a seed in the ground, if you were to go out, say, to your lawn that might this time of year be covered in leaves, and I'm going to plant this seed, you're probably going to move the leaves.

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And you're probably going to dig around in a little hole of the soil and remove the grass, and then you're going to kind of soften that soil up a little bit, and then you're going to put your seed in. That's tillage. People think about a big tractor pulling a big implement turning soil over. Yeah, that's tillage, but so is the other stuff. It's just scale that you're looking at. And I think that's where it'll be very interesting to see, as the future progresses, the technology that comes forward that allows us to do things differently. I've got a friend who is an executive with one of the larger paper manufacturers, paper mills, and they're developing a biodegradable plastic—I think they call it a polymer mulch.

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And they are a paper company, so it is paper based, but it also has a polymer applied to it, so it's not a true—there are plastics in it, essentially. But it is supposed to be truly biodegradable. And there's been some biodegradable mulch products on the market for several years, and the feedback has always been—and this is what I was quizzing Ron about, the executive—I'm like, "Well, some of the people who have used the current biodegradable are like, 'Yeah, when I tilled and chopped it all up, it's still in my land five, six years. It might biodegrade at some point, but it hadn't yet.'" And then the other problem was that it started to break down before the growing season was finished, and come apart, and then it wasn't effective. It wasn't doing the job that it was intended to do.

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So, it'll be interesting to see this new product. The only other part of it is, and like I asked Ron, because we can buy a 4,000 foot roll of plastic mulch for $150, $160—somewhere around there, depends on pricing—but this new mulch is going to be more expensive. So, it's something new, we don't know if it works or doesn't work, and you're asking me to pay more money for it than something that we currently use, we're set up to use. And that's a dilemma. Especially, like, I hate the plastics industry. Sorry, but I can't stand them. They lied to us. They made up recycling. I could go on about that for hours. But that's the other thing, the economics of it are hard. We don't make much money. Our margins are next to nothing.

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We have to watch every single penny, and when we look at an alternative to materials we currently use that are supposed to be better—and they may well be—it's also a cost concern.

That becomes a big issue. But yeah, I definitely personally think that no-till for more crops is on the horizon, that there's going to be the technology there for us to implement more no-till practices.

Sarah Rodriguez: Can you, just in your memory, describe any major challenges or major successes that you've had in implementing more regenerative practices on the farm?

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John Bryant: Challenges—I'm kind of throwing out there all the farmers I know—every farmer I've talked to were like, "Please just let 2024 end and let us have another shot." Because every year is different, and most of us are like, "It's not going to be as bad as '24." Because it's been a hard year. We're in another period, and it's the fall. We don't have moisture issues in the fall in central Virginia. It hadn't rained in over 30 days, and it's 83, 84 degrees every day right now. But this year—and I said it's our second dry period—we didn't have rain for about six weeks, any appreciable rain in June which is normally a wet month, and then that bled into July. And then we had a couple decent weeks in July, and then we started to get three to five inches of rain in one- to two-hour periods every three days.

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And we won that clean water; we were awarded the Clean Water Farm. A lot of it is for our water management. We guttered all of our buildings. We capture the rain water, so we just have giant 3,000 gallon cisterns to capture water off of our buildings. We can capture over 15,000 gallons of water at any given time, and they're all connected, and we use it to irrigate with. So, we're not pulling—we do have a well, we do pull groundwater, but we can mitigate the amount

we have to use electricity and pull from the aquifer, and we reduce the amount of water hitting the ground for runoff. But when we get three to five inches of rain in an hour, erosion is an issue. No matter what we're doing—putting up erosion control measures, bales, fencing, cover crops, crops on the field—we still have erosion.

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I guess the only benefit from that is it pointed out very clearly the areas we need to focus on and improve, but that's probably been one of our bigger challenges this year was water, excess water. One of the ways we are mitigating it—and I'm fortunate, and I had nothing to do with it because this farm was in my family, and we have a lot of land to expand and to move around on—but one of the areas that we knew was a little bit problematic but we had been able to mitigate it with the way we farmed, and the way we planned our fields, and planting on contours to reduce erosion in that area.

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But a) because I do not think that this year was an anomaly. Every year is still going to be different, but I think our rain events are going to continue to be more extreme than more the gentle one inch of rain or half inch of rain during the summer months. But we're actually going to redesign two of our fields, and that area of drainage we're not going to farm anymore. We're going to put it in a permanent cover crop. We're going to establish a crop with substantial root mass and substantial plant matter above the ground that is part of that design. And what I mean is it's going to be an area between two fields, so we'll still have traffic on it, you know, vehicles during harvesting, tractors. It'll essentially be where tractors turn around: they're coming out of

the field, they turn around and go back into the field. But that's easy enough.

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There's covers—white clover is one that's great—that stands up to high traffic. Whether it's foot traffic or vehicle traffic, it regenerates quickly. We'll probably put some fescue in there, things like that. Whatever nutrient benefit we're getting is not going to matter because we're not going to farm it anymore. That said, clover is going to capture nitrogen, so it's going to prevent leaching or volatilization into the air, but there'll be crops in there that also help pollinators. That's one we try and do. In our border areas around fields we always want to plant something that's attracting pollinators because we need them. Not every crop requires pollination; they either self-pollinate or pollination is not a factor in what we harvest.

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But the more pollinators we have on this farm, the better, all the way around. A lot of the pollinators are also predator insects that kill the insects that we don't want, which is a good thing. So, I think that managing water was a challenge this year more than any other year, like taking that area out of production. And this is where we get technical assistance, so experts who—you know, I can look at it and I can say, "This is where the water goes. This is where I think we ought to put a water retention basin." But somebody with way more knowledge, education, and experience than me will come out and be like, "Actually you ought to put it right here, and you ought to make it this big," and they'll do the technical design of it, and then we'll put it in.

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But that's the other thing, is we have a lot of water-control systems through the farm to direct water where we want it, where we don't want it, to capture it. But we also, I think the next step—and it's something we've been talking with not only the Colonial Soil and Water Conservation, who's our district conservation from the state level, but also with the NRCS, which is part of the USDA, on some of those technical aspects. So, it's hard to deal with this year, it's probably going to be hard to deal with going forward, but also the difficulty showed us exactly what our shortfalls were and how to improve it or hopefully improve it.

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And then success... I think a big thing when we were smaller, we used a—I should say it this way: we use way more compost now than we ever used on one acre, but 100 percent of that one acre received compost. When you get to 50 acres, there's no effective way to spread that much compost. Or even with the amount of compost that we produce every year and manufacture ourselves, it would not be enough to do that. So, we're very crop specific. A good example is asparagus. We have about an acre in production across two fields, and the benefits are huge from compost on asparagus, so compost gets put on asparagus every year. So, we kind of judiciously use that throughout the farm on the crops that will benefit most, and take the time and the labor necessary to apply it.

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But probably the knowledge and use of cover crops and the blends that we're now using, it is rare that any field does not have a blend of at least two different crops, but really it's three to five different seeds that go into that blend. We're learning things like mustards have certain chemical

properties in them that are natural fungicides when they're turned back into the soil, so that's one of our credits. With that, now you're looking at, "Okay, I'm suppressing the bacteria in the soil that we don't want."

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The nutrient credits from the cover crops that we spoke about. The other is there's a lot of biologicals that have come about, which—we transplant almost all of our crops, so when we plant kale, we're not very often putting a seed in the ground, we're actually putting a plant in the ground. And when we do that, part of the transplant process is to fill that little hole with water. And what we're doing now is there's a lot of different biological cocktails of good bacteria, enzymes, carbon, and things like that that really benefit not only the plant, but the soil, and increase our good bacterial loads.

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Because there's so many—just like our gut health, we're learning that good bacteria is a really good thing. We don't want sterile soil. And that goes back to one of the huge things with no-till is that bacteria is there. When you till it and you introduce air or oxygen into it, it degrades a lot of that bacteria, so part of the mitigation is to put bacteria back in. But that's also where we're learning, and even with tillage, you kind of have different levels. You have no-till, and then you have true conventional tillage: plowing, deep tillage, completely inverting the soil profile, but you also have a whole array of what is the term "vertical tillage," whereas horizontal tillage smears. That's like the old fashioned plow.

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So, you invert the entire soil profile to whatever depth plow shares you have, but as by nature of it, it creates a layer of compaction which prevents the roots from going as deep as they want, it creates a hard layer that water can't infiltrate, so it generally messes things up. But now the equipment manufacturers along with the universities, they're trialing different things and they're learning that we can actually do the tillage that we need, but we can do it in a manner that doesn't invert the soil. It reduces the amount of oxygen that gets impregnated into the soil. It also doesn't create a hard pan.

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It also specifically, because we're looking at getting what we call a minimum piece of tillage equipment, and based on how we set it up we can leave 80 percent, 60 percent, 50 percent of the crop residue on the soil surface, turn in some so it—well, it's all going to degrade, it's just that if it's turned in the soil it's going to degrade quicker which is a benefit nutrient-wise, organic-matter-wise, but soil health overall-wise, that cover on the surface. Plus any residue on the surface, that also goes the same as a cover crop. That helps with soil erosion, wind erosion. But also a lot of this equipment—and again it goes equipment, i.e. technology—being able to manage and size that residue that we can still plant there. So, those things I think are kind of diverged from cover crop, but it ties into the cover crops and how we're managing them in our tillage practices to not only be able to grow and grow effectively, profitably, and bountifully, but also to improve our soil.

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Which goes back kind of the very first thing we talked about was that the goal is better soil. And

to have better soil, in our soil tests every year we get an analysis of the organic matter because we grow on fine sandy loam is our primary soil profile. It does not hold organic matter well. It drains really well, which is a huge benefit when we have a lot of water. We're not—poor clay farmers. And clay has great benefits 'cause it binds nutrients and organic matter. I mean, you can see clay and buck soils with 15-plus percent organic matter. Our goal is to start approaching five, six, seven percent organic matter. If we can hit those numbers and start sustaining those numbers, that would be a huge, huge benefit to our soil health.

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Sarah Rodriguez: As we're wrapping up, I want to be respectful of your time. Are there any stories or anything we haven't talked about that you particularly want to include or mention?

John Bryant: I'm going to say the one that pops to mind, and it's two stories, but it's about the same person. Herbert Minor, an African American, has worked on this farm his entire life. His father worked here, so he came when he was a small child, but he actually started on payroll when he was 14 years old, and I think Herbert's 83 now, or so.

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How that ties into me: I'd be here visiting, and Saturday morning I'd see Herbert at 7:00 in the morning at the diesel pump filling up a tractor, and I would run out of the house and jump up in his arms and ask him if I could go with him for the day. And we're talking like two- and three-years-old me jumping in his arms. And he would say, "Well, go ask your mother or your grandmother." And I'd run inside, and of course their answer was like, "We'll pack you a lunch," [laughs] 'cause I'd be gone for 10, 12 hours at that point. But that is just a tremendously fond

memory and what this place means to me. And Herbert, when I say he's still farming this today, he works for Eric and Reid Randolph who lease our crop land.

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And as he's gotten older, and as we all get older with health issues, he does less, but for years he planted soybeans. He ran one of the soybean planters and did much of that planting, and always planted this farm when it was in soybeans, or he would be spreading lyme in the fall and things like that. But when we talk about big row-crop equipment, almost all of that equipment now has guidance: GPS tracking, auto-steer, functions where the operator spends their time monitoring the seed population: Are there skips? What's going on with the planter versus where's the tractor headed? Trying to make those perfectly straight rows so your neighbors don't laugh at you with crooked rows. But Herbert, when he started the same soybean field that's out these windows now, he was walking behind a mule, planting one seed one row at a time.

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The things he has seen, I'll never see that in my lifetime, because I always had a tractor with a cab on it. We just got a tractor that has a cab on it for the vegetable operation, but when I was row-crop farming, all the tractors had cabs on them. It wasn't until I started vegetable farming and all I could afford was a tractor with no cab, and they're not necessary for what we do, and they're less expensive. But yeah, Herbert, when he talks about the days when he was a boy and hitching up a mule, getting the equipment, getting them to the field.

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My uncle, before he passed away, he was fond of saying, “They haven’t made a tractor yet,” [pounds table] and he’d slam his fists on the table or whatever surface he was near. He liked to emphasize his points. And he would say, “They haven’t made a tractor yet that knows which way to turn when it gets to the end of the row,” because mules did. You know, they’re doing it all day long. They knew they already planted over here; they turned the right direction. Well, Herbert and I joke that he missed it by about 20 years, because then guidance came along, and now tractors know exactly where to go on the farm. And that technology has vastly improved the functions and yields and effectiveness in row crop, and we’re starting to see more of that already.

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A friend of mine who grows 400 acres of vegetables close to here, he also row crops, so he’s already got some of the equipment, but he uses that same equipment on his vegetables, so he’s planting with guidance and has that technology. It’s hard for a small vegetable farmer to afford. You know, when you get into that scale... Just to give an example: a normal, necessary-size row-crop tractor, just the tractor, is pushing three quarters of $1,000,000. The planter is at $500,000 to even $750,000 depending on the technology you want with it. But the technology is insane. The planters are equipped with AI; they have cameras.

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One of the interesting things with corn planters, they used to put a starter fertilizer that they would dribble the entire length of the row, and even though the seed spacing is every 8 or 10 or 12 inches, well now, through a camera and AI—and AI is because there’s what we call “skips” where the planter didn’t pick up a seed, so it actually doesn’t drop—it knows if the seed drops or

doesn't drop. When it sees the seed drop, it sprays a band one inch before and one inch after the seed. So, if it's eight-inch spacing, instead of spraying eight inches, it's only spraying an inch either side. So, it cut back by three quarters the amount of fertilizer being used. It's just as effective. The technology—immediately 75 percent reduction in that fertilizer going into the ground. Less in the ground, less harm, more money in the farmer's pocket because you're not spending it on that fertilizer.

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I got off a fond memory, but anyway, if you have any other questions, or if that's a good place to wrap up.

Sarah Rodriguez: Yeah, I think so.

John Bryant: Okay.

Sarah Rodriguez: Thank you so much.

John Bryant: You're welcome.

[End]