Canada's Nature Advantage

CASE STUDY

Harvest to Gather

Restoring Natural Value in Ontario's Carolinian Zone

SOUTHERN ONTARIO, CANADA

harvest to gather

DRIVER

On a spring morning in Norfolk County, Cory Van Groningen stands on the edge of a pasture as cattle nose through fresh shoots of grass. The soil beneath their hooves is dark and spongy, fed by years of cover cropping and rotational grazing. Just beyond, a thin line of native oak and tallgrass prairie sways in the breeze - a restoration project Cory began more than a decade ago, aiming to revive the chorus of meadowlarks, bobolinks, woodpeckers, and the pollinators and plants that sustain them in this corner of the Carolinian zone, one of Canada's biodiversity hotspots.

When Cory was growing up, the story of this land was different. Fields were tilled bare, runoff poured into creeks feeding the Great Lakes, and erosion carved gullies into the farm. Like many family farms in Ontario, the Van Groningens were caught in a system that rewarded volume over stewardship, overlooking soil health, biodiversity, and long-term resilience. Supply chains were organized around export and dominated by a handful of powerful buyers. Independent producers who tried to farm differently often found themselves without the infrastructure or market access to make those choices viable. The problem was not only how food was grown, but how it moved - through increasingly concentrated channels that left little room for regenerative values.

"We saw the land getting tired," Cory recalls, "and we knew the way the system worked wasn't giving it a chance to recover."

MECHANISM FOR CHANGE

To change that system, the Van Groningens realized they would need more than better farming practices. They needed to redesign the supply chain itself - investing in processing, distribution, and retail to give regenerative farmers secure markets.

They acquired trusted retail brands like Rowe Farms, known for healthy, high-quality food, invested in their own processing facility for soups, prepared foods, and grass-fed beef, and in 2020 established a distribution hub to keep their stores stocked with in-demand proteins and farm-fresh produce, from artichokes to asparagus. This platform – called Harvest to Gather – brought farming, processing, retail, and ecosystem monitoring under one roof, enabling them to bypass volatile, low-margin commodity systems and create direct relationships with customers.

At the same time, Cory and his brothers began tracking soil carbon, runoff reduction, and habitat restoration on their farms and across a growing network of more than 60 partner farms attracted by secure markets and farmer-to-farmer trust. This monitoring helped the business verify ecological improvements and connect them to long-term financial performance. It also provided evidence that could be communicated to consumers today and leveraged with investors in emerging carbon and biodiversity markets tomorrow.

The Van Groningens used vertical integration to change the economic equation for farmers. By consolidating processing, distribution, and retail, they absorbed major infrastructure costs and ensured predictable, premium demand. Farmers who shifted to pasture-based practices from input-heavy feed systems sharply reduced their own operating costs - eliminating fertilizer, pesticides, feed and equipment leases - allowing the transition to regenerative methods without sacrificing income or taking on new debt.

Those business choices also had to be backed up by changes on the ground.

IN THE MAKING

Day to day, transformation meant reshaping how fields and animals were managed. Holistic planned grazing gave grasses time to recover and allowed ground-nesting birds to survive the harvest. Wetland buffers were planted to capture excess nutrients and sediments before they could wash downstream. Along the margins of pastures, Cory and his team restored patches of oak savanna, bringing back wild lupine and other native plants.

These changes created ripple effects across the landscape. Pastures allowed flowering plants to thrive, feeding bees and butterflies. Wetland buffers reduced nutrient runoff and became feeding grounds for ducks and geese. Restoring oak savanna and tallgrass habitat supported species such as the red-headed woodpecker and eastern meadowlark, both tied to these rare ecosystems. By restoring ecological connectivity across farmland, Harvest to Gather was effectively weaving biodiversity back into working landscapes.

Beyond their own fields, the Van Groningens became a knowledge hub for a wider network of farmers.

Cory and his brothers shared their monitoring tools and production standards, building trust through farmer-to-farmer exchange. Producers compared notes on grazing plans, cover crop mixes, and wetland design. Over time, this grew into a community of practice where ecological insights traveled faster than any top-down directive could have achieved. In this way, Harvest to Gather spread regenerative practices horizontally, knitting together a regional movement grounded in collective knowledge and aligned incentives.

“What’s most powerful here is not just one family farm, but the way they’ve built a network that makes regeneration contagious, pairing investment with farmer training and capacity building,” said Erin Crampton, who has known Cory for decades and works as a consultant alongside investors, farmers and suppliers to enable the sustainable financing of regenerative food systems.

The ecological and economic effects of these shifts soon became visible.

IMPACT

Economically, the business grew into an integrated food platform supporting 150 employees and dozens of partner farms. Harvest to Gather's financial performance has outpaced sector norms: the group has recorded growth well above industry averages, nearly tripling revenues with a double-digit compound annual growth rate far stronger than the 3–6% typical in food retail, thanks largely to lower input costs and higher margins.

Within a few seasons of keeping cattle out of sensitive riparian zones and planting native grasses, Cory saw monarch butterflies return, followed by the bees that pollinate his clover fields. Mallards began nesting in the wetland buffers, and in the evenings he sometimes spotted wood ducks skimming the ponds. Red-headed woodpeckers, long absent, reappeared among the scattered oaks.

What set the model apart was how it linked ecological outcomes to financial results. Harvest to Gather embedded monitoring of soil carbon, water retention, and biodiversity into its operations, giving credibility to what Cory was already seeing in the fields: healthier soils that absorbed more water, lower runoff into the lakes, and habitat returning in surprising abundance.

For investors, these monitoring systems also signal future potential. The same data that builds consumer trust could underpin emerging carbon and biodiversity markets, offering new financial instruments that align capital with ecological restoration.

For Cory, these outcomes confirmed something he knew to be true from watching the land.

LESSONS

“Mother nature knows how to heal itself,” Cory recalls. “You just have to work with it, not against it.” For him, the integration of business and ecology has been the key. Owning processing and retail means that regenerative farmers finally have secure markets.

The Harvest to Gather experience shows that vertical integration can de-risk regenerative agriculture by providing stable outlets for farmers and controlling quality throughout the supply chain. Without secure processing and retail channels, even the most committed regenerative farmers can struggle to reach customers. The model also demonstrates how bioregional processing and distribution can strengthen food resilience by reducing dependence on global supply chains and buffering producers against trade and logistics shocks. It also shows that ecological monitoring is essential to the integrity of the model.

With proof of concept validated, Harvest to Gather now stands as a platform ready to scale again — potentially tripling in size and impact over the next 10 years. Such growth would not only create a competitor on par with premium regional grocery chains, but also multiply ecological restoration: more oak savanna, more wetlands, more corridors for wildlife. For farmers, it means resilience and stable markets. For policymakers, it signals that the right incentives can unlock system-wide benefits. For investors, it offers a tested model of growth aligned with measurable ecological outcomes.

The Van Groningens have little time for advances from suitors like buyout funds or incumbent grocery chains that might acquire their brands but divorce them from the regenerative practices and farmer networks that make them credible. Instead, they are seeking values-aligned partners — impact funds and regenerative finance models that can reinforce ecological and community outcomes rather than strip them away.

Eoin Callan, Managing Director at Bloom Impact Capital, which invests in natural climate solutions, said: “Cory has shown how farmers can rebuild the food system from the ground up - less extractive and more regenerative. We should be doing the same with finance. If capital is to serve the next generation, it has to reward resilience and regeneration, not extraction.”

On certain evenings now, as wild turkeys move through the grass and a coyote traces the fence line, Corey can see the land answering back – a small, steady signal of what’s possible.

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