

My name is Noli Taylor and I'm the Senior Program Director at Island Grown Initiative.

At IGI, our focus is on gardens and farm fields rather than playing fields, but one foundation both have in common is the soil. Something that we're seeing at our farm is the power of regenerative soil practices to turn around degraded, compacted land and make it productive again. We think this lesson has implications for what is possible on our playing fields.

For the past few generations, the dominant cultural thinking has seen soil as something inert—a kind of bucket where you can put in chemicals and fertilizers and get out the plants you want. But soil science has been evolving rapidly in recent years, and now we now know better. Soil is actually relational and alive. In fact the vast majority of terrestrial life on earth lies in the ground beneath our feet. One tablespoon of healthy soil has more living organisms than there are human beings on earth.

Most agricultural soils, just like many playing fields, have been degraded over years of poor soil management. These soils become unable to withstand periods of drought or heavy rainfall, and they become less and less capable of growing healthy, productive plants. Yields decline, topsoil washes away, and the land becomes increasingly barren.

But with careful soil management, we are seeing that people can be drivers of regenerating soil, bringing it back to life and returning productivity to the land, and that this transformation can happen quickly.

On our farm and on regenerative farms all over the world, we are seeing incredible results by implementing good soil stewardship practices.

By decreasing tillage, increasing plant diversity, rejecting synthetic chemicals and fertilizers, and utilizing compost and mulches, the soil structure changes. It becomes more porous and able to absorb water in times of extreme rainfall and also stays resilient in times of drought. Connections between root systems strengthen, soil organic material grows, and the land becomes healthier.

Healthy soils are also able to sequester more carbon below ground, an important tool for tackling climate change, the primary crisis that will impact the lives of our children and grandchildren.

On our farm, we aren't just seeing these changes in the soil itself and in the plants we grow, we're also seeing more life on the land—more pollinators, more birds. The decisions we make about how to manage our working lands have impacts far beyond what we do on the land itself and beyond our property lines.

I was at our farm yesterday, walking around with one of our farmers and a shovel. We stood on one plot that we'd stood on together two years before, when the soil had been completely compacted, a light brown color, and had no structure to it—when you picked

it up it would turn to powdery dust in your hand. When it rained the water would puddle on the surface like concrete.

Standing in that same spot yesterday, after two years of regenerative soil care practices, the soil was dark brown, filled with roots, and crawling with worms. The transformation was just remarkable, and can show us what is possible with land regeneration when we change our practices and care for the soil.

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There is a set of values that binds us all together in this long challenging debate over the playing fields for our student athletes—we all want our kids to have access to healthy, safe fields where they can learn and excel and feel proud in their sports. We know that the way we've been managing our fields so far isn't working, that our students deserve better, and field management needs to change—and that this is a worthy community investment.

How we target that investment is the question before you now: do we invest in plastic or in soil based systems?

If we invest in plastic, we know we're going to have to pay to buy that plastic field, install it, haul away two acres of topsoil, and in 10 years or so figure out how to dispose of that plastic field, pay for that disposal, and then pay for a new plastic field and start that entire process again. We would not only have those financial costs to contend with, we would also pay environmental costs. We would pay in the pollution and fossil fuel usage that goes into manufacturing, shipping, and disposing of the plastic field. We also suffer the loss of the carbon sink, fire break, and water cycle regulation of a healthy soil field, while contending with the heat and plastic pollution emitted through the life of the plastic field.

Alternately, an investment in healthy fields through dedication to soil health is an investment of human time, energy and creativity. We have learned that land that has been poorly treated and run down can come back, and can change quickly, with focused, informed and attentive soil stewardship. This requires people to work with the land, pay attention to nature, and invest in good seed and soil care strategies to keep the fields our children play on safe, green and thriving.

This, to me, is the investment we want to be making as a community—dedicating ourselves to nature-based solutions to the challenges we face. It is the kind of investment our island farming community is moving towards more and more every year, and that we hope other land managers, like our schools and towns, will join.

This is the time to begin the work of nurturing the life in our fields—our playing fields and our farm fields—to build the future we want for our kids. And we can start this work now. We don't have to wait another season to begin tending to the ground beneath our feet.

Thank you for your time.