

Salad chain says a cleaner farming method will offset adding steak to its menu. What is it?

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Salad chain Sweetgreen is adding [steak to its menu](#), an announcement that led to strong reactions online, with customers questioning how that would impact the company's carbon neutral plans.

Founded in 2007 and known as a fast-casual spot serving salads and bowls, Sweetgreen says it will be [carbon neutral](#) by 2027 — meaning it plans to offset its own emissions by putting in place strategies that also remove carbon from the atmosphere.

But beef production is incredibly resource-intensive and a contributor to climate change. It's the [largest agricultural source of greenhouse gases](#) globally, emitting massive amounts of methane into the atmosphere, and requires extensive land use.

Sweetgreen's rationale for the controversial caramelized, garlic-flavored steak menu addition this week includes using [regenerative farming](#). The chain also says carbon offsets are part of its pledge to combat climate change and reduce its [greenhouse gas emissions](#).

A Sweetgreen spokesperson referred request for comment to its [menu expansion details](#).

What is regenerative agriculture?

[Regenerative agriculture](#) means farming and ranching in a way that not only produces food from a landscape, but also sees that landscape improve ecologically, said Jason Rowntree, co-director of the Michigan State University Center for Regenerative Agriculture.

This means "minimizing disturbance, keeping ground covered," Rowntree said, "improving biodiversity below and above ground through

adding animals to your cropping systems or enhancing biology below ground."

Many grocery chains and restaurants are starting to look to regenerative agriculture for animal proteins, grains and fruits and vegetables while meeting climate goals. [Starbucks](#) cited regenerative agriculture as one way it aims to slash its carbon, water use and waste in half by 2030. [Burger King](#) have also dabbled in it.

"It's all in what you do and how you implement it," said Allen Williams, a farmer and founder of agriculture consultancy Understanding Ag. "It allows for the repair, rebuilding and restoration of our ecosystems — and that's critically important if we want to mitigate climate change."

Some experts question whether regenerative agriculture can offset all emissions from [beef production](#) in particular.

What are carbon offsets?

Companies, including those in dining, also buy [carbon offsets](#). They purchase "credits," as part of a voluntary and unregulated market for projects that claim to absorb carbon dioxide that otherwise would've happened.

These offsets are an effort to cancel out one's own carbon dioxide pollution. But it isn't an exact science.

Though companies including Sweetgreen should be applauded for their efforts, "We all know that the offsets schemes over the last few years have been really problematic, to say the least," said Jonathan Foley, executive director of climate nonprofit Project Drawdown.

What can be done instead?

Even if a chain employs productive regenerative agriculture and offsets, experts say its use of plastic, paper or non-renewable energy could negate those practices.

So the priority should be focusing on a restaurant chain's whole carbon footprint, fostering and improving landscapes that are more resilient for food security and improving water cycling, experts say.

"At the end of the day," Rowntree said, "I think these challenges we're going to see with aridity, with heightened intensity of rain events followed by longer periods of drought are probably agriculture's biggest challenge moving forward."

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