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# A New Podcast Talks Crops

## “Field Work” aims to help farmers navigate the growing pains of transitioning to sustainable practices

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By Erin Brereton

Zach Johnson and Mitchell Hora hadn't met before American Public Media, a public radio organization, paired them as hosts of “Field Work,” a new podcast about sustainable farming.

Chances are, though, some listeners were probably familiar with both commercial row-crop farmers.

In the past few years, Zach, a fifth-generation farmer based in Minnesota, has shared videos about planting, machine maintenance, and other topics on his MN Millennial Farmer YouTube channel, amassing more than 300,000 subscribers.

Mitchell, who's also from a family of farmers, lives in Southeast Iowa and had been co-hosting a separate soil health podcast, all while serving as CEO and president of agricultural consulting company Continuum Ag.

In “Field Work,” Zach and Mitchell discuss the benefits and challenges of sustainable farming practices, drawing on their own experiences as well as interviews with experts ranging from small farm owners to scientists to the chief sustainability officer of General Mills.

Shortly after “Field Work” wrapped up its first season in August, Out Here spoke with Zach, Mitchell, and producer Annie Baxter about the inspiration for the podcast and why there's a need for honest conversation around sustainable agriculture.

### Q&A with ‘Field Work’

**Out Here: What was the inspiration for a sustainable farming podcast?**

**Mitchell:** A lot of farmers are interested in implementing more sustainable practices, but there aren't a lot of people with tons of experience that are right in their neighborhood. For the most part, it's all very new. Getting to the really important nitty-gritty conversation—something people can really learn from—is a critical component.

**OH: What's the main focus of the show? What are listeners getting from “Field World” that they aren't getting anywhere else?**

**Mitchell:** Most of the farmers right now are starting from ground zero. We've got to have a conversation not only about the final picture, but issues and road bumps along the way.

**Annie:** We didn't want this to be a sales pitch for sustainable farming. We wanted it to be a realistic depiction of the cost of changing things that are working well for you.

The feedback we got from our first focus group is farmers spend a lot of time in solitude; it's just them doing it on their own. “Field Work” makes you feel like you have a friend in the same boat—a companion to help walk you through it.

Cover crops are legumes, grasses, and other crops planted in the same field after the cash crop has been harvested.

Cover crops are used primarily to improve soil health, slow down erosion, and mitigate pests, weeds, and disease.

While cover crops have proven to increase cash crop yield in the long term, it's not without its challenges. In its first season, “Field Work” dedicated three separate episodes to cover crops.

**OH: You've discussed cover crops extensively on your show. What type of challenges do farmers hoping to implement the process face?**

**Zach:** The biggest thing for me is the logistics of it. I need to figure out what the timing is supposed to be and find machinery to do it; and I either need to hire someone to run it and get it done, or take a tractor of mine off something that's already an important piece of my farm.

**Mitchell:** The first year with cover crops [during a trial], it cost us \$100 an acre. If the costs are for 800 to 200,000 acres, you can lose \$100,000 really quick. That's a big economic risk for a farmer to jump into.

**OH: If a farmer can overcome those challenges, what kind of benefits can planting cover crops, and other sustainable practices, potentially provide?**

**Mitchell:** It all has to go down to the economics of it. What have you done? Why did an issue happen You have to tell that story with quantitative and qualitative data.

After more years of biological activity, I'm cycling nutrients better and, in terms of water quality, allowing my soil to function properly and efficiently. I'll also see gains in a couple of years.

**Zach:** Long-term, there are health benefits. The idea is along the lines of eating right and exercising: Soil is healthy in the same way we try to keep our body healthy. For us, as a farm, if we take everything from the soil for short-term profit, it won't be sustainable long-term. Whether people are trying to make these changes because they care about water or want to improve the economics of their farm and be more profitable as a result, it's all the same to us.

Learn more about “Field Work” and listen to the first season on the podcast's website.

Erin Brereton has been writing about travel, business, and other topics for magazines, newspapers, and other publications for more than 20 years.

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