



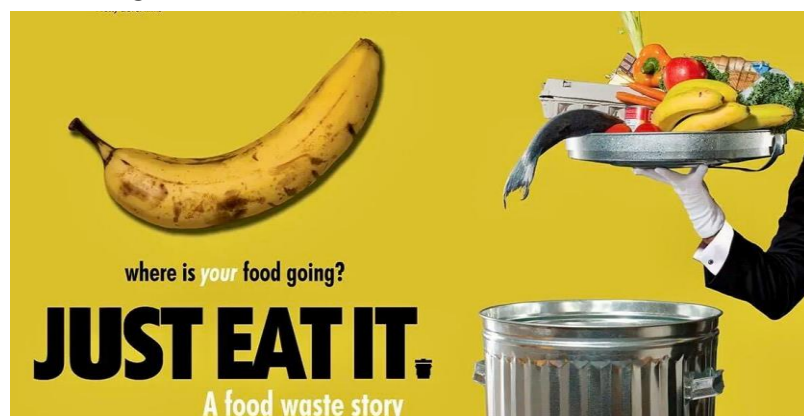
Sustainable Agriculture & Food Systems

Michigan State University

Spring Newsletter
February 2026

SAFS Community Event

The **Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems** program and the **MSU Slow Food club** will co-host a **movie night** on Wednesday, **Feb 25th from 4-6pm in PSS 271**. Slow Food selected the documentary ***Just Eat It*** about food waste nationally and globally. This topic intersects with a SAFS 424 capstone project groups' work with local food rescue organizations. **Join us for snacks & discussion!**



Student members wanted for SAFS Steering Committee!

The SAFS Steering Committee invites SAFS student voices to join in shaping our curriculum, community events, campus connections, and alumni networks. If you would like to serve on the SAFS Steering Committee, please submit your resume or CV and a brief letter of interest by March 9th to safs@msu.edu. Selections will be made in Spring 2026; appointments start in Fall 2026, 1 year for undergrads, and 2 years for graduates.

Grow your SAFS network!

- ✓ Take advantage of a **SAFS travel grant** to attend a conference or event
- ✓ Join the **AGROECO listserv** for jobs, internships, academic positions, and other SAFS opportunities



MSU DEPARTMENTAL SEMINARS

We've highlighted speakers that might be of special SAFS interest. Visit the departmental links for meeting rooms, Zoom links, and additional speakers.

Plant & Soil Science & Horticulture Seminar Series, **Wednesdays at 12:00pm**

- Mar 11th - Carmen Ugarte, University of Illinois
Soil Biology: The Foundation of Soil Health
- Mar 25th - Kaitlin Gattoni, KBS & PSM
Nematodes as indicators of soil biological health in natural and agricultural ecosystems
- Apr 22nd - Jahi Johnson-Chappell, CRFS MSU
Thinking and Acting Critically Towards "Good Food"

Kellogg Biological Station Seminars, **Fridays at 10:45am**

- Mar 27th - Tyler Lark, geospatial modeling and lifecycle analysis of agricultural land systems
- Apr 17th - Ashley Keiser, U. of Massachusetts, carbon and nutrient exchange between plant and soil communities
****Save the date! SAFS is planning a lunch with Dr. Keiser and a tour of KBS on April 17. SAFS will provide free transportation to KBS for this event. Stay tuned!****

Entomology Seminar Series, **Mondays at 3:30 pm**

- March 9th - Lynette Strickland, Boston University
The Beetle's Palette: Tales of Color, Climate, and Adaptive Evolution

Community Sustainability Seminars, **Fridays 11 am**

- March 13th - Adam Gallagher, Central Michigan U.
Trade-offs, Misconceptions, and Opportunities for Resilience at the Nexus of Energy, Agriculture, and Conservation

Upcoming Events

Indigenous Food Sovereignty Summit

April 6-8, 2026

SAFS is proud to be a sponsor and partner of the inaugural Indigenous Food Sovereignty Summit, hosted at the Kellogg Hotel & Conference Center in East Lansing. SAFS-sponsored student conference rates will be available!



U-M Food Literacy for All **Tuesdays 6:30-7:50pm**

Food Literacy for All is a community-academic partnership course that features guest speakers each week addressing challenges and opportunities of diverse food systems. Everyone can participate via zoom!

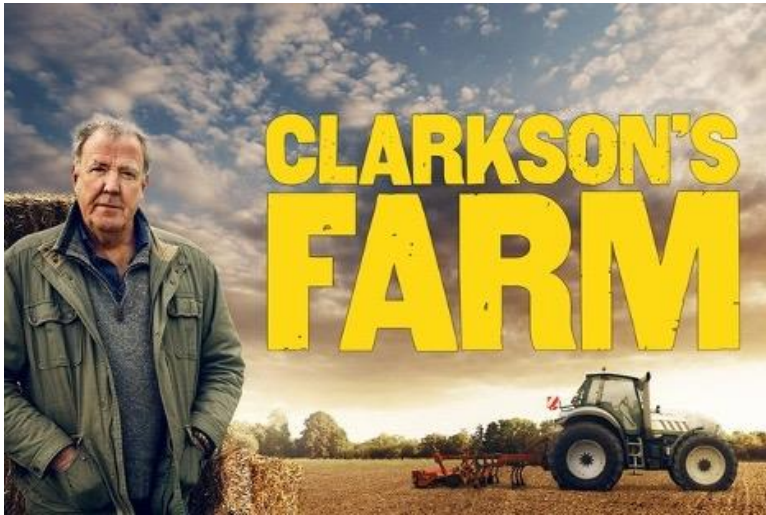
MSU Sustainability Events

Public calendar highlighting events at MSU.

MSU Fate of the Earth Symposium **March 26-27, 2026**

Sustainability: Embrace the mess!

Free conference for MSU students and community featuring keynote speakers, participatory sessions, sustainability career panels, and a student competition.



Jeremy Clarkson is no stranger to popular media. Famous for his BBC Top Gear motorcar show, he acquired a farm in Oxfordshire, England in 2008. In his own words, Clarkson bought the farm for the financial benefits and aesthetic pleasure. However, when his farm manager retired in 2019, Clarkson decided to learn to farm himself. His reasoning: “Obviously farming cannot be that difficult, people have been doing it for 12,000 years!”

The TV show, Clarkson’s Farm, aired on Amazon Prime in 2021. Few expected it to be a success, but it quickly grew from a comedic experiment into an insightful portrayal of modern agriculture and the challenges of managing a 1,000 acre farm, resonating with the struggles of many farmers today.

Behind all the humor and personalities (humans and animals alike), Clarkson’s Farm reveals truths about sustainable agriculture, resilience of farmers, impacts of weather extremes, regulations, and the resulting fragile economics of agro-economic food systems. Of course, many of us have heard stories of family farms from long ago or distant family, but most viewers of the show are largely detached from agriculture. This series provides an unprecedented window into the reality of a farmer trying to run a sustainable 21st century farm.

Sustainability is founded on three intersecting concepts; namely, social, economic and environmental. In the context of agriculture, the three interconnected dimensions are environmental integrity, economic viability (i.e. profitability), and social well-being. The broad framework of agroecology take sustainability a step further by also emphasizing soil health, minimizing dependency on external inputs, promoting biodiversity, enhancing synergies and efficiencies, protecting social values, co-creation of knowledge, economic diversification and responsible governance.

Featured Article

Clarkson’s Farm: Sustainability Lessons in Agroecology from an Unlikely Farmer

by Estée Swartz

**SAFS PhD Student and Research
Assistant, Biosystems and Agriculture
Engineering, [MSU Irrigation Lab](#)**

Featured articles are written by SAFS students highlighting sustainable agriculture and food systems in current science, events, and popular media

Although I’m sure that Clarkson’s Farm was never meant to be a guide to agroecology, the unscripted honesty, experimentation, and real time problem-solving illuminates practical lessons which mirror the principles of agroecology. The show inadvertently is a living case study of the transition toward more sustainable and adaptive farming systems and illuminates what these concepts look like on the ground—not in policy documents or textbooks, but in everyday decisions about soil, animals, landscapes, and livelihoods. I’d like to share with you some key lessons from the show:

Lesson 1: Climate variability is a daily operational reality and farmers need to be adaptive innovators

In Season 1, Clarkson experienced persistent rain which resulted in water-logged fields and delayed sowing. Clarkson was forced to reconsider his farm plan and change his crop choice and field timing. Later in the same season, a hot spell accelerated crop drying and harvest conditions. Again, Clarkson had to adapt, reconsider machinery and adapt field operations. In Season 3, another drought spell impacted the growth of the grass which is forage for his livestock and Clarkson needed to experiment with alternative fodder and adjust his grazing strategies.

Lesson 2: A farm is a system, not isolated tasks and production areas.

Clarkson had to learn quickly that a farm is a system and that systems thinking should be embedded into daily decisions. Small decisions and actions can trigger cascading downstream consequences. In Season 1, his overconfidence in operating machinery led to poorly timed ploughing, soil compaction, and delayed planting (which was already delayed due to water-logged fields). In Season 2, he attempted to cultivate new crops and expand to restaurants, which led to regulatory and ecological barriers, including badgers carrying bovine tuberculosis. Although the badgers posed a threat to Clarkson's cattle, they are legally protected. Instead of lethal control, Clarkson needed to explore ways to reduce exposure risk to his cattle by moving cattle feed/troughs and using badger deterrents.

Lesson 3: Local knowledge is just as important as technology

On the show, experienced farm hands, Kaleb and Gerald, correct Clarkson's every move - from ploughing lines, tractor speed, drilling depth -- highlighting the value and knowledge of lifelong farmers. Kaleb's valuable knowledge helps Clarkson with planting, spraying, harvesting, and general management. Gerald guides Clarkson through traditional land management techniques that machines cannot replace, and he regularly steps in to handle jobs like harvesting and day-to-day problems. Early on, Clarkson learned that sustainability is learned together, not individually, and the co-creation and sharing of knowledge is imperative to farmer success.

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Lesson 4: Biodiversity and “non-productive” spaces are essential, not optional

During Season 1, Clarkson established wildflower meadows and grew hedgerows simply to beautify the farm. But he was amazed to see wildlife return in those areas. He also expanded into bee-keeping and learned about global pollinator decline, which then drove him to intentionally incorporate the health of bees into his field management decisions. Biodiversity quietly emerged as a powerful theme throughout the series, resulting in more pollinators, healthier soil, and natural pest control – that also translated into economic benefits, including subsidy payments, reduced input costs, and improved public perception/farm branding.

Lesson 5: Sustainable farming requires economic creativity

Clarkson quickly discovered that ecological success is meaningless to the farm if the farm cannot support itself financially. His first season's profits barely covered the costs of machinery. This prompted him to diversify his crop plan adding durum wheat for pasta, barley to brew his own beer, and chilies in a poly-tunnel for chili sauce. By Season 2, the diversification also included exploring new crops, launching a restaurant, and developing additional products such as jam, honey and ice-cream.

Lesson 6: Stewardship of land is as emotional as it is technical

Behind all the humor, the viewer watches Clarkson's determination to make the farm successful grow from technical knowledge to an emotional connection to the land and animals in his care. The viewer unexpectedly joins him on his emotional rollercoaster of the joys and griefs of lambing and animal care, bureaucratic frustrations, and the worry of feed shortages, forcing difficult decisions regarding livestock. This is a good reminder to viewers that responsible governance by farmers invested in stewardship involves mental, emotional, and social resilience.

Let's be clear: Clarkson has financial security and a media platform that protects him from the precarity faced by many (even most) farmers. This gives him more freedom to experiment with sustainable farming than the average farmer.

However, Clarkson entered the show as an entertainer but emerged as an unlikely translator between the farming world and the public. As agriculture faces accelerated pressure from climate change, volatile markets, and public scrutiny, the need to understand and connect with the food systems grows. Clarkson's Farm has quietly brought farmers back to mind for city and far-from-farm dwellers as we all learn, laugh, and cry together with Clarkson through his farming journey of successes and failures. The rising viewership of the show (at least 4.4 million viewers per episode) shows that the public is interested in deeper themes in farm and food systems. Clarkson's Farm forms a bridge made of humor, humility, and honesty, and does something rare. It makes the viewer care about the soil, the climate variability, the regulations in their county, and the human hands that feed them.