

Cultivating the Future of Organic in the Southeast

*OUTCOMES, REFLECTIONS,
AND OPPORTUNITIES*

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Many thanks to the planning committee for their hard work and support! Thanks to the USDA Organic Agriculture and Extension Initiative for funding this project.

The Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research (FFAR), Tuskegee University, Mondelēz International, and The Organic Center collaborated to host an in-person convening titled *Cultivating the Future of Organic Agriculture in the Southeastern US: How Advancing Equity and Inclusion Will Strengthen the Organic Movement*. This event brought together stakeholders from across the Southeast, including organics and organic-aligned producers, researchers from 1890s land-grant universities, small/midsized producers in the Southeast, farmer organizations, and non-profit leaders. Held in conjunction with the Professional Agricultural Workers Conference (PAWC) in Montgomery, Alabama, from November 15–17, 2024, the convening featured panel discussions with producers, nonprofits, and government representatives, followed by breakout sessions to examine the most pressing challenges and opportunities for growers in the region. The dialogue built upon the momentum of a December 2023 virtual convening, which identified critical themes for advancing the Southeastern organic sector: consumer education and market development, communication and effective outreach, and increased access to research and funding.

Event Photos: Tuskegee University College of Agriculture, Environment, and Nutrition Sciences
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Above: Kwangmoozaa/Getty Images

Introduction & Event Background

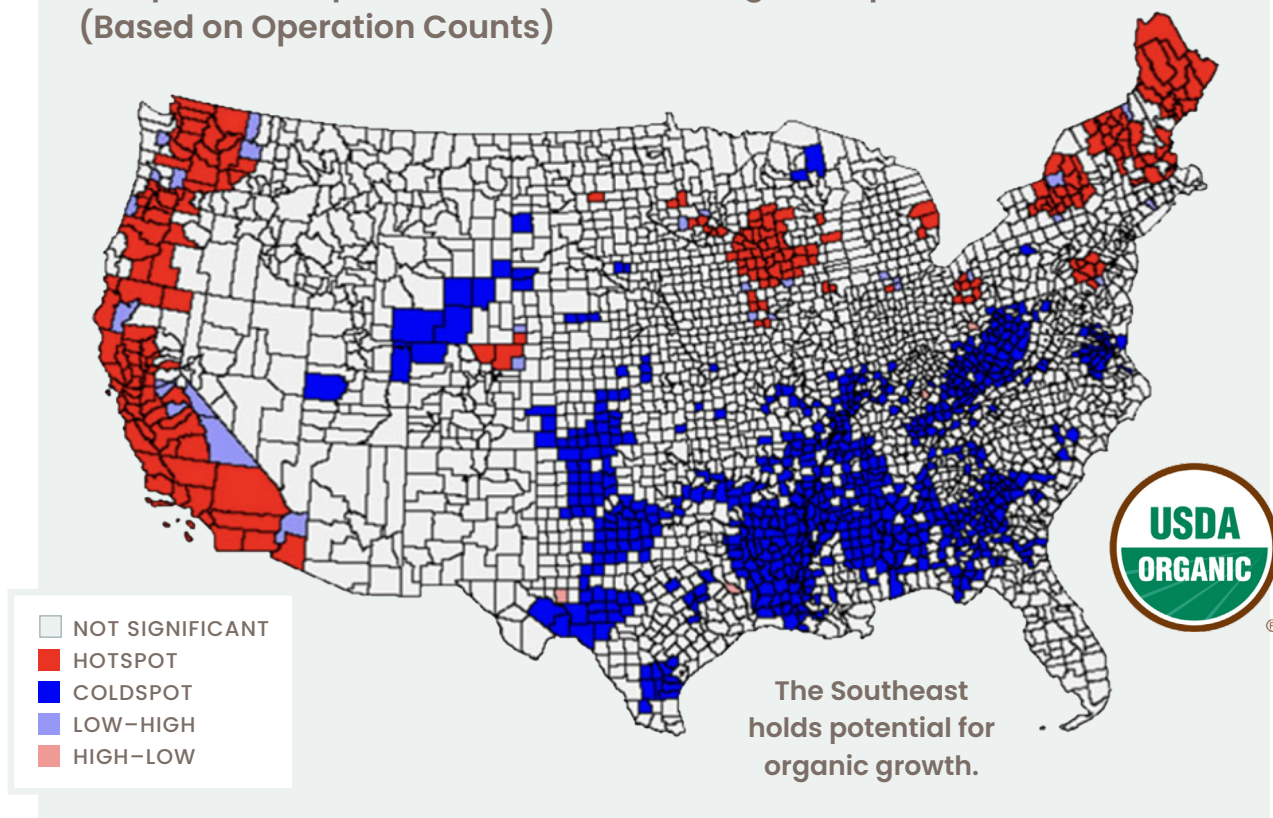
The Southeastern United States presents a promising yet underdeveloped region for the expansion of organic agriculture. Compared to other U.S. regions, the Southeast lags significantly in both the number of certified organic operations and total organic acreage.

For instance, when compared to the West, states like California lead in both the number of certified organic farms (3,061) and organic acreage (1.7 million), while Southeastern states such as Alabama and Mississippi trail in certified organic acres with 7,000 and 6,000, respectively. Because there are many environmental, human health and economic benefits associated with organic

agriculture, the Southeast is missing important opportunities by remaining a low-organic-uptake region.

A groundbreaking national study identified 225 "organic hotspots," or counties with high levels of organic agricultural activity that have neighboring counties with high organic activity. These hotspots consistently showed

Hotspots, Coldspots and Outliers of All Organic Operations (Based on Operation Counts)



Source: Marasteanu and Jaenicke 2018. *Economic impact of organic agriculture hotspots in the United States, Renewable Agriculture and Food Systems*

strong economic indicators such as boosted median household incomes (over \$2,000 more) and reduced poverty rates (up to 1.3 percentage points less). These gains are unique to organic hotspots and were not observed in general agricultural hotspots, highlighting the distinct advantages of organic hotspots. This presents a powerful potential tool for economic development in “coldspots,” like many counties in the Southeast, particularly in rural communities.

Despite the opportunities afforded by organic farming, numerous barriers contribute to the reduced adoption of organic practices in the Southeast. The region’s climate, marked by high humidity, heavy rainfall, and a long pest season, poses significant production challenges for organic systems that rely on ecological and biological, rather than chemical, pest management. High heat and humidity create ideal conditions for pests, fungal diseases, and aggressive weed growth—challenges that can

be especially difficult to manage using organic compliant tools. These climate-specific pressures add to the complexity of transitioning to and maintaining organic systems in the Southeast, particularly outreach, infrastructure and institutional support for organic farmers that are lacking in the region.

Despite these constraints, the Southeast holds potential for organic growth. The region currently imports a large share of its organic food supply from outside its borders, indicating a market demand that could be met through expanded local production.

To capitalize on local market opportunities, it is essential to expand awareness, acceptance, and adoption of organic practices. Increased investment in organic transition support, research on region-specific practices, and market infrastructure development could enable Southeastern farmers to meet this demand while contributing to regional food security.





Recognizing these opportunities and challenges, a regional initiative supported by CLIF BAR, the Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research (FFAR), and the Organic Agriculture Institute at Tuskegee University was launched to explore pathways for the expansion of organic agriculture in the Southeast. In partnership with The Organic Center and with funding from the USDA Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative (OREI #2024-51300-43045) awarded to Tuskegee University, the project convened a series of virtual and in-person events designed to facilitate cross-sector dialogue and generate policy and practice recommendations. Stakeholders included farmers, researchers, retailers, cooperative extension professionals, policy professionals, and nonprofit leaders, with a shared commitment to expanding the reach and impact of organic agriculture in the region.

An in-person conference, held in collaboration with Tuskegee University's Professional Agricultural Workers Conference (PAWC) in Montgomery, Alabama, focused on identifying

actionable strategies to address both technical and systemic barriers to the adoption of organic production practices in the Southeast. Key themes included the need to advance systemic change to increase inclusivity in the organic movement, expand consumer education and capital for sustainable market development, prioritize farmer-centered research and outreach, leverage organic agriculture to promote health equity and food access, and support the next generation of farmers.

This report presents a synthesis of the key findings, discussions, and outcomes from the in-person gathering. It highlights the need for targeted investment, collaborative research, and inclusive stakeholder engagement to advance resilient organic agriculture in the Southeast. The findings aim to inform ongoing policy development and funding priorities, with the goal of building an organic sector that serves farmers, consumers, and communities across the region.

Conference Agenda

Event programming included an opening reception, six moderated panels that featured over 20 speakers, and four breakout sessions that allowed nearly 60 participants to examine region-specific challenges such as limited organic infrastructure, cultural and systemic barriers to participation, and climate-related production pressures. Highlights included a synthesis of lessons from the 2023 virtual event, a producer perspectives panel, a discussion on food as medicine, and a presentation on seed access and innovation. The convening fostered meaningful dialogue and laid the foundation for advancing fair and economically viable organic agriculture in the Southeastern United States.



Cultivating the Future of Organic Agriculture in the Southeastern US: *How Advancing Equity and Inclusion Will Strengthen the Organic Movement*

RENAISSANCE MONTGOMERY HOTEL & SPA  MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

Friday, November 15, 2024 ~ Arrival Day

Networking Reception: Evening gathering with dinner, short presentations, and community activities

Saturday, November 16, 2024 ~ Day 1

Opening Remarks, Context Setting & Lessons Learned

Dr. Olga Bolden-Tiller—Tuskegee University

Dr. K. Kpomblekou-A—Tuskegee University

Dr. LaKisha Odom—Foundation for Food & Agriculture Research (FFAR)

Dr. Amber Sciligo—The Organic Center

Panel Series: Challenges & Opportunities in Organic Agriculture

1. Role of Consumer Education & Market Development

Panelists: Seanicaa Edwards Heron (Freedmen Heirs Foundation), Michelle Stearn (Forum for the Future), Bill Green (The Common Market)

Moderator: Dr. LaKisha Odom—FFAR

2. Producer Engagement, Communication, Education, and Outreach

Panelists: Andre Carter (Farmer & Cooperative Consultant, TX), Dr. JC Rodriguez (Florida Organic Growers), Briana Bazile (University of Kentucky)

Moderator: Dr. Amber Sciligo—The Organic Center

3. The Need for Cultural Competence

Panelists: Seanicaa Edwards Heron (Freedmen Heirs Foundation), Bryan “Ibrafall” Wright (Natural Dye Initiative), Christa Barfield (FarmerJawn)

Moderator: Stephanie Jerger—Organic Trade Association

4. Resources and Funding to Address Producer Challenges

Panelists: Ruth Canada (Potlikker Capital), Konda Mason (Jubilee Justice), Dr. Allison Vetter (AgFTAP Program)

Moderator: Philippa Lockwood—Mondelēz International



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Lunch Program: Food Access & Food as Medicine

Speakers: Dr. Dana Nettles (Dr. Nettles Farms), Dr. Kevin Murphy (WSU Breadlab, Washington State University), Philippa Lockwood (Mondelēz International)

Producer Perspectives Panel

Panelists: Michael Wall (Georgia Organics), Sedrick Rowe (Soil Health Institute), Loretta Anderson (Adderson Historic Black Farm), Ramkrishnan Balasubramanian (Florida Organic Growers)

Moderator: Dr. Franklin Quarcoo—Tuskegee University

Collaborative Breakouts & Report-Outs

Attendees broke into groups to more intimately discuss session topics from the day:

- *The Role of Consumer Education and Market Development*
- *Producer Engagement, Communication, Education, and Outreach*
- *The Need for Cultural Competence*
- *Resources and Funding to Address Producer Challenges*

Day 1 commenced with a discussions on next steps, followed by summary presentations.

Sunday, November 17, 2024 ~ Day 2

Reflections & Synthesis

Dr. Franklin Quarcoo—Tuskegee University

Dr. Amber Sciligo—The Organic Center

Dr. Elias Miller—The Organic Center

Session on Seed Access & Innovation

Dr. Julie Dawson—University of Wisconsin–Madison; CLIF BAR & Organic Valley Chair in Plant Breeding for Organic Agriculture

Closing Session & Adjournment

Lunch, final reflections, and optional farm tour led by Dr. K. Kpomblekou-A, Tuskegee University

Panel Series Themes

Systemic change and inclusivity are essential to the growth and success of organic agriculture in the Southeastern United States.



The need to advance systemic change to increase inclusivity in the organic movement

A key outcome of the convening was the collective recognition that systemic change is essential for the growth of job opportunities and overall success of the organic sector in the Southeastern United States. This theme was woven throughout the panel series, most notably during *The Need for Cultural Competence* panel, moderated by Stephanie Jerger of the Organic Trade Association. Panelists Seanicaa Edwards Heron (Freedmen Heirs Foundation), Bryan "Ibrafall" Wright (Natural Dye Initiative), and Christa Barfield (FarmerJawn) spoke about the structural barriers that small/mid-sized producers in the Southeast face in accessing organic markets and resources. These discussions emphasized

that organic farming must be recognized not only as a method of food production, but also as a tool for community empowerment and public health. Several attendees also stressed that **outreach efforts must be grounded in language and practices that build trust and reflect the experiences of the communities they aim to serve.**

This message was reinforced in the *Producer Engagement, Communication, Education, and Outreach* panel, moderated by Dr. Amber Sciligo of The Organic Center. Panelists Andre Carter (Texas farmer and cooperative consultant), Dr. JC Rodriguez (Florida Organic Growers), and Briana Bazile (University of Kentucky) discussed the importance of peer-to-peer knowledge sharing, mentorship, and culturally relevant education. They emphasized



Certified Organic Farm at
Tuskegee University

Building pathways into organic requires creating welcoming spaces and representation within extension, certification, and technical assistance programs. Farmers must be engaged not just as recipients of support, but as leaders and co-designers of outreach and education strategies.

that building pathways into organic requires creating welcoming spaces and representation within extension, certification, and technical assistance programs. Farmers must be engaged not just as recipients of support, but as leaders and co-designers of outreach and education strategies.

Similarly, in the *Resources and Funding to Address Producer Challenges* panel, moderated by Philippa Lockwood of Mondelēz International, speakers Ruth Canada (Potlikker Capital), Konda Mason (Jubilee Justice), and Dr. Allison Vetter (AgFTAP Program) addressed the structural financial barriers that disproportionately affect farmers of color. They **highlighted the need for targeted investment in rural communities and for funding programs that are flexible, accessible, and aware of the unique challenges of transitioning to organic.**

Although the *Role of Consumer Education and Market Development* panel, moderated by Dr. LaKisha Odom of FFAR, focused on demand-side issues, the theme of systemic change and inclusion remained central. Panelists Seanicaa Edwards Heron (Freedmen Heirs Foundation),

Michelle Stearn (Forum for the Future), and Bill Green (The Common Market) spoke to the importance of ensuring that market development efforts are grounded in fairness. They emphasized that **consumer education campaigns must not only promote the benefits of organic food, but also uplift the cultural histories behind traditional practices that align with organic.**

Across all sessions, a strong consensus emerged that **elevating regional producer voices, investing in effective outreach, and committing to long-term structural change are essential for building a more just organic agriculture system in the Southeast.** Actionable recommendations generated from these panels included:

- **Expanding the USDA's 2501 Program to provide targeted support for socially disadvantaged farmers.**
- **Simplifying the organic certification process and reducing associated financial and administrative burdens.**
- **Developing peer-led training programs through efforts like the Transition to Organic Partnership Program (TOPP).**
- **Creating inclusive spaces for in-person gatherings that foster relationship building and give policymakers direct insight into farmer-identified challenges and solutions.**

This theme reimagines an organic movement that centers fairness, acknowledges relevant histories, and invests in the leadership and expertise of local farming communities.

Consumer education and capital for sustainable market development

A recurring theme throughout the convening was that organic market development in the Southeastern United States cannot advance without a strong foundation of consumer education, capital access, and regional infrastructure. These interconnected needs were highlighted across the panel sessions, with experts offering a unique lens on the barriers and opportunities shaping the region's organic future. The discussions made clear that building a resilient organic marketplace requires a multi-pronged approach that educates consumers meaningfully, supports farmers financially, and builds the systems necessary to connect supply with demand.

The need for capital emerged early and often, particularly during the *Resources and Funding to Address Producer Challenges* panel. Panelists Ruth Canada (Potlikker Capital), Konda Mason (Jubilee Justice), and Dr. Allison Vetter (AgFTAP Program) emphasized that transitioning to organic can come with steep costs, such as certification fees, infrastructure upgrades and labor, that disproportionately affect small and mid-sized operations. While programs like AgFTAP offer support, **panelists called for broader, more accessible financing structures that provide long-term stability.** This theme was echoed in the *Producer Perspectives* panel, where Michael Wall (Georgia Organics), Sedrick Rowe (Soil Health Institute), and Ramkrishnan Balasubramanian (Florida Organic Growers) shared expertise

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Building a resilient organic marketplace

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and firsthand experiences with the financial strain of organic production. Their stories reinforced the need for investment in farmer-led solutions.

Capital access was also closely tied to the theme of producer engagement and technical support, explored in the *Producer Engagement, Communication, Education, and Outreach* panel moderated by Dr. Amber Sciligo of The Organic Center. Panelists Andre Carter, Dr. JC Rodriguez, and Briana Bazile discussed how **a lack of financial security can limit a farmer's ability to adopt new practices, even when high-quality training and technical support are available.**

On the consumer side, the *Role of Consumer Education and Market Development* panel addressed the widespread misconceptions about organic practices and certification. Panelists **called for narrative-driven outreach that demystifies organic and makes its benefits relevant to Southeastern communities. Storytelling emerged as a critical strategy, particularly narratives**

that connect organic agriculture to cultural history, community health, and economic opportunity. One example cited was the power of language, like explaining the African roots of okra to foster connection and pride in local, organic food systems. Panelists also emphasized health messaging as a key strategy for shifting behavior, especially in communities deeply affected by chronic disease and diet-related illnesses. As one participant noted, **“Nobody cares about organic, but everybody cares. People care about their health.”** Framing organic in terms of preventing cancer, asthma, and other illnesses resonated strongly as a way to grow consumer awareness and market demand.

This messaging was directly linked to the need for institutional support through procurement. Panelists pointed to schools, hospitals, and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) as key institutions that could anchor

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demand for organic products. However, speakers across the *Resources and Funding*, *Market Development*, and *Producer Perspectives* panels emphasized that **institutional buyers face constraints of limited budgets and lack of infrastructure to source from small-scale producers.** One panelist noted, **“All procurers say they want to support local, but change only comes if budgets accommodate those values...HBCUs have to lead in this area [of procurement] and budget has to be a part of the negotiation in the food service management contracts.”**

All panels highlighted the need for infrastructure investment. Without access to cold storage, commercial kitchens, mobile processing units, and regional food hubs, committed organic producers could face challenges scaling their businesses. This need was especially apparent in discussions during the *Producer Engagement and Consumer Market Development* panels, where Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) and cost-sharing programs were discussed as possible tools for supporting small farms, reducing financial burden, and fostering connections between farmers and consumers.

Across the sessions, speakers aligned around a common set of actionable strategies for strengthening organic markets in the Southeast:

- **Increase access to capital through grants, flexible loans, and financial planning support tailored to small and midsize farms.**
- **Launch culturally relevant consumer education campaigns that use storytelling and health messaging to connect organic food to well-being.**

- **Invest in regional infrastructure, including food hubs, cold storage, and shared-use facilities, to bridge the gap between supply and demand.**
- **Develop values-based procurement policies that prioritize local and organically produced food and align budgets accordingly.**

Panelists emphasized that building a resilient marketplace requires investment in the financial, social, cultural, and physical aspects of organic.

The importance of farmer-centered research, outreach and extension

A central topic at the conference was the need to redesign organic research, outreach, and extension systems in the Southeast to be more farmer-centered and participatory. This theme was especially prominent during the *Producer Engagement, Communication, Education, and Outreach* panel. Speakers emphasized that organic agriculture cannot thrive in the Southeast without research and education systems that reflect the lived experiences and production realities of the farmers they aim to serve.

Panelists discussed the shortcomings of top-down research and extension models, noting that many academic studies are disconnected from the daily challenges faced by organic growers. They **called for participatory research approaches that treat farmers not as passive recipients of information, but as co-researchers and knowledge-holders.**

Panelist Briana Bazile, who is conducting graduate research on the effectiveness of university extension systems in Kentucky,

There is a need to redesign organic research, outreach, and extension systems in the Southeast to be more **farmer-centered and participatory.**

spoke to the disparities in how cooperative extension services are delivered, particularly in their failure to provide fair assistance to small/midsized producers. Her remarks reinforced the need for institutions to structure outreach programs with an emphasis on cultural competence, accountability, and relevance.

Participants across panels echoed that **research must be localized to the Southeast**, where organic producers face unique production constraints such as long pest seasons, high humidity, and limited access to organic inputs. Standardized “best practices” developed for other regions often fall short, leaving opportunities for stronger collaboration between farmers, researchers, and extension professionals.

In addition to research and information access, structural barriers that limit the reach of extension, including underrepresentation of diverse staff, lack of cultural awareness, and limited support for organic-specific practices were discussed. Recommendations included hiring extension agents who represent a wider range of demographics and communities, integrating peer-to-peer training models, and providing support in multiple languages and formats.

To advance a more effective research and outreach ecosystem for organic agriculture in the Southeast, the following action steps were prescribed:

- **Develop Participatory Research Models** engaging farmers in all phases of the research process to ensure practical impact.
- **Invest in Localized Research** by focusing on region-specific challenges related to climate, pest pressure, and soil conditions.
- **Reform Extension Systems**, hiring agents from wider range of demographics, improving cultural competence, and creating peer-led learning spaces that reflect the needs of communities that have historically received less investment of resources.
- **Expand Outreach Channels** through access to bilingual, digital, and community-based resources at field days, demonstration sites, and farmer-led knowledge sharing groups.

These recommendations highlight the importance of investing in farmer focused community-led research and extension to build a responsive organic sector.

Advancing health equity and food access through organic agriculture

Throughout the convening, the connection between organic agriculture; health equity, which aims to create a society where everyone has the same opportunity to live a healthy life, regardless of their circumstances; and food sovereignty, the right of people to define their own food systems, ensuring access to healthy, culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods; emerged as a defining theme considering the Southeast's disproportionate burden of chronic illness and food insecurity. This theme

Expanding access to organic food is not only an agricultural and economic goal, but also a public health imperative.

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at Tuskegee University**

surfaced across several panels, with speakers emphasizing that expanding access to organic food is not only an agricultural and economic goal, but also a public health imperative.

Communities across the Southeast face high rates of diet-related illnesses, issues often linked to barriers that limit access to fresh, nutrient-dense food. The role of organic farming in supporting community health was

Solutions must go beyond one-off interventions and focus on **systems change**.

explored in conversations about producer engagement where panelists spoke about the importance of bridging the gap between producers and community needs, especially when farmers themselves live in the same

communities disproportionately impacted by diet-related illnesses. The idea of prescription produce programs, where healthcare providers prescribe fresh, organic food to patients, was discussed as a promising model.

Equally important was the theme of food sovereignty, which prioritizes local control over food systems and fair access to healthy food. During the *Need for Cultural Competence* panel, Seanicaa Edwards Heron, Ibrafall Wright, and Christa Barfield **highlighted the importance of empowering communities to reclaim food traditions and rebuild local supply chains that reflect their values and histories.**

Panelists also stressed that solutions must go beyond one-off interventions and focus on systems change. In the *Resources and Funding to Address Producer Challenges* and *Producer Perspective* panels, speakers emphasized the need for investments in systems to support distribution of organic goods into food-insecure neighborhoods.

Across these conversations, participants outlined several recommendations for advancing food access and health equity through organic:

- **Partner with Healthcare Providers by advocating for prescription produce programs that integrate organic food into treatment plans for chronic diseases.**
- **Support Community Food Infrastructure with investment in food hubs, mobile markets, urban organic gardens, and cooperative models that bring organic food into underserved areas.**
- **Center Food Sovereignty in Program Design to ensure that food access programs reflect the cultural values and leadership of the communities they serve.**

The discussions surrounding this theme demonstrated how the organic movement can play a broader role in mitigating health disparities in the Southeast.

Encouraging the future generation of farmers

A consistent concern of panelists was the need to cultivate the next generation of organic farmers in the Southeast. Conversations emphasized that **building a strong, inclusive pipeline for new and young farmers is essential for the long-term viability of the organic movement in the region.**

Access to land was identified as one of the most persistent barriers for young and aspiring organic farmers. Panelists discussed the challenges of navigating land affordability,

ownership, and long-term leases, especially for small/midsized producers in the Southeast. Innovative land access models such as land trusts, cooperative ownership, and incubator programs were mentioned as strategies to reduce barriers and support new farmers interested in organic.

Retention was also a key concern. New farmers face steep learning curves and financial uncertainty, particularly when adopting organic and regenerative practices. Speakers across the *Producer Engagement* and *Resources and Funding* panels emphasized the importance of pairing educational programs with strong mentorship and access to organic-specific technical assistance.

Panelists also highlighted that **awareness of economic opportunities surrounding organic can inspire the next generation.** The *Role of Consumer Education and Market Development* panel explored how market messaging around organic price premiums

and consumer demand can serve as a motivator for youth considering farming as a career.

Finally, across all sessions, the importance of relationships and alternative career

paths within the organic food system emerged as a key theme. Cooperative networks, farm-to-school initiatives, and trusted relationships with buyers, advisors, and peers were described as essential to building awareness and confidence in agriculture-related careers. Creating spaces for intergenerational

Creating spaces for intergenerational knowledge exchange and peer learning was highlighted as a powerful tool to support the transition and retention of new farmers.



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knowledge exchange and peer learning was highlighted as a powerful tool to support the transition and retention of new farmers.

To support youth entry and retention in the organic sector, panelists outlined the following:

- **Adapt Youth Programs for Organic Agriculture** by revamping 4-H and related initiatives to incorporate organic principles.
- **Expand Access to Land**, supporting community-based models that reduce financial barriers and offer security for beginning farmers.
- **Invest in Education and Mentorship** through culturally competent, organic-specific technical training and connect those interested in organic agriculture with experienced mentors.
- **Build Trusted Relationships** by strengthening networks between farmers, buyers, mentors, and extension agents to foster a more holistic farming ecosystem.

The region must invest in young and beginning farmers to build a resilient and inclusive organic agriculture movement.

Breakout Group Discussions

Breakout discussions were a vital component of the conference, as they facilitated open dialogue among participants with diverse perspectives and experiences. These discussions provided a space for attendees to share insights, reflect on the conference content, and identify strategies that could be implemented in their communities. By engaging in these smaller, focused conversations, participants were able to address specific challenges, brainstorm solutions, and create a sense of shared responsibility for advancing organic agriculture in the Southeast. Information gathered from these discussions informed the following day's reflection activities.



Participants cautioned against one-size-fits-all messaging, emphasizing that education must start with listening, understanding specific community needs, and aligning messages accordingly.

SESSION #1

The Role of Consumer Education and Market Development

Building on themes raised during the panel sessions, the first breakout discussion offered a perspective on the challenges and opportunities surrounding consumer education and organic market development in the Southeast.

One of the most pressing concerns raised was the lack of widespread understanding

about what organic means, particularly in communities unfamiliar with the certification process or the broader health and environmental benefits of organic systems. Participants cautioned against one-size-fits-all messaging, emphasizing that education must start with listening, understanding specific community needs, and aligning messages accordingly.

Recommendations including integrating organic farming into federal incentive programs, expanding support for direct-to-consumer models like CSAs and mobile markets, and leveraging storytelling to frame organic as a tool for community health in addition to environmental stewardship.



In terms of market development, the group echoed panel discussions that called attention to the Southeast's limited organic infrastructure. Transportation costs, a shortage of local aggregators and food hubs, and insufficient regional supply chains were identified as persistent barriers. Price competition with conventional products, combined with the smaller scale of organic farms in the region, further limits farmers' ability to reach institutional or wholesale markets.

Despite these hurdles, participants highlighted promising examples that demonstrate the power of community-centered practices. The FarmerJawn equity-based Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) model was discussed as a successful example of value-driven marketing that expands organic food access while centering social equity.

The group also offered several concrete recommendations including integrating organic farming into federal incentive programs, expanding support for direct-to-consumer models like CSAs and mobile markets, and

leveraging storytelling to frame organic as a tool for community health in addition to environmental stewardship.

This session reinforced the need for a systems-level approach to education and market development that is responsive to local conditions, driven by community, and backed by policy and funding.

SESSION #2

Producer Engagement, Communication, Education, and Outreach

This session focused on improving the ways organic farmers, and those considering organic transition are supported through education, communication, and research.

One of the clearest takeaways from the discussion was that **traditional outreach models often fall short of meeting farmers where they are.** Communication channels can feel inaccessible or irrelevant, either too academic, too digital, or



Southern agriculture can be strengthened by listening to farmers and building systems that reflect the diversity and complexity of their challenges.

misaligned with day-to-day realities on the ground. Participants noted that **stigma around government programs and the perceived complexity of organic certification can further discourage engagement.**

Mentorship emerged as one of the most successful strategies for supporting new and transitioning organic farmers. Informal peer networks were recommended as tools for transferring knowledge, sharing risk, and building confidence in organic practices. Examples included regionally tailored training programs, cooperative-led field days, and initiatives that help farmers connect to markets and funding opportunities.

Participants recommended recruiting trusted communicators to translate technical findings into plain language, developing bilingual materials, and increasing outreach to younger generations through FFA (Future Farmers of America), 4-H, and other youth-centered

programs. The idea of a national, centralized organic resource database was also discussed as a tool to improve access to training materials, events, grant opportunities, and research tailored to Southeastern growers.

This discussion framed meaningful producer engagement through the lens of trust, respect, and relevance. Southern agriculture can be strengthened by listening to farmers and building systems that reflect the diversity and complexity of their challenges.

SESSION #3

The Need for Cultural Competence

The need for cultural competence was woven throughout the convening and was the focus of breakout session #3. Southeastern participants in the session **defined cultural competence not as a checklist, but as a continuous, reflective practice, beginning with recognizing one's own positionality and biases and extending into building relationships rooted in respect and shared learning.**

The conversation explored critical shortcomings in cultural competence across the organic landscape. Participants noted the lack of culturally representative leadership within institutions and programs tasked with supporting farmers, including extension services and certifying bodies. They discussed how language barriers and limited engagement with non-English-speaking communities continue to exclude potential participants from organic farming. These issues are compounded by what some described as “performative inclusion,” well-meaning outreach that lacks accountability, or long-term follow-through.

The session also highlighted promising examples of what meaningful cultural competence can look like. **Participants praised efforts where organizations practiced active listening, centered lived experiences, and shifted power by allowing culturally grounded leaders to shape programming.** One example cited was the work of the Organic Trade Association in adapting its communication strategies and

leadership engagement to better reflect the diversity of the communities it serves.

Participants stressed that **cultural competence must be embedded early and often.** They emphasized the need to recognize and celebrate culturally competent leadership and suggested creating more spaces to honor these successes. Suggestions also included standardizing cultural competence training, hiring more diverse staff across the organic supply chain, and building feedback loops that allow farmers and consumers to shape program design.

SESSION #4

Resources and Funding to Address Producer Challenges

The challenges and opportunities related to funding and resource access were brought into focus during breakout session #4, which was built on themes raised during the *Resources and Funding to Address Producer Challenges* panel.

Participants described a range of valuable resources that have helped support organic practices on their farms or within their networks:





Participants described a range of valuable resources that have helped support organic practices on their farms or within their networks. Programs like the USDA's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) were cited for offering targeted conservation support, while extension workshops and open-access USDA data have provided technical knowledge and planning tools. Research funding, when available, was described as particularly impactful, allowing scientists to respond quickly to farmer identified challenges to co-create solutions. Community-based organizations and NGOs were recognized as trusted sources in areas where farmers have experienced exclusion from government services. Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) and alternative lending models were recommended to expand access to capital. There was also strong interest in cooperative business structures, equipment-sharing programs, and joint marketing efforts as ways to reduce costs.

Technical assistance too often focuses on production practices without addressing skills like budgeting.

Another recurring theme was the need for more targeted business training and administrative support. Participants expressed that technical assistance too often focuses on production practices without addressing skills like budgeting, recordkeeping, and compliance. Better integration of farm business training with organic transition support could help producers thrive.

Participants further emphasized the importance of increasing consumer awareness around the value of organic certification and its relevance to health disparities in the Southeast. Greater awareness could also drive demand and help justify premium pricing, ultimately improving producer profitability.

Reflections

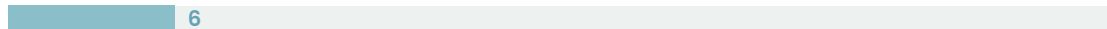
Which factors most critically impact the growth of organic in the Southeast?

A synthesis presentation by Dr. Elias Miller and The Organic Center revealed conference attendees' most commonly perceived barriers to adopting organic. Participants then engaged in small-group table discussions to explore priorities and strategies for advancing organic agriculture in the Southeast. These informal conversations reinforced the complexity of the region's challenges while highlighting the creativity, resourcefulness, and community built during the conference.

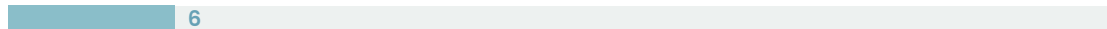
Votes Per Factor

Attendees were asked to choose the factors they believed were most important in limiting the widespread adoption of organic farming in the Southeast. They were then given two votes that could be cast for either one, or two separate factors. The figure below shows the number of votes each factor received.

NETWORKING OPPORTUNITIES



CLIMATE



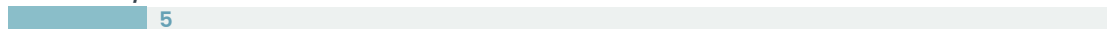
CONSUMER DEMAND



MARKETING INFRASTRUCTURE



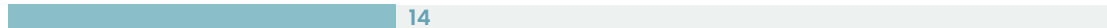
OUTREACH/EXTENSION COMMUNICATION



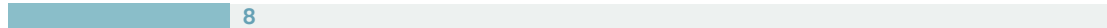
QUALITY EDUCATION



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE



RELEVANT RESEARCH



FINANCIAL SUPPORT



Votes indicated that more financial support and better infrastructure to get products to market would increase the adoption of organic.

Strengthening Organic Market Infrastructure

Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of market access, and the need for robust infrastructure to support it. Some producers noted that the certification process often demands infrastructure investments that are out of reach for small and limited-resource farmers. Cooperative development emerged as a strategy for overcoming these logistical and financial constraints. However, reflections also acknowledged that cooperatives require careful design, conflict-resolution structures, and strong leadership to avoid internal friction. Looser collaborative models were also seen as a viable entry point for producers seeking the benefits of shared resources without the administrative burden of formal co-op structures.

Consumer Education and Demand

Building public understanding of organic agriculture remains a priority. Participants discussed how consumer education can play a role in expanding markets, especially when messaging connects organic food to health benefits. Community-based efforts like grassroots education in places of worship and grocery stores, or storytelling campaigns that center culturally relevant crops and growing practices, were seen as particularly powerful. However, participants also cautioned that education must be sensitive to the realities of communities navigating food insecurity and chronic health disparities.

Advocacy and Engagement with Local Leadership

Several tables emphasized the need to engage elected officials and local leaders in advancing supportive policies and funding streams for organic agriculture and research. Policymakers with agricultural experience were identified as especially effective allies,



Lwe Umstatter/Alamy

as their understanding of farming lends credibility to advocacy efforts. Expanding dialogue with legislators, developing policy education materials, and organizing farm visits were all proposed as concrete next steps for strengthening political support.

Innovative Funding Models and Resource Sharing

Collaborative grant writing, pooled funding applications, and equipment-sharing models were discussed as ways to reduce the financial burden on individual farmers. Black Growers Associations and other producer networks were named as promising change agents for building collective power and accessing resources efficiently.

Reframing Agriculture as Community Health and Resilience

The connection between organic farming and public health was brought into focus during discussions throughout the event. Framing agriculture as a form of community care was seen as a compelling strategy for mobilizing public and political support. Participants discussed how partnerships with healthcare providers and schools could help make the case for organic investments as part of a broader strategy for addressing chronic disease.

Conclusion

The findings from this conference highlight that the future of organic agriculture in the Southeastern United States relies on making long-term investments in education, infrastructure, and consumer engagement.

A recurring theme throughout the conference was the barriers faced by small and mid-sized farmers who continue to navigate limited market access and climate-related stress. Panelists and participants highlighted promising opportunities to support organic transition, including value-based procurement, shared-resource hubs, and peer mentorship. Investing in the next generation of farmers through land access, mentorship, and youth-focused education was seen as essential to sustaining the movement, along with consumer education through

relevant storytelling and health-focused messaging. This convening made clear that growing the organic sector in the Southeast requires a community-driven approach that weaves together financial support, farmer engagement, institutional collaboration, and cultural competence. Addressing past harms while building future opportunities will require collective action from across the sector, with farmers, researchers, educators, policymakers, and consumers working together to make lasting change.

**Certified Organic Farm
at Tuskegee University**



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