



SOUTHEAST

TRANSITION TO ORGANIC PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

SE TOPP NEWS, April 2024

2023 YEAR IN REVIEW

As we reflect upon the accomplishments of the first year of the Southeast Transition to Organic Partnership Program (SE TOPP), we at Florida Organic Growers (FOG) extend our deepest gratitude to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) National Organic Program (NOP) for making this initiative possible.

Our inaugural year was focused on laying a solid foundation, navigating the complexities of establishing and strengthening pivotal relationships with 30 plus partners across the Southeast region, and aligning programmatic goals to build a strong network across the United States together with the other TOPP regional leads California Certified Organic Farmers, MOSA Certified Organic, Oregon Tilth, Organic Crop Improvement Association International, and Pennsylvania Certified Organic.

SE TOPP Region and Partners

To support the five key performance areas of the program: Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship, Community Building, Technical Assistance, Data Collection and Reporting and Workforce Training and Development, we worked with programmatic partners to implement a multifaceted approach to support farmers across seven states, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina and two U.S. territories, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

We were grateful for the opportunity to contract with the following partners in the Southeast, whose unwavering support has been instrumental in propelling our initiatives forward: Alabama Sustainable Agriculture Network, Black Farmers Index, Mississippi Small Farm and Agribusiness Center at Alcorn State University, Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, Center for Environmental Farming Systems at North Carolina State University, Central Carolina Community College's Sustainable Agriculture program, Clemson University's Organic Certification Program, Georgia Organics, Georgia Organic Peanut Association, Global Growers Network, Louisiana Central, Louisiana State University Agricultural Center & Grow Louisiana, Market Umbrella, Mississippi State University Extension, National Center for Appropriate Technology, North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University, North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension, Organic Growers School, Oxford Farm at Emory University's Oxford College, Rural Advancement Foundation International - USA, Rodale Institute Southeast Organic Center, Southeastern African American Farmers' Organic Network, Sprout NOLA, Tuskegee University, University of Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands Farmers Alliance.



United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program
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Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship

Year 1 witnessed the collaboration of national and regional partners to tailor the Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship program for the Southeast's unique agricultural landscape. A core aspect of developing this mentorship initiative was the collective effort among regional leads to forge a unified vision and establish best practices. This teamwork has culminated in a resource-rich section on the TOPP website, www.organictransition.org, offering tools for those interested in mentorship.

Support from SE TOPP partners has been pivotal in shaping our approach and enabling us to develop a suite of resources and tools designed to bolster the capabilities of both mentors and mentees. By using innovative strategies to inform and engage local communities, this initiative has fostered a growing interest in organic farming in every state in the Southeast.

Applications are now being accepted for both experienced farmer mentors and developing farmer mentees. For details on the matching process, incentives, and requirements, visit the SE TOPP mentorship page: www.organictransition.org/mentorship-program.

APPLY TO BE A MENTOR OR MENTEE

Learn more and apply:

<https://www.organictransition.org/mentorship-program>

Farmers transitioning to organic will be paired with experienced certified organic farmers as mentors in their region.

Mentors will be compensated to provide one-on-one support to the mentee farmer during transition.





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Community Engagement

Key to SE TOPP's community engagement has been the ability to bring together farmers, experts, and organizations through various events and workshops. In 2023, SE TOPP partners hosted over 30 events including workshops, field days, symposiums and farmer meet ups which cultivated meaningful connections. Our efforts, ranging from simplifying organic certification processes to facilitating insightful on-farm gatherings, have fortified a supportive network for organic aficionados, reaching over 1,800 community members.

These collaborative efforts have led to meaningful dialogues and shared learning experiences, allowing farmers to share insights and challenges. These gatherings not only facilitated learning and networking but also played a critical role in building a supportive community for organic and transitioning farmers.

Technical Assistance

Our technical assistance and training initiatives were developed to meet the specific and diverse needs of farmers across the region. SE TOPP partners implemented multiple strategies to connect with farmers in assessing the resources and assistance needed through focus groups, farm visits and tailored outreach. Understanding these needs is key to developing the resources and workshops that provide essential knowledge on organic certification and sustainable farming techniques to producers in our region.

One-on-one direct technical assistance is vital for farmers' success in transitioning to organic, obtaining certification, and the long-term success of organic operations. This approach has enabled farmers in the Southeast to explore alternatives to chemical usage, such as composting and cover cropping, enhancing soil health and reducing costs. On-farm workshops, covering topics from pest management to organic livestock raising, allowed farmers to witness sustainable practices firsthand, encouraging detailed inquiries and knowledge exchange.

SE TOPP also prioritizes inclusivity by developing resources in Spanish that addressing both language and cultural barriers. New educational materials, including organic research white papers and farming manuals, will support ongoing learning and adaptation within the organic farming community. At the end of Year 1, FOG hired an SE TOPP Technical Assistance Specialist to further efforts in providing quality information to farmers





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Workforce Development and Training

In enhancing the organic agriculture sector, our mission emphasizes the importance of supporting the entire organic marketplace ecosystem, from producers to consumers, including essential roles like inspectors and processors. Efforts to debunk misconceptions about organic viability in certain areas have led to innovative events that showcase the success of sustainable and organic practices in their region. Additionally, recognizing the significance of business acumen in organic farming, SE TOPP partners have provided training in enterprise budgets, holistic decision-making, and marketing, equipping farmers with the necessary skills for success.

Another key focus is nurturing the next generation of organic industry professionals by introducing students to organic agriculture's role in the broader agricultural landscape and demonstrating a commitment pathway to joining and sustaining the organic workforce. By enhancing market opportunities for Certified Organic producers and empowering service providers with essential knowledge, we're laying the groundwork for the organic sector's future leaders through comprehensive training and educational initiatives, benefiting aspiring professionals.

Looking Ahead to 2024

As we step into year 2 of our journey, we will continue to support farmers in our region through the key performance areas while increasing our focus on creating meaningful mentor-mentee pairings across the region, offering technical assistance to farmers within the region tailored to their needs, and providing opportunities for development of the organic workforce. Together, we are not just cultivating crops, we are nurturing a brighter, more sustainable future for agriculture in the Southeast!



PHOTO: More than 30 TOPP partner organizations from seven states and two territories came together for the first Southeast TOPP Partner Annual Meeting

Questions for SE TOPP?

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