

SOUTHEAST

TRANSITION TO ORGANIC PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

ROOTED IN COMMUNITY: COMMUNITY VOICES SHAPE THE FUTURE OF ORGANIC AGRICULTURE AT NORTH FLORIDA TOWN HALL

On the morning of August 19th in Orange Park, a few miles southwest of Jacksonville, farmers gathered under the roof of the Hilltop Club carrying with them the recent stories of their farms: blueberries from sandy ridges, microgreens from greenhouse benches, cattle on drought-tolerant pasture, vegetables rooted in soils that had endured another summer of heat, storms, and uncertainty. Some had farmed for decades. Others were still deciding what kind of farmers they hoped to become.

The town hall, organized by Florida Organic Growers through the Southeast Transition to Organic Partnership Program, was intended as a conversation rather than a presentation. Resource information from FOG staff and partners framed the discussion, but the day belonged to the producers seated around the tables.



Participants engaging in discussions during the Town Hall.

When asked what they were growing, the answers formed a portrait of agriculture in the Southeast. Blueberries, cabbage, collards, corn, peas, bananas, avocados, peppers, fruit trees, flowers, and herbal teas. Participants also discussed their food forests, native plants, and other specialty perennial crops. One producer saw opportunity in bamboo; another in grazing systems adapted to heat and drought.

The challenges surfaced just as quickly. Farmers spoke of weed pressure, pests, labor shortages, storm damage, insurance difficulties, and markets that seemed perpetually out of reach. Production concerns often led back to economics. Input costs continued to rise. Equipment repairs arrived at inconvenient moments. Shipping expenses cut into already narrow margins. Access to land remained difficult. Several participants described farming not as a path to expansion, but as an exercise in endurance. Yet the discussions rarely lingered on obstacles alone.

When breaking for lunch, the mood was decidedly positive. Participants repeatedly returned to the value of relationships. They called for stronger networks among farmers, more opportunities for peer learning, better marketing assistance, and practical education tailored both to beginning farmers and experienced operators. Grants, cost-share programs, tax incentives, and organic-specific technical assistance were frequently mentioned, but so was a simpler need: having knowledgeable people to call when questions arise.

Farmers also expressed interest in shared equipment programs, recordkeeping assistance, irrigation guidance, and stronger connections to lenders and institutions that understand the realities of organic production.

The town hall created a space where producers could compare experiences, identify common concerns, and help shape future programming. In a room filled with different operations, crops, and ambitions, a common theme emerged: farmers wanted practical resources, meaningful connections, and support systems capable of meeting the needs and challenges of organic producers.

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www.organictransition.org/region/southeast

United States Department of Agriculture
Agricultural Marketing Service
National Organic Program
Transition to Organic Partnership Program