

Building a Georgia Beyond Carbon: Inside the Drawdown Georgia Business Compact

Summary

What does it take to get 70 competing businesses working together on climate solutions? In this conversation, David Eady, director of industry engagement at the Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business at Georgia Tech and organizer of the Drawdown Georgia Business Compact, joins host Eriqah Vincent to talk about how the Compact formed, what collective action looks like across sectors from clean energy to food waste, and why equity has been built into the initiative from day one.

Key Takeaways

- The Drawdown Georgia Business Compact launched in October 2021 with about a dozen founding members and has grown to roughly 70 companies, ranging from multinational corporations to small, minority-owned startups across every region of Georgia.
- Member companies focus on collective-action initiatives where working together beats going it alone, including carbon-free electricity, renewable natural gas, sustainable aviation fuel, forest carbon sequestration, healthy home retrofits, and plastics circularity.
- Equity is intentional, not incidental: the Compact actively recruits women-led, minority-owned, and B Corp businesses, and partners with organizations like the Georgia Forestry Foundation and the University of Georgia to help underserved landowners access the voluntary carbon market.
- David has been most surprised and inspired by purpose-driven, profitable small businesses like Retaaza and Goodr, which built entire companies around solving food waste and food insecurity at the same time.
- The Compact's biggest win may be the community it has built among sustainability leaders, who share ideas, form new partnerships, and hold each other accountable to Georgia's shared climate goals.

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Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful, welcome back everyone to this Drawdown Georgia interview series. I'm really happy today to be speaking with David Eady. David is here to talk to us today about Drawdown Georgia's Business Compact, so I'm really excited to talk to you today, David. Thank you so much for joining me.

David Eady: No, thank you.

Eriqah Vincent: I'd like to start by asking you to introduce yourself to our audience, and tell us what brought you to a career focused on sustainability, first of all.

David Eady: Sure, yeah, so I'm David Eady, director of industry engagement within the Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business, which sits within the Scheller College of Business at Georgia Tech. As far as what brought me into a profession in sustainability, it really does date back to growing up — playing in the woods, being immersed in nature throughout my formative years — and then going off to college and studying environmental ethics at the University of Georgia. When I graduated with my undergraduate degree, I had this passion to save the world, but absolutely no technical skills to really have an impact. That brought me into community organizing work with a statewide nonprofit, the Georgia Environmental Project, where I worked and got a lot of great teaching and mentoring around community organizing skills, and really got to see a lot of the impacts of environmental injustices being imposed on rural communities and African American communities across Georgia and the Southeast. That strengthened my conviction that I wanted to be part of change, and also convinced me I needed to go back to graduate school in order to become more gainfully employed. I went to Georgia State, got my master's in community planning and development, and coming out of grad school, because of the networking I'd done, I was recruited to work with the Army Environmental Policy Institute, which supports the Secretary of the Army's office, sitting in an office at Georgia Tech and at Clark Atlanta University.

The reason they were intrigued to bring me on as a fellow was because of my work in environmental justice — President Clinton had signed an executive order on environmental justice, and no one within the Army or DOD knew anything about it, so they were assembling a team to work on that policy. I ended up spending over 20 years of my career bringing sustainability and environmental justice into the U.S. Army and across DOD. Part of that time was in consulting, so I was able to get into sustainability across a variety of subject areas, whether it's land conservation, pollution prevention, energy management and efficiency, and so on — really ran the gamut. Part of that time I was on the research faculty at Georgia Tech in the School of Public Policy, and part of the time I was a private consultant working with different organizations. So, yeah, I've just been in the field for a long time.

Eriqah Vincent: Yes, yes, and I totally understand your non-linear path into this work — it's very reminiscent of my own path. So you lead the Drawdown Georgia Business Compact, which I'd love to hear more about — tell us about the Compact. Where did the idea come from, and what types of companies have joined? I think it's about 70 companies now. And why should Georgia-based businesses get involved with the Compact?

David Eady: Yeah, when the Drawdown Georgia research team was assembled back in 2019, they were looking at what climate solutions were most applicable to Georgia. At the same time, we were looking at what type of corporate activity there was around decarbonization and climate action. We were seeing that even though the federal administration at the time was pulling back from the Paris Climate Accord, the corporate sector was leaning in, really accelerating some of their commitments to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and addressing equity issues around the same time. So we were convinced there was an opportunity to build on that leadership in the corporate sector, particularly in the absence of leadership within the federal government. We started talking with our corporate partners about this idea of a collective impact initiative.

Collective impact is a particular term that came out of academia — it's when a group has a shared mission and vision they work toward, that aligns with their individual activities, and there's an ongoing, coordinated effort to work in alignment on things that advance that common mission. We wanted to brand this collective impact initiative in alignment with the Drawdown Georgia research, and ask, how can the business community help accelerate the deployment of these solutions? So around the same time the first phase of the research was wrapping up, at the end of 2020, and those solutions were announced, we started formally organizing what this Drawdown Georgia Business Compact would look like, and how it might help advance the solutions coming out of the research.

We had about a dozen founding members, which included folks like Coca-Cola, Delta Air Lines, UPS, Google, and Amazon — some real heavy hitters at the start — but also some smaller businesses, Better Earth and Goodr among them. We said from the beginning we wanted the group to be diverse — we wanted it to represent Georgia's economy in the fullest sense. We wanted to represent big multinational companies, but also small businesses, startups, minority-owned businesses, B Corporations. We also wanted to be geographically diverse — it wasn't going to be just Atlanta-centric, we wanted companies throughout Georgia, and I can speak to that a bit more.

We came up with a list of over a hundred companies as our target outreach list, and started talking to them about the vision of companies coming together and aligning their efforts. Everyone had their own decarbonization pathway they were charting at the time, and people were at different stages of that path — some were just getting started, some had been at it for a while. We said, as the Ray C. Anderson Center for Sustainable Business, we'll focus on three things. We'll help organize and facilitate collaborative efforts where it makes sense for two or more companies to come together and work on something. We'll also help catalyze innovation — Georgia has a great innovation ecosystem, so how do we nurture more sustainability and climate-action-related solutions within that ecosystem? And we said we'll build a community of practice — we have all these people doing this work within their respective organizations, but building community among them, sharing with each other, learning together, learning from one another. And we'll also keep track of progress, how we're doing across the state and as a collective.

We officially launched in October of 2021 with about a dozen founders, and started the process of recruiting other companies to join, while also ideating around what our main areas of focus should be, since there's a whole lot we could do. One last point — from the beginning, we wanted to make sure it wasn't just focused on climate action, just on decarbonization, but also on how we could advance these solutions in ways that create new economic opportunities, advance equity, safeguard our natural resources and environment, and address risks to public health. I think you were involved in some of those early discussions, Eriqah, about what we were calling Beyond Carbon — it's not just about carbon, we had to bake in, from the get-go, this broader view of what it takes to deploy solutions that have these additional benefits for our communities.

Eriqah Vincent: Right, yeah, I remember some of that. I'm wondering, as a follow-up, for businesses that might be interested in joining the Business Compact — what's the structure of the initiative right now? In general terms, how do you all meet, how does that functionality work for businesses that might be interested in tapping in?

David Eady: Yeah, we try to keep the road to joining fairly simple. I usually engage with folks in a conversation, explaining in more detail what the Compact is, talking to them about their

priorities and how they align, and even exploring some ideas about how joining the Compact might help them advance some of those priorities. But really, it's just — you say, yeah, we align with the effort, we want to join. You agree to share what you're doing already, the stories, successes, and challenges you've experienced, and we do ask for a financial donation from members, based on the size of the company. We have companies donating from \$250 a year up to \$50,000 a year — it really ranges depending on the company. We bring them in and start introducing them to the other members virtually at first, and then we have meetings of the whole Compact — I call them all-hands meetings — twice a year, usually spring and fall. That's a good chance to get everybody together, celebrate successes, and introduce new members. Then, throughout the year, we'll have working groups meeting on specific topics. We've been doing a lot of work around how to bring more carbon-free electricity onto the grid, which is particularly challenging for existing industries and existing utility customers, because they don't have the leverage to come in and say, we demand a hundred percent renewable power. As existing customers, they need the utilities to offer them ways to decarbonize the electricity they're using, and that's proven challenging on an individual basis. So by coming together and saying, we all have these common challenges, how can we work with utilities to make progress on that, or develop new programs — we look for those kinds of initiatives where, working together, we're stronger and more impactful through our collective voice than through our individual efforts.

Eriqah Vincent: That sounds really impactful, and you've mentioned some of this already — 70 companies is very impressive for a big state like Georgia, with the way economies work around the state, and, as you said, trying to get some diversity of region as well. So, with such a big group, what are some of the initiatives the Business Compact is working on right now?

David Eady: So I mentioned carbon-free power, that's an ongoing effort — we've had a great partnership with Georgia Power in talking through that and looking at how they can bring new programs that support industry, as well as with MEAG Power and Georgia EMC. We've looked at renewable natural gas as an intermediate step — we use a lot of natural gas in Georgia for industrial processes and generating electricity, but we also have a lot of potential for biogas, gas that can reduce the carbon intensity of the gas we're using. So we've been talking about what demand there might be, and what opportunities there might be for collectively investing in renewable natural gas. We're also looking at sustainable aviation fuel — we have the world's busiest airport, and one of the largest airlines, Delta Air Lines, right here. We have great resources on the agricultural and forestry fronts that can be used as feedstock to make biofuel for commercial jets, right here in Georgia. So we talk about Georgia-grown sustainable aviation fuel as an opportunity, and it's also going to create new economic opportunity for our rural landowners and farmers across the state — we think there's real good potential there.

We've also talked about our forestry resources in terms of carbon sequestration, particularly for our underserved and smaller-acreage landowners — how do we build capacity for them to participate in the voluntary carbon market, which can be very complex to navigate. You may hear conflicting messages around it, so how do you feel confident participating in that as a landowner? And then also, how do we connect that with companies that might be a little hesitant right now, because there's been a lot of negative press around it for a while, and now folks are converging and saying, no, there are good, high-quality carbon credits that can be generated and sold through the voluntary carbon market. Georgia is really underrepresented in that market as a whole — we don't have as many projects in Georgia as we could, or as other states do. So how do we get more going? Because we believe that means investing in our

forestry resources, keeping forest as forest, rather than having it converted into other things — that's another collective initiative we've really been leaning into.

One we're really looking to get into moving forward is around how industry can help invest in improvements to homes that might need life, wellness, and safety improvements, as well as energy efficiency improvements. So you're creating healthy living environments, reducing energy burden, and obviously lowering demand for electricity, which reduces greenhouse gas emissions. We might support that philanthropically, but maybe we also incentivize it by generating carbon credits or other credits that show up on their electric bill — that would create more of an incentive, because there's just not enough federal and local dollars from the government side to make the level of impact we need in Atlanta and other cities and towns across Georgia. So we really think there's a lot of opportunity there, and we're looking at piloting an effort, possibly in Atlanta, working with the City of Atlanta, Georgia Power, and others. Those are just a few of the initiatives we really try to focus on, the ones more conducive to collective action.

But then everyone's interested in reducing waste and creating circularity in the materials going out there — plastic is a huge issue. How can you create more circularity there, and maybe there's a collective opportunity? We have great organizations like CHaRM that serve as receivers of a variety of materials — how do we create more of those regional collection facilities? Because a lot of it comes down to, how do my customers get their leftover plastic to where it needs to go, who do they give it to, how do they get it there — there's a logistical challenge. So that's something we've been talking about, and hopefully we'll dive more into that as we move forward.

Eriqah Vincent: I love hearing about all the businesses we interact with all the time, and the fact that they're on the radar of the Business Compact — I think that's great. I love CHaRM, we go to CHaRM all the time in our house, so that's really fantastic to hear. And also, on the equity piece — we talk a lot about making homes more energy efficient, but making them safe first, you know — a lot of the businesses and organizations that do retrofits can't even do some of those retrofits, because somebody needs a new roof, or needs their plumbing replaced, whatever it is. So the awareness of the business community on those pieces is really important — I'm glad you mentioned that.

David Eady: We have some great nonprofit partners who've helped educate us on the need and the opportunity — Groundswell, I've known Michelle Moore for a long time, she's from LaGrange, and they've done some work down in LaGrange, partnered with Southface. And you realize, oh, they needed a roof, or they needed their plumbing pipes replaced, or they needed all new electrical — there are some basic life, safety, and wellness things that need to happen to a house before you even start looking at how to put more insulation in the roofline, or new windows and doors, or bring in energy-efficient appliances and electrify what's in the home. We definitely want to do those things, but we've got to do, like you said, some of that pre-work that's really important for creating good, healthy homes.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely. So, since we're talking about it — what is the Compact doing, aside from what we've already mentioned, to elevate issues of equity around climate and business in Georgia's business community?

David Eady: That's a good question. Being mindful as we go through discussions, also looking to make sure we engage with partners on the initiatives we're working on — when we talked about energy efficiency in homes and retrofits, working with some of the groups that have been

engaged, whether it's Atlanta or Rebuild ATL, one of the early efforts, to help us be aware of what those opportunities are, and bake them into the initiatives. We partnered with the Georgia Forestry Foundation and the University of Georgia to apply for a grant specifically focused on underserved landowners and smaller-acreage landowners, making sure they were engaged in the voluntary carbon market, for example. And if we look at opportunities in renewable natural gas, how do we make sure we're engaging African American farmers or women-owned farms in the opportunities to turn their material into biogas and sell it on the market? So we're just trying to be very purposeful — I think intent is so important, to have that in the forefront of your mind, but also in terms of who we're trying to recruit to join the Compact. We want women-led businesses, we want minority-led businesses in the Compact, to also educate us on some of the challenges they may face, that we can help elevate opportunities for them in ways they haven't been successful before.

I know Cherry Street Energy, one of our early members in the Compact, has a great program training folks in how to install solar panels, and there was one woman in particular, an African American woman who'd been through their program, who decided to start her own company, and now she's really taken off in terms of being an installer — she works with Cherry Street and others to install solar panels. A lot of that was just building up her capacity to set up a new business and be successful in this area of opportunity. So I think it's really just across the board and everything we do, trying to make sure it's not an afterthought, but front of mind, that this is always an important element of everything we do.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely. I think, you know, we talked about the way the businesses the Compact works with are working in community, but also working for equity in business — like you said, women-owned, minority-owned businesses in the state, and trying to recruit them to the Compact. And I'm glad you're saying that, because I think when people hear things like Georgia Business Compact, they're thinking about the big industry folks — when I first heard about it, I was thinking about our large businesses, your Deltas and so on. So it's good to know those smaller companies not only have a place in the Business Compact, which is really important, but also have a voice to say, here are the issues we're dealing with that are unique to us, that you all aren't, because you don't have those same challenges — we have all these systems of oppression layered on us, and you all are working with different sorts of privileges.

David Eady: Exactly, and a lot of times that's where a lot of innovation is coming from, that's where a lot of new employment opportunities are coming from — there's a lot of growth opportunity there. How do we nurture that, instead of just within these incumbent industries that are already well established — how can they contribute to industry as a whole, as a community, and then also look at how they impact the communities where they are? Most of the companies in the Compact are very engaged in their local communities and have different initiatives there as well. There's sort of a self-selection bias in the companies that join — companies that want to be having a positive impact, not just be about profit. They obviously want to be profitable, they have to be profitable, they see sustainability and climate action as strategic imperatives for their business, but they also see it as a moral obligation to contribute in a positive way to the communities where their employees work and live.

So it's a lot of great, well-known brands, but then also scrappy startups you might not know — Good Agriculture, that's a woman-owned business trying to help farmers, doing all the back-of-house stuff it takes to run a farm from a business perspective. Farmers are really good at growing food, but they aren't necessarily good at managing the business side of farming, finding markets, managing finances, tracking all of that. So they provide support to farms,

particularly smaller farms and Black-owned farms across the state, the Southeast, and elsewhere — they're a great, scrappy little startup company that joined the Compact, and we try to elevate what they're doing to make people aware and hopefully bring them more clients.

Eriqah Vincent: I love that. Switching gears a little bit — working with people, especially people from all different types of businesses, and running a network of folks, as I've done a few times in my career — people come from all different lenses and experiences. So what has surprised you most about your work with industry and with the Business Compact companies?

David Eady: Wow, what has surprised me most... that's a tough question, it's hard to challenge or surprise me. But I think I've been most surprised by the innovative spirit of some of the smaller companies that really started from a place of just seeing a need and saying, I can do something about that and still make money doing it. Retaaza is another company — Kashi Sehgal, sitting there during COVID, seeing truckloads of produce getting dumped because there wasn't a customer or a market to take it to, and she said, that should never happen, we've got people going hungry while we've got food being wasted from field to grocery store to your table — how can we work on that, it's a logistical problem, how can I help address that? And Jasmine Crowe-Houston's story — seeing people in need, people hungry, cooking food herself and bringing it out to feed people, but then realizing there was a lot of other prepared food going to waste that she could create a company to collect and deliver to organizations feeding folks in need. So much food that's wasted could instead be used to feed people going hungry.

So those are just two organizations I've been blown away by, by their purpose-driven mission — but it's not at the expense of making money and being successful as an enterprise. These aren't nonprofits, they've gone the B Corp route, which just says, we as a company have baked in a public benefit as part of our mission, but it doesn't say we don't want to be profitable — it says we do want to be profitable, but we want to be purpose-driven and put people at the forefront of our business. I just continue to be impressed by people who recognize those needs and find innovative ways to bring solutions and have significant impact on people's lives. So that's probably the biggest area where I've been surprised and blown away.

Eriqah Vincent: That's so important, and I'm glad you keep mentioning that — there's a place and space for nonprofits, that's the work that I do and have always done, and there's also a place and space for businesses to be beneficial to the community while also being profitable. Understanding that organizations like B Corps have that public benefit, but there's also a revenue stream, which is so important, especially for those in minority-owned businesses. I think it's so cool to hear them being in the same room and having the same voice and space as bigger businesses that might still want to do well, but sometimes it's harder when you're trying to generate that much revenue to see what your blind spots are around doing the best you can for the community as well. So I think that's a really good point you're making about this space being really beneficial, and an attractive point for being part of this network.

David Eady: And I think it's also incumbent upon us, as Georgia Tech, to give a platform to a diverse group of businesses, and let people be aware of who they are and what the opportunities are for working with them. Several of the companies I mentioned have, as a result of the Compact, been able to create partnerships with companies like Norfolk Southern, collecting up excess food from their food services — all these big companies have food courts in their buildings and food service partners, so partnering with them to make sure food is diverted, or connecting them with nonprofits like the Common Market, or with for-profits like Retaaza, to buy produce that goes to these food service companies, and that's local, locally

grown here in Georgia. So it's been neat to use those skills of creating networks and connections, building partnerships, and seeing them take advantage of the opportunity to partner with businesses.

And it doesn't even have to be small businesses partnering with big businesses — we've also created a digital platform where people can see what each other is doing, what initiatives they have going on, some of the partnerships that have formed between member companies, and they can say, hey, I'd love to connect with you, I'd love to learn more about that, I'd like to join your effort there. So creating visibility into what's going on, and making people aware of the capacity and capabilities of each company, as well as their priorities and initiatives that they might want to engage on. I think the companies have said the community aspect has been one of the biggest positive impacts they've experienced from being part of the Drawdown Georgia Business Compact — getting to know other companies, hearing about their successes and getting inspired by that, or just learning about new companies they'd never heard of that they might want to partner with. That learning together, sharing with one another, and connecting with each other has been such an important part. Eriqah, you know this from your work in organizing — that's an important part of any kind of movement-type effort, understanding your connection to something bigger than just what you're doing, and figuring out how to join in on this larger effort and amplify your impact by being part of this broader movement of folks trying to make a difference here in Georgia and across the Southeast — even globally.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, I totally agree with you, and that type of community, whether in a nonprofit space or a business space — building community, I think, is the common thread between the work that you and I do. That building of community, of the space, of the network you're hosting, is really important for those changes to happen. So that's really fantastic to see on the other side. Thank you so much, David, for this insight on the Drawdown Georgia Business Compact, and we'll make sure folks get information on how to join, because I know there will be more folks interested in joining the Compact after seeing this interview.

My favorite question is coming up, it's our last question, and I'd love to hear from you — what is giving you hope around climate in Georgia?

David Eady: I mean, I kind of alluded to it already — it's these rock stars, like Jasmine and Kashi, and also folks like Savannah Seydel, who are out there making an impact while making a profit in the work that they do. I've told my sons, and I tell students, that all the while the federal government may be letting you down, or may not be as aligned with your values, that can be disheartening — but you can look and see, well, there are folks still committed, and industry is still taking action. Paul Hawken wrote the book *The Ecology of Commerce*, which was the book that really catalyzed Ray Anderson's shift toward becoming a champion for sustainability at Interface. He talked about how commerce has the resources to really have an impact at a level that other sectors don't. So I think seeing businesses recognize their potential, and bring their resources to bear on these very complex challenges we face — like climate change, like racial justice and racial injustice — that does give me hope. It's the people I come in contact with on a very personal level that inspire me and continue to make me feel good about coming to work every day.

Eriqah Vincent: Absolutely, and I say all the time, I've said it on this show before too, it's very easy to write Georgia and the South off. But I think what makes places like Georgia, and initiatives and efforts like Drawdown, and initiatives and efforts like the Business Compact, so impactful, is that even under sometimes impossible circumstances, folks are still doing really

fantastic and impactful work, and the work isn't stopping. Even in the time we're in now, the work is continuing, and folks are finding interesting ways to get around certain things and still make sure their work is aligned with their values. I think whether you're a nonprofit or a B Corp or a corporation, there are ways to do that. So I'm glad places like the Business Compact exist, and I'm glad you're helping make sure they continue to exist. Thank you so much, David, thank you for your work, thank you for coming to tell us about the Drawdown Georgia Business Compact. As I said to our audience, we'll make sure folks get information on how to join the Business Compact and connect with David and the folks over at Georgia Tech and Drawdown in this fantastic effort.

Thank you, David, for being here once again, and thank you for giving us this information about the Drawdown Georgia Business Compact, and thank you all so much for being here with me once again. I hope you'll join us next month for another interview with a great Georgia climate leader. Thank you. Thanks, David.

David Eady: Thank you, Eriqah, really enjoyed talking with you, appreciate the opportunity.

Eriqah Vincent: Awesome, thanks, bye-bye everybody.