

Supporting Local Farmers in Shifting to Climate-Smart Agriculture

Summary

How do you help farmers access resources they're often reluctant to trust? In this conversation, Meg Darnell, Farmer Services Coordinator at Georgia Organics, and Ben Sterling, Program Manager at McIntosh S.E.E.D., join host Eriqah Vincent to talk about the Climate Smart Farmer Program, a partnership that's helping Black and Brown farmers in coastal Georgia access USDA conservation and solar funding, and why trust-building has been just as important as the funding itself.

Key Takeaways

- Georgia Organics and McIntosh S.E.E.D. combined their strengths, Georgia Organics' administrative expertise and McIntosh S.E.E.D.'s deep community trust, to launch the Climate Smart Farmer Program with support from a Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions & Equity Grant.
- In its first cohort, all 10 participating farms applied for USDA EQIP conservation contracts, with nine approved, and one farm successfully installed solar through the USDA's Rural Energy for America Program (REAP).
- A major barrier for farmers wasn't awareness of these programs, it was distrust rooted in the USDA's documented history of discrimination against Black and Brown farmers, which McIntosh S.E.E.D.'s community relationships helped overcome.
- The 2025–2026 continuation grant is expanding the program beyond a cohort model, opening technical assistance to more farmers across a 30–60-mile radius of coastal Georgia.
- Conservation practices and solar aren't just about emissions reduction, they've helped farmers boost crop yields, extend growing seasons with high tunnels, and enter entirely new markets, turning climate resilience into a business advantage.

Transcript Notice: This transcript was generated automatically and may contain transcription errors. It has been lightly edited for clarity. Please refer to the video for the most accurate record.

Eriqah Vincent: Hi, everyone, thank you so much for being here again. Happy New Year, we're starting again — I'm so honored to be bringing back, and for this team to be bringing back, the Drawdown Georgia interview series once again for 2025. We have an exciting lineup for you all this year, and some really great guests, including the wonderful guests we have today.

I'm very excited to start off these great conversations, and even more excited to be with Meg Darnell and Ben Sterling today, to kick off this 2025 season of the series. Good morning, Meg, good morning, Ben, thank you so much for being here with me today for our Drawdown conversation. I'm excited to talk to you both for multiple reasons. I'd like to start by asking you both to introduce yourselves, and the work your respective organizations do in the community.

Meg Darnell: Great, thanks, Eriqah, I appreciate it. Ben, do you want to go first?

Ben Sterling: Sure, no problem, thanks, Eriqah, appreciate it as well. So, my name is Ben Sterling, I'm the program manager for McIntosh S.E.E.D. The acronym stands for Sustainable Environment Economic Development. We're a nonprofit organization located in Southeast Georgia, in Darien, right along the beautiful coast. We're dedicated to empowering underserved farmers, families, communities, and landowners in Georgia's rural areas, and we were founded in 1998. McIntosh S.E.E.D. has a long-standing history of promoting environmental stewardship, economic development, and social equity. Today, the organization provides resources, technical assistance, and educational programs to help landowners and farmers access USDA programs, adopt and implement sustainable practices, and enter new markets, whatever that may look like. We pride ourselves on meeting farmers where they are, and helping walk them through the process of acquiring certifications, filling out paperwork, whatever that may mean, when it comes to accessing resources. That's what we do.

Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful. Maybe you want to talk about Georgia Organics, Meg?

Meg Darnell: My name is Meg Darnell, I'm a Farmer Services Coordinator at Georgia Organics. Georgia Organics has been around for more than 25 years — we connect farmers to resources that help them thrive. Farmer prosperity is kind of our overarching goal as an organization. We also advocate for policies that strengthen local food systems, and we build programs that empower farmers to be resilient in the face of climate change, economic challenges, and other pressures farmers face, across the entire state of Georgia. Our offices are in Atlanta, but we've been wanting to expand our services more far and wide in Georgia, and this was a perfect opportunity to do so, in partnership with McIntosh S.E.E.D.

Eriqah Vincent: Great, thank you both so much. I'm going to put my glasses on for this next question, I wanted to make sure I got this right. I have an immense amount of respect for Georgia Organics, Meg, so I'm really glad to have you here, and I was so delighted to be introduced to McIntosh S.E.E.D. a few years ago, as you all were joint applicants for the Climate Solutions and Equity Grant from Drawdown Georgia. We've talked about the Drawdown Georgia grants on this show before — we've had some former and current grantees on the show, so we've talked about it in passing, but I really want to introduce our audience deliberately to what those grants are, because it's a really special program.

The Climate Solutions and Equity Grant is designed to accelerate Drawdown Georgia's mission to advance achievable climate solutions that prioritize equity across the state — that's the important part, equity across the state, advancing equity and climate solutions at the same time. I think, in my time in the environmental movement, it started out very science-heavy, and we saw that the most powerful stories and projects that really made a difference in the movement were the ones that centered equity and underserved communities. So prioritizing equity across the state is so important. These grants are centered around the Drawdown Georgia climate solutions, like composting, electric vehicles, energy efficiency improvements, food waste reduction, plant-based diets, rooftop solar, and so on. I'm honored to have been part of the advisory committee for choosing the Drawdown Georgia Climate Solutions and Equity Grant grantees over the past few years — we just did our third cohort of grantees. I've always given this particular project high marks when we're discussing those grants, because it really is a fantastic project.

I'm not someone who comes from a rural background, or has that familiarity, but I have such immense respect for farmers, for agriculture — as a city girl, I have such immense respect, especially for Black farmers, because I know, having learned a lot, about the inequities in

agriculture. So I was really excited not only to see you all as part of our first cohort, but also to see you become the first grantee to get a continuation grant, in the third cohort. Congratulations to you both, and to the great work your project has been doing — you're the first organization to receive two of these grants. So please tell us about the work these grants are funding, and why you decided to renew your grant again this year.

Meg Darnell: I can take the lead on that. We wanted to say thank you as well, we're super excited to be part of this important work, and have a lot of respect for Drawdown Georgia and all its initiatives. The first grant we received really helped us pilot the Climate Smart Farmer Program. I think McIntosh S.E.E.D. and Georgia Organics came at this from two different directions — we have an emergency farmer fund, and we were thinking, how can we be more proactive? We're seeing natural disasters increasing in frequency, and what could we do to help farmers be resilient to climate change? And McIntosh S.E.E.D. — Ben, correct me if I'm wrong — was already sort of doing this work, for a myriad of reasons, supporting farmers in rural Georgia. So it just came together as a perfect partnership, I think.

The overarching mission of that first pilot program was to give Black and Brown farmers access to USDA resources that were already available to them, but that we were seeing they weren't accessing. So we did a first round of outreach and education — these programs are available to you, NRCS has this amazing EQIP program, where you can access — they don't like to call it grant money, but —

Ben Sterling: Cost-share programs.

Meg Darnell: — cost-share programs for conservation practices. We don't need to reinvent the wheel here, there's already money in programs to advance farmers' conservation practices, how can we help them access it? So that's really where our program and this proposal came in. We did outreach, making sure farmers in the area knew these programs were available to them, we did education, we held several farmer field days, to make those networking sessions happen, where they're meeting other farmers interested in the same thing, meeting their NRCS agents. And then McIntosh S.E.E.D. took that a step further, being that bridge — they're a trusted organization in that community, and they're really handholding both sides, making those connections with the agents and the farmers, to build trust. I think we all agreed, at the end of the program, it was successful on many levels, but that relationship-building piece was huge.

In addition to that, another issue with NRCS EQIP is that it's only cost-share — it's not a totally free project, you still have to come up with a certain percentage of money. So we really felt like we needed funding to bridge that gap, and that's what Drawdown allowed us to do. So the first program was very successful — we had all 10 farms in the first cohort receive technical assistance for EQIP applications, and all of them successfully applied, and nine were approved for contracts, gaining funding for conservation practices. We also provided one-on-one guidance for the REAP grant — that's the Rural Energy for America Program — which was the solar piece of all this. So it was two-pronged, conservation agriculture and solar were the two things we identified we could get resources and education around for our farmers. One farmer accessed the REAP grant and installed solar, which was a very exciting outcome of that first program.

The success of that made it pretty apparent there was a tremendous need in this area, and across Georgia, for these services, so we wanted to expand on it. In this new grant cycle, we're changing our approach a little — instead of limiting participation to a cohort model, we're opening up the program to all farmers to access technical assistance to apply for EQIP, and then

we'll do a call for proposals for grants for conservation practices. So we're hoping to do outreach and education much further, and we'll probably keep the funding gap coverage to about the same number of farms.

Ben Sterling: Some of the things that came to light throughout the process were us understanding why there was such a big discrepancy in whether underserved farmers were getting access to these resources, or able to utilize them, or even being approved. Some of it came down to the application process — not being familiar with what was required, or, in some cases, not even applying at all, because of a situation that happened years ago. As we're aware, there are discrimination claims regarding how Black and Brown farmers have been treated by the USDA. But, like Meg said, McIntosh S.E.E.D. being a trusted organization, having relationships with a lot of the district conservationists in the area, at all levels concerning the USDA, but also talking to a network of farmers — we continue to give them educational webinars, and we actually own and operate an 1,100-acre community forest that we use as a learning lab for some of our landowners, so we're able to show conservation practices in real time, and have them bring those practices back to their communities.

A lot of it is the discomfort of, I'm not familiar or comfortable with someone coming out to my farm — even though you're saying this resource is free, and they're coming to help me, with their wealth of knowledge on everything from soil health to yielding higher crops, I don't want them on my land. So we made sure we were there, available, during all those site visits too, to help break down that barrier, and have them implement some of these conservation practices, and see the benefits, so they can share that with their families and communities.

So, like Meg said, the first year we limited it to a cohort of 10 farmers, to get an idea of how this would work. We don't have any control over who gets approved by USDA, so we made that abundantly clear — we can't guarantee approval, but if these are practices you plan on implementing anyway, here's a program that will help pay, if you're a socially disadvantaged or historically underserved farmer, up to 90 percent of that conservation practice. We were able to use the Drawdown Georgia grant to cover the extra 10 percent, and beyond that, help farmers see, oh, I really can get this done, because maybe the financial input required upfront won't necessarily be such a barrier, since that's usually one of the highest barriers — well, I can't afford it, I'm just trying to keep the land, so trying to make it better through conservation practices doesn't interest me if I can't afford it. So we were able to share education on why it should interest them, why it brings value to their land. Especially with solar — of the 10 farms, we had one able to utilize it, and that was for the same reason, in our questionnaire about interest in solar, the number one answer for not being interested was, I can't afford it, it's not even a thought to me. So, thankfully, through the grant, we were able to help a farm actually implement that, and show their community the benefits, beyond just the cost savings from having solar on the farm. So, through this third cohort, we're able to extend that out to a broader network of farmers, so it won't just be a cohort, but more people, hopefully, applying for these resources, whether they ultimately utilize them or not.

Eriqah Vincent: That's so awesome, and I love hearing how these project grants are implementing and reaching right into the community. I'm really appreciative of you both talking about that distrust, Ben — it's really poignant that you mentioned the distrust underserved farmers, Black and Brown farmers, have toward people coming onto their land, and the whole process, the whole system. We know there's been discrimination, and there has been, at the USDA — it's not a secret, it's documented, just as there's been discrimination in housing and other land ownership throughout the history of our country. So having McIntosh S.E.E.D. there,

as trusted partners in the community, to Meg's point, someone who can be present and give even a little bit of credibility or recognition, so people feel like you care just as much about their land, their farm, their livelihood as they do, and want to make sure they're protected, but also that they're part of these opportunities — that's really fantastic.

I'd love for us to go to the next question — I'd love to hear more about where the Climate Smart Farmer Program came from, and for you to tell us more about how solar arrays and conservation agriculture are helping Black and Brown farmers in Georgia become more resilient in the face of climate change. We've been having conversations about snow today, so it's becoming less and less of an anomaly, and something southern farmers are having to grapple with. So I'd love to hear more about how this program is helping people be more resilient — solar arrays, conservation agriculture, and other pieces — in the face of this changing climate.

Ben Sterling: Sure, I like to start with, first, when we're talking to our network of landowners or farmers about what's important to them, a lot of it is keeping the land. Like you just mentioned, climate change is real, it's happening in real time — I mentioned earlier I'm in Southeast Georgia, and we experienced snow for the first time in like 20-plus years. So they see it in real time. The inspiration for participating in this grant came from us always providing outreach and education to farms about why, or how, to mitigate some of the issues with climate change. But in real time, we've been able to show them the direct benefits of implementing conservation practices — not only are you mitigating climate change, you're increasing the value of your land. It's a passion of ours, as an organization, because we know how important it is to keep farms sustainable and profitable. A lot of farmers' first concern is, well, I'm just trying to be profitable, I'm just trying to make money. So we're able to tie it together — hey, if you implement soil health practices, the crops you grow will yield higher. If you're able to yield higher crops on the same acreage, you're able to produce more. If you produce more, you can sell more. So being able to tie how conservation practices directly affect their pockets was one way we got buy-in from landowners, because it's not just about the money, but a lot of it is — if you're worried about paying taxes at the end of the year, that's a bigger concern than whether your soil's pH level is at seven. So we utilize the grant funds to give direct stipends to the farms for those conservation practices, and a lot of the inspiration came from those conversations with farmers, as they're facing financial and environmental changes at the same time.

Especially for Black and Brown farmers, who are socially disadvantaged or historically underserved — a lot of them haven't taken advantage of federal programs that have been available for a long time. So just getting them exposed to these opportunities — you're already doing it, you're already doing rotational cover cropping, you're already rotating your crops, here's a program that will benefit you and compensate you for things you're already doing. Same with solar — like we said earlier, the biggest drawback to implementing solar was the direct, initial input cost — I can't afford to put solar panels on my farm, it costs too much. So we've been able to use the grant funds to alleviate that barrier, and, due to the complex and bureaucratic nature of the application process itself, we're able to handhold through that process, to help them get to implementation. We're all about implementation, but through that process, we continue to empower and educate the communities. And, like you said, there's also a history of discrimination that some farmers still feel the effects of right now, so we wanted to remove as many of those barriers as we could, to make sure farmers actually access the resources they need, and can implement conservation agricultural practices like cover crops, residue management, conservation tillage, and improved soil health. These practices enhance long-term productivity while mitigating the effects of extreme weather. Similarly, solar energy can reduce

operational costs and make farms more sustainable — lowering energy bills, providing additional revenue through net metering, solar arrays offer farms a reliable and renewable energy source. So understanding that, but also understanding why it's important, and getting farmer buy-in on it, is what inspired us to participate in this funding opportunity.

Eriqah Vincent: Right. I want to talk more about this partnership, because it's been really nice for me — as somebody familiar with Georgia Organics, but not familiar, as I said, with McIntosh S.E.E.D. before you applied for this grant. As a follow-up, you talked about the external benefits of this program, and working together — I wondered if you could talk a little about the way McIntosh S.E.E.D. and Georgia Organics work together, especially for folks thinking about applying for the grants in the future. We value the equity in the work just as much as the equity in the impact, and we want to make sure organizations are working well together, and that there's mutual benefit internally, because we know that when people feel respected, honored, and part of the process internally, everyone works better. So I wondered if either or both of you wanted to talk about the ways Georgia Organics and McIntosh S.E.E.D. work together, in an equitable way that makes both organizations feel valued, but also reflects the joint working capacity going into this project.

Ben Sterling: I want to start, Meg, if that's okay.

Eriqah Vincent: Yeah, sure.

Ben Sterling: McIntosh S.E.E.D. and Georgia Organics actually worked together before I joined — I've been with the organization three years, so there's a history of the two organizations collaborating on projects and programs before that. As far as my experience, I think because we always put the landowner or farmer first in anything we decide to do, and Georgia Organics does the same, it's been real organic in all of our discussions, from applying for the grant to implementing anything, the whole process. I feel like it's been organic and easy, because Meg doesn't make it about her, I don't make it about me, we always make it about what benefits the cohort most, to where they're most comfortable, but also to where they're able to implement — because there are a lot of programs that provide education, there's a webinar every week, and we always try to make sure it's as engaging as possible, but also relatable, because if we're talking about crop rotation and none of the farmers are even doing it, that may not be relatable. Some of the sustainable and conservation practices we mentioned were also geared toward what was needed — we had surveys initially, and heard from farmers what they were interested in doing. Through the entire process, we always kept in mind what would benefit the farmer most, with the funds we have — even to the point where, and I'll say thank you to Drawdown Georgia for this, allowing us to reallocate the budget a couple of times, so we could say, hey, we want to increase the stipend for the farmers, and that not being an issue when we were determining the conservation stipend. So I think that made it real organic and easy to just get the work done — I wanted to say that first.

Meg Darnell: Yeah, I totally agree. I feel like I'm constantly talking about how great our partnership is — I recently attended a leadership workshop at UGA, and they were talking about how difficult collaboration can be internally, but especially externally, because your two organizations' goals might not match up, or there's a myriad of reasons for conflict, communication styles, and so on. But I've had nothing but a completely positive experience working with Ben. I think, obviously, he and I really get along and have mutual respect, but I think this partnership aligned so well with this particular project because of their set of goals, and the resources and skills they have. Ben is really the face of the program, he's meeting with farmers,

building the trust, and I'm more background, more admin and spreadsheets — I plan most of our farmer field days, with input from Ben, of course, but taking away that extra work for Ben, so he can do what's really the important work. I think it's just such a good fit — I don't think we could do this program without them. They could probably do it without us, but we're lightening their load, because they do have a lot of work outside this program. So it's a really good fit.

Eriqah Vincent: I love that, thank you both for humoring me on that, because I think it's so important, and I want folks to really get that — the equal, mutual respect in conversation, communication, and collaboration between organizations, especially when, in general, you have organizations where one is far more well-established, has the wheels turned, has been around longer, has more staff, and you have a small organization that's maybe community-led, maybe completely volunteer-led — we see how collaborations can become very inequitable that way. Being the face of the program, talking to the farmers, is no less and no more important than the spreadsheets, the project planning, and processing — as someone who's also a project planner, yes, all of that is needed for things to run the way they need to. So that's really great, and leaning into those strengths is really serving you all well in this project — I think that's wonderful.

Along those lines, what you're all doing and learning about each other and these farmers — what's something you've learned, or that's surprised you, working with the first cohort in 2023 or 2024, and now, as you continue? I'd love to hear what's going to surprise you this time around, but first, what surprised you working with that first cohort?

Meg Darnell: I think we were pretty surprised at how many people applied, and the eagerness to participate in this program. It's funny, because I'm not sure surprised is the exact word — we were kind of hoping that would be the case. We unfortunately weren't surprised to hear that people weren't being contacted by their NRCS agent after they reached out — we did confirm that along the way, which was unfortunate. But we were pretty surprised at the amount of interest in solar. I think, to Ben's point earlier, it's definitely cost that's the biggest barrier to installing solar, but I think people are really interested in it, it's just too cost-prohibitive unless you're participating in a program like this. We were also surprised at the value of peer-to-peer networking — that was pretty consistent feedback we've gotten from surveys, that piece really bolsters everything, seeing their neighbors and friends interested in these practices too, and that being a bigger piece of the puzzle than we originally realized. Ben, do you want to talk about access?

Ben Sterling: Yeah, one thing that also surprised us — as far as the deliverables of the grant, we wanted to make sure we could implement conservation practices and solar — was how extending the life of a crop, by having a high tunnel, allowed farmers to enter a different market, because now they're able to sell a little longer. So the direct tie from conservation implementation resulted in — we always want more profit, we always want them to have more, healthier produce, but they were able to enter into new markets they were exposed to, because they're able to grow during a season that market required, compared to only having a short season before, which limited them to a different market. So the fact they were able to tie this directly to different markets was kind of like, okay, well, we're doing more than just preserving and mitigating for climate change, we're allowing you to become more profitable, and look at your farm differently, more as a business. So those were the kinds of conversations that came after people received their stipends — all right, well, now I'm able to do this, because I have this on my farm. That was a big surprise for me.

Eriqah Vincent: I love that, I love hearing they're able to enter into a new market. Thank you both so much, this has been so helpful and enlightening for me, as someone who's had such immense respect for the folks who work in agriculture, especially in the face of climate change — the folks seeing it firsthand, who know what their seasons look like, and how they've changed over the years they've been doing this. I really appreciate you both for the work you're doing, I'm so glad, congratulations again on getting a continuation grant. My last question, and Ben, I'd love for you to start — what is giving you hope around climate in Georgia?

Ben Sterling: Awesome, yeah, around climate in Georgia, as it pertains to the farms and farmland, the farmers themselves give us hope. Like I was saying, the high tunnel was able to extend into new markets. We had a farmer who — well, we just kind of wait on the rain, that's kind of what we do — and now we're saying, so you're telling me now I can get a well and drip irrigation? So now that farmer's able to extend their season, because they're like, yeah, God will provide, that's a true statement, and I believe it too, but now you have drip irrigation on your land, so you're not just relying on rainfall to come. Even in your resiliency, and what you've been doing, you may be even more resilient now that you have tools in place to extend the life of your crops. So the farmers themselves, exposed to the information and the importance of some of this conservation stewardship, continue to give me hope, with them being innovative in the techniques they used before, and now being exposed to more climate-smart solutions, and being able to utilize them. They're dedicated — we all know farming isn't easy, regardless of what level you do it at. Resiliency is, I think, just ingrained in the title of being a farmer. We see a growing interest in a lot of these climate-smart solutions, and we also see more programs actually putting equity at the forefront — we want this to directly serve underserved, socially disadvantaged, Black and Brown farmers. More community organizations are recognizing that climate change is real, but here are some ways we can actually mitigate it, because we're able to share resources. A lot of farms work in silos — this is what I've been doing, I'm a fifth-generation farmer, this is what my family's been doing — and now that they're actually within a network, or in a cohort, seeing other practices, seeing their neighbors doing something else, they're a little more willing to participate, because I always say, hey, I'm not the professional, I work for a nonprofit, you know how to grow, I can just help you with the process of growing better, if that's something you're interested in — and they're like, well, I am interested, depending on what that looks like. Additionally, USDA programs, even like the Partnership for Climate-Smart Commodities, are increasingly prioritizing equity, and providing financial and technical assistance specifically targeted for underserved farmers. These initiatives help level the playing field, and make sure smaller-acreage farms — because sometimes it's not necessarily a race or ethnicity equity issue, it could be about farm size, hey, I only have this amount of acres, so I may not be eligible — we're seeing some of these programs adjust their eligibility requirements to include more socially disadvantaged and historically underserved farms as well.

Eriqah Vincent: Right, I love that — God, you know, we just wait for the rain, but God also provided the education and the drip irrigation, so we're blessed.

Ben Sterling: That's it.

Eriqah Vincent: Amen, I love that. Meg, what's giving you hope around climate change?

Meg Darnell: Yeah, I feel like Ben touched on it — I think there's a bit of a tide change in what we're focusing on, when I say "we," I mean organizations, foundations, government programs — there's a lot more talk about climate solutions, just in the last five years. So I feel like that's really hopeful, and definitely the equity piece is basically common language now among these

programs, which is amazing, and I think that trickles down. So farmers are becoming more aware of these grant opportunities and programs, because the money's coming in, and they're starting to join these programs and implement things, and then, like we said earlier, this peer-to-peer thing — oh, well, my neighbor's doing this, because he's in this program — I think it's really exciting.

Eriqah Vincent: Wonderful, thank you both so much again — congratulations, well deserved, well earned. Thank you for this very enlightening conversation, I'm just so happy for you both, and happy for the farmers who have you as a resource down in South Georgia, and really happy for their continued success, as they're able to move in resilience as the climate changes, and get more profit, sell more, and take care of their families — that's what it's all about. Thank you so much for being with us again, we have a great lineup for 2025, so we hope you'll continue to join us for this Drawdown Georgia Climate Interview Series. Meg, thank you. Ben, stay safe, stay warm.

Ben Sterling: You too.

Eriqah Vincent: Thanks, y'all so much.

Ben Sterling: Thank you so much.