Mother Nature is my Business Partner: A Climate Conversation with Farmer Casey Cox

Summary

Agriculture is Georgia's number one industry, contributing about $76 billion a year to the state's economy, and it's especially critical to the state's rural communities. When it comes to scaling climate solutions, the people on the ground, those running their own farm operations, understand the stakes and opportunities better than anyone. In this conversation, Blair Beasley of the Ray C. Anderson Foundation talks with Casey Cox, sixth-generation farmer at Longleaf Ridge Farms and a member of the Drawdown Georgia Leadership Council, about conservation, climate solutions in agriculture, and why farmers need a seat at the table.

Key Takeaways

● Casey Cox is the sixth generation of her family to farm along the Flint River in southwest Georgia, where Longleaf Ridge Farms grows sweet corn, peanuts, field corn, and soybeans, with more than half the farm in timber, much of it managed as longleaf pine ecosystems.

● Casey views conservation through the lens of stewardship, the careful and responsible management of land entrusted to her family, and sees it as the connecting thread between six generations of heritage and her own livelihood and future.

● She's especially interested in irrigation efficiency, using sensors and data to make better water and energy decisions, but notes that solutions like electric trucks remain difficult in rural Georgia due to limited charging infrastructure.

● Casey has watched some of her community's most productive agricultural land convert into large-scale solar fields, and believes the opportunity lies in being strategic, converting land less suited to farming rather than sacrificing productive agricultural acreage.

● She believes farmers and agricultural stakeholders must have a genuine seat at the table in climate solution planning, since they understand the industry's limitations and challenges better than anyone, and because the future of agriculture and the future of Georgia are tied together.

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Casey Cox: I read somewhere, or someone told me, that when Mother Nature is your business partner, you never know what to expect. That's really something I think about a lot, in the context of climate change and how it's going to impact my future as a farmer.

Blair Beasley: Well, thank you so much, Casey, we're so thankful you're here talking with us today, and I also wanted to thank you for being a member of the Drawdown Georgia Leadership Council. To start, for those who don't know you yet, I thought you could tell us a little about yourself and your farm, Longleaf Ridge Farms, in Camilla, Georgia.

Casey Cox: Sure, well, Blair, thank you so much for inviting me to be part of this series, it's such an honor to share my perspective, and certainly to serve on the leadership council for Drawdown Georgia. I'm actually the sixth generation of my family to farm here in southwest Georgia, and our farm sits right on the Flint River, which has a really special place in my heart, and certainly fostered a lot of my love for conservation and stewardship. We grow sweet corn, peanuts, field corn, soybeans, and timber, actually, over half our farm is in timber, some of which we manage commercially, and a good bit of which we manage ecologically, we have some really lovely longleaf pine ecosystems that our farm is named after.

I majored in natural resource conservation in college, that was a really fun major, and I learned so much through it. Right after college, instead of going straight back to the farm, I worked for our local conservation district, the Flint River Soil and Water Conservation District, for about six years, and then transitioned into the farm full time, learning from my dad, which has been fun, but I just don't know how I'll ever learn everything he has in his head.

Blair Beasley: Wow, six generations, that's pretty amazing. Can you talk a little broadly about how you think about the role of conservation on your land, both in the forestry sector and in the traditional ag sector?

Casey Cox: Yes, absolutely, this is something I'm just so passionate about and always really enjoy talking about. The way my parents raised me, and how we look at this across the land, both on the farm operation side and in our land management, is really about thinking about conservation in the context of stewardship. The actual technical definition of stewardship is the careful and responsible management of something one has been entrusted to, and that's really how we view our role with the farm. I feel like the general concept of conservation, and the natural resources we depend on at the farm, is really the connecting thread between my heritage, six generations of it, and my future. My livelihood, and that future, depend completely on the conservation of our farm and our natural resources, on taking care of our land. Another really important part of this, beyond the longleaf pines, is being adjacent to the Flint River, growing up on it gave me a really valuable perspective on the intersection between what we do for a living on the farm and the ecosystem, and the ecosystem services provided by this incredible landscape all around us.

Blair Beasley: I know when we think about climate and the farm community, it's really easy to just focus on the impacts, but one thing I find really hopeful about Drawdown Georgia is that we're looking for solutions across our economy, including ones that intersect with our ag community here in Georgia, whether that's conservation agriculture or silvopasture, which, as you know, is just planting trees on pasture and ag land. So when you think about the role agriculture can play in reducing carbon emissions and being part of the solution, what do you think are the most promising opportunities here in Georgia?

Casey Cox: I really want to emphasize that each farm is different, so what works on my farm may not even work on my neighbor's farm, and that's why there's so much complexity involved. I think one of the dangers when the agricultural community isn't part of this conversation is that people latch onto something that just sounds perfect. That's where we really need our research community and our experts, as well as the stakeholders and farmers who are part of that community, to share their own experiences and some of the limitations we face. For example, I love the idea of getting an electric truck for the farm, I just got a hybrid farm truck, which I was very excited about, and then a month later, they came out with the electric F-150, and I was like, darn it. But honestly, even if I were able to get one, I might wind up 100 miles from home with absolutely no infrastructure to support that, because we just don't have that kind of infrastructure in rural Georgia yet to support some of these technologies and solutions. So I think that's important to keep in mind too, that we may be just as limited by infrastructure as we are by the diversity of our farm operations.

I'm really interested in irrigation efficiency, that's something I worked on a good bit when I was at the conservation district, and I love the idea of using technology, sensors, and data to make better irrigation decisions, use less water, and use less energy to power those systems. That's a small step we can take on our farm, but it's something other farms can do too, and are doing. If you'd told me ten years ago that some of our most productive agricultural land in my community would be converted into these massive solar fields, I wouldn't have even known what to think, and that's what's happening. That's an opportunity to be really strategic about that kind of conversion, and about landscape-scale changes generally, you have to be careful not to take out all the productive agricultural land, but be strategic about converting land that may not be ideal for agriculture in the first place.

Blair Beasley: You spoke about it a little already, but I was wondering if you had additional thoughts on the role of the agricultural voice in this space.

Casey Cox: I appreciate this question, because I'm very passionate about it. Agriculture is the number one industry in Georgia, it contributes about $76 billion a year to our state's economy. It's critical to our state as a whole, but especially to our rural communities, they would really struggle without such a thriving agricultural economy here in Georgia. So anything that threatens our livelihoods, or this economic engine across our state, has to be taken seriously, and the people on the ground, running their farm operations and businesses, and people in the associated industries, understand that better than anyone. I think it's so critical to give them a

seat at the table, to give them a voice. It would really help foster a sense of trust and partnership to build solutions with input from farmers and people in the ag industry, because we understand limitations and challenges that others outside the industry may not, in the context of this conversation. I really believe the future of agriculture and the future of Georgia are tied together, we all care about this state, our natural resources, and the communities that make us thrive. So I'm really passionate about working to build solutions together, and including the agricultural voice as much as possible. Mother Nature and I are business partners, I rely on her, and with everything happening from a climate change and extreme weather perspective, we're all going to have to learn how to navigate that together.

Blair Beasley: Well, thank you, Casey, it's been such a pleasure talking with you, and we really appreciate your time.

Casey Cox: Thank you so much, Blair.