



# SOUTHEAST

## TRANSITION TO ORGANIC PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

SE TOPP NEWS, May 2025

# 2024 YEAR IN REVIEW

### A Message from Florida Organic Growers' Chief Executive Officer

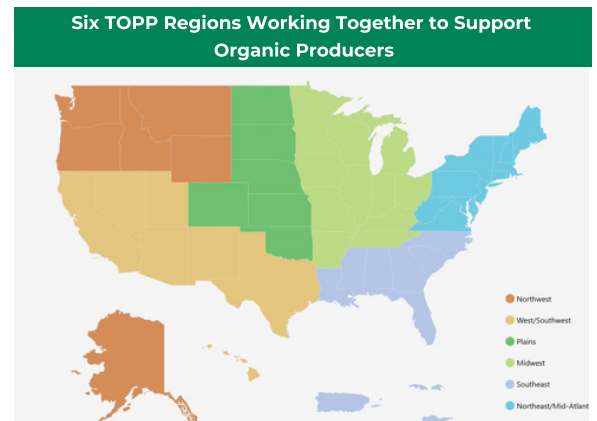
As we reflect on the incredible accomplishments in 2024, I want to express my deepest gratitude to our dedicated SE TOPP team, the invaluable dedication and collaboration of our partners, and the ongoing support of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) National Organic Program (NOP) for their continued support of this initiative to make it all possible. Through the numerous events in the region, the mentorship of new organic farmers, and the one-on-one technical assistance, combined with forward-thinking strategies, SE TOPP has empowered farmers to tackle common production challenges, expand their organic acreage, and even begin tapping into new markets. Your passion and commitment have fueled real change, strengthening communities and ensuring a thriving future for organic agriculture in the Southeast. Let's carry this momentum forward—bigger goals, bolder ideas, and an even greater impact await us in the year ahead!

- Ramkrishnan Balasubramanian

### SE TOPP Region and Partners

In 2024, we built upon the foundation and successes developed in previous program years, which were to increase the impact of the key goals of TOPP: Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship, Community Building, Technical Assistance, Data Collection and Reporting and Workforce Training and Development. To do this, we worked collaboratively to align efforts across the nation and were grateful for the Regional Leads: California Certified Organic Farmers, MOSA Certified Organic, Oregon Tilth, Organic Crop Improvement Association, Pennsylvania Certified Organic, as well as the National Leads: Organic Farmers Association, Organic Farming Research Foundation, Organic Trade Association, National Organic Coalition, and Rodale Institute for the partnerships that have been fostered through our shared work.

In the Southeast, we have continued to strengthen relationships with more than 30 partners in seven states—Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina—as well as two territories, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. TOPP partners have seen many achievements over the last year, including cultivating new partnerships, growing producer interest in organic certification and methods, supporting the transition to organic certification for their mentees and other transitioning operations, as well as increasing economic benefits for those farmers they have reached.



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





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### Key Achievements

#### Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship

Farmer-to-farmer learning and mentorship are fundamental to the SE TOPP program, emphasizing the critical role of in-the-field subject matter experts—farmers themselves—and equipping them with tools and support for peer-to-peer learning and mentorship. In 2024, SE TOPP Launched the Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship program, making meaningful mentor and mentee pairings across the region, and supporting farmers with resources as well as specialized and translated training materials.

The Mentorship Program achieved significant growth, with 88 mentees participating across the region, including 22 in North Carolina, 9 in South Carolina, 17 in Georgia, 8 in Florida, 12 in Louisiana, 9 in Mississippi, 6 in Alabama, 4 in Puerto Rico, and 1 in the U.S. Virgin Islands. Supporting these mentees were 38 dedicated mentors distributed regionally: 9 in North Carolina, 6 in South Carolina, 6 in Georgia, 6 in Florida, 3 in Louisiana, 3 in Mississippi, 2 in Alabama, and 3 in Puerto Rico. The program successfully facilitated 36 mentor-mentee matches, creating meaningful opportunities for mentorship and knowledge-sharing.

Collectively, these mentorship efforts are guiding the transition of 1,563.15 acres of farmland to organic practices, showcasing the tangible impact of peer-to-peer collaboration on sustainable agriculture.

← SE TOPP MENTOR-MENTEE NETWORK



THIS IS A DYNAMIC MAP OF THE SE TOPP MENTOR NETWORK. MENTOR LOCATIONS AND AVAILABILITY ARE SUBJECT TO CHANGE AS THE PROGRAM GROWS. SOME MENTORS MAY NOT YET BE INCLUDED. LAST UPDATED APRIL 2025

MENTOR NETWORK

MENTEE NETWORK



*“The mentorship program gave me access to real-life advice from a farmer who understands the challenges of transitioning to organic firsthand.”*

*“Having a mentor to guide me through this process not only made it less intimidating but also provided actionable steps to implement new practices on my farm.”*

- Mentee reflections



Through TOPP collaboration, several apprenticeship and training programs in the region have expanded their impact with TOPP support, offering personalized guidance and fostering growth in sustainable farming initiatives. Additionally, efforts are underway to develop additional resources including an organic agriculture education curriculum for an on-farm farmer mentor program in North Carolina, leveraging the expertise of six organic producers and key regional contributors.

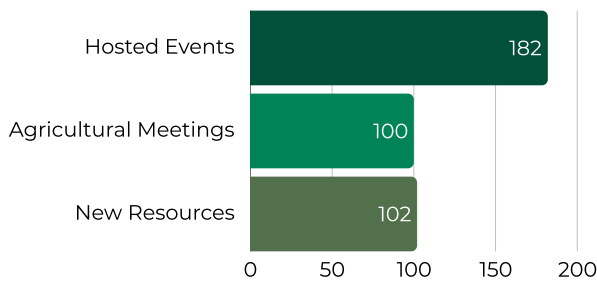


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### Community Engagement

Community building is a cornerstone of TOPP, fostering meaningful connections that strengthen the organic farming network across the Southeast. Throughout 2024, SE TOPP partners engaged over 11,000 attendees across the Southeast through 182 hosted events, 100 agricultural meetings, and 102 new resources, equipping farmers with essential knowledge for organic transition.



Outreach efforts included surveys, listening sessions, and market analyses to ensure farmer needs are met with targeted solutions, while workshops, mentorship programs, and networking events expanded access to resources and support. Notable initiatives included Spanish-language training for Latino growers, market access panels, farmer-to-farmer networking, and disaster recovery mobilization. By prioritizing collaboration and inclusivity, SE TOPP continues to build a resilient and thriving organic farm community.

### Technical Assistance

As a core pillar of SE TOPP's mission, Technical Assistance (TA) ensures farmers receive tailored support throughout their transition to organic practices. In 2024, partners provided direct one-on-one assistance to 222 operations, leading to certification of 21 operations and 1,635 acres. Support was given on a variety of topics including organic enforcement, cover cropping, organic inputs, livestock certification, record-keeping, supply chains, and organic systems plans.

Farmers benefited from workshops, field days, and in-depth guidance on organic certification, soil health, and pest management. Notable efforts included on-farm technical support in Gulf states, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, certification guidance to transitioning operations covering 1,216 acres in Georgia, and record-keeping workshops to streamline compliance with organic regulations.

SE TOPP also expanded weather resilience training, farmer-led conferences, and mock audits to prepare producers for certification. With a focus on practical learning and regional collaboration, SE TOPP's initiatives have empowered farmers with essential tools, knowledge, and connections to successfully transition to organic, strengthening the future of sustainable agriculture in the Southeast.

**Access SE TOPP  
Resources and Events on  
the TOPP Website**



[www.organictransition.org/region/southeast](http://www.organictransition.org/region/southeast)



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### Workforce Development and Training

Workforce development is a critical component of SE TOPP. In 2024, 483 technical assistance providers were trained across the SE TOPP network, highlighting the program's commitment to equipping service providers with the knowledge and tools needed to support organic transition and certification.

In Florida, FOG took a hands-on approach to workforce development by visiting over 250 Future Farmers of America and 4-H students across the central region of the state. These interactions provided valuable insights into youth knowledge of organic agriculture, laying the groundwork for future curriculum enhancements and industry connections. FOG also supported 2 dedicated internship positions through the Organic Career Network, which is hosted by the Organic Trade Association through TOPP funding. These interns played an essential role in creating resources, conducting surveys, and strengthening engagement with SE TOPP's network of partners, helping to bridge knowledge gaps and expand organic opportunities.

Beyond Florida, SE TOPP regional partners developed organic workforce resources and improved accessibility to careers in the field. Notably, partners in South Carolina represented at a job fair dedicated to organic careers, connecting students and job seekers with industry professionals and employers. Additionally, in North Carolina organic career opportunities at a university agricultural awareness career fair day, successfully motivating students to apply for internship positions.

Nationally, TOPP regional leads initiated a comprehensive workforce development needs assessment to identify opportunities for organic certification inspectors and reviewers and to isolate gaps in organic workforce preparedness. Additionally, a microlearning needs assessment tool was developed to pinpoint essential short-course training opportunities in organic agriculture, ensuring that emerging professionals receive targeted, practical education.



*I gained valuable experience in communicating organic practices through outreach materials and educational content. The skills I developed with FOG will support my future career in therapeutic horticulture, where I plan to integrate organic and sustainable practices into healing spaces."*  
- Nikkira McCall, Educational Resources Intern



*"Interning with the SE TOPP team was nothing short of inspiring. From working alongside passionate individuals to engaging with my local community, this experience undoubtedly defined my career in sustainable agriculture."*  
- Madeline Wise, Outreach Intern



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### Looking Ahead to 2025

As we move into Year 3 of our journey, we remain committed to supporting producers in our region while building on previous achievements. Our 2025 strategic focus will be:

- Expanding the SE TOPP Farmer-to-Farmer Mentorship program by increasing outreach efforts, strengthening mentor-mentee connections, and enhancing support through tailored resources such as updated toolkits and specialized webinars.
- Strengthening Technical Assistance support by hosting field days and workshops, offering one-on-one guidance, and creating targeted resources for farmers facing physical challenges and those affected by the digital divide.
- Advancing workforce development efforts with an assessment report identifying job opportunities in the organic sector and implementing activities to bridge gaps in employment pathways.
- Enhancing community building through networking activities, a web-based mentor database, and the development of materials to foster farmer engagement and knowledge-sharing.
- Continuing engagement through virtual monthly and quarterly meetings with NOP, regional leads, and partners while preparing for the Year 3 SE TOPP Partner Annual Meeting to review progress, refine strategies, and strengthen collaboration.



PHOTO: SE TOPP partner organizations came together in Gulfport, Mississippi for the second SE TOPP Partner Annual Meeting.

**Together, we are not just cultivating crops, we are nurturing a brighter, more sustainable future for agriculture in the Southeast!**

### Questions for SE TOPP?

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