



CASE STUDY
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Strengthening Regional Food Systems Through Strategic Institutional Partnerships & Supply-Side Investments V.2

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The Georgia ACRE Collective



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Executive Summary



Since 2022, the Georgia ACRE Collective has been transforming metro Atlanta's food system by aligning institutional demand with the needs of local producers through values-based procurement. By pairing strategic institutional partnerships with supply-side investments, the Collective has advanced access to land, capital, infrastructure, and technical assistance while fostering long-term purchasing commitments that provide stability for farmers and reliability for institutions. Together, these efforts demonstrate that resilient food systems are built on relationships, shared values, and practical tools that enable small and mid-size farms to thrive while ensuring communities have lasting access to fresh, healthy food.

Introduction

How strategic institutional partnerships and supply-side investments create a stronger, more resilient food system.

The Georgia ACRE Collective is **advancing agriculture, community, resilience and equity (ACRE) through values-based procurement**. The ACRE Collective nurtures the growth of these systems by building market demand for locally and ethically produced food, supporting regional farmers in meeting that demand, and distributing those products directly to institutional customers who serve their communities.

Rather than viewing food procurement as a series of transactions between producers, buyers, distributors, retailers, and eaters, the ACRE Collective's members understand it as a network of relationships founded in shared values. They believe a truly resilient food system is composed of people who are accountable to one another and to the communities they nourish.

More background about the history and membership of the ACRE Collective:



Building such an interconnected, values-aligned network takes time, investment, and intentional partnerships.

The ACRE Collective's partners each bring a long-standing commitment to food systems transformation. They are driven by their shared dedication to community health, well-being, and **economic vitality**; to the **environmental sustainability** of farming and ranching practices; and to **fairness** for all. Every food purchase made through the Collective's efforts serves as a confirmation of those values and forms a deeper bond between members of the food system.

THE ACRE COLLECTIVE

The Common Market Southeast

The Conservation Fund

Health Care Without Harm

Georgia Organics

The Turner Environmental Law Clinic
at Emory University



About the Case Study

This case study illustrates how strategic institutional partnerships and supply-side investments are creating a stronger, more resilient food system.

We will examine the impacts of the ACRE Collective's work, highlighting results achieved in 2022-2025. Specifically, we will illustrate how the Collective has:

- **Strengthened partnerships across the regional food system**, enabling producers and institutional buyers to support one another and drive lasting systems change.
- **Implemented shareable best practices** toward a model for local and regional food system revitalization.

More background

This case study builds upon the introductory themes and learnings of The Georgia ACRE Case Study published in January 2025: *The Georgia ACRE Collective Case Study, "Building Resilient Agriculture through Forward Purchasing Commitments and Direct Farmer Financial Investment"*



Growing Markets: Expanding Opportunity Through Shared Values

The ACRE Collective's values drive programs that establish trust and open lines of communication between local producers and institutional food buyers, leading to durable partnerships.

“Once you know your produce is sold, then you can comfortably plant what you need, and you can definitely sleep at night a lot better.”

Rafael Guererro, La Hacienda Sweets



Rafael Guerrero of La Hacienda Sweets (left, pictured with family) in Lyons, Georgia benefits from forward commitments and open communication.

Finding Alignment with the Materiality Assessment

For any relationship to last, it must be built on a foundation of shared values. The ACRE Collective's relationship-first approach to rebuilding the local food system began with finding common ground: What issues matter most to institutional buyers? And where do those institutional values intersect with the practices of local producers?

In 2023, the Collective conducted a materiality assessment to map alignment between the Atlanta region's institutions and producers. The findings revealed how the values prioritized by schools and hospitals could translate directly into practical procurement opportunities.

For example, institutions committed to **environmental sustainability** are drawn to buy products from producers that use regenerative practices for its positive impacts on biodiversity, water management, and climate change mitigation. Alternatively, an institution with expressed values around **labor rights and community development** might partner with a beginning or historically underrepresented producer, fulfilling their social commitments while meeting operational needs for reliable deliveries of high-quality food.



“The ACRE Collective’s relationship-first approach to rebuilding the local food system began with finding common ground: What issues matter most to institutional buyers? And where do those institutional values intersect with the practices of local producers?”

The assessment also equipped Collective partners with compelling information to help communicate the community benefits of shifting institutional investment. The findings from the materiality assessment illustrate how values-aligned procurement supports regional producers, creates high-quality jobs, and improves access to fresh, culturally relevant, nutritious food.

Demonstrating Values through Forward Commitments

Forward Commitments: Collaborations for Local Resilience

Defined simply, a “forward commitment” is an advance agreement made by an institution to purchase a farm’s products for a set amount of time at a mutually agreeable price. In practice, they forge a strong bond between those who produce food and those who serve it to their communities. Like any relationship, forward commitments require adaptation and communication. Trusted intermediaries, like The Common Market, bridge any gaps, helping producers understand wholesale pricing while educating institutions on the real value of local food.

Forward commitments **allow producers to plan ahead**, knowing their crops are sold before they are even planted. “It’s helped me to sell every head of lettuce in my greenhouse,” says **Alexis Edwards of R&G Farm** in Dublin, Georgia. **Rafael Guerrero of La Hacienda Sweets** in Lyons, Georgia, agrees: “Once you know your produce is sold, then you can comfortably plant what you need, and you can definitely sleep at night a lot better.” By removing many of the risks inherent to farming, forward commitments empower producers with the confidence they need to invest in better equipment, hire more staff, and think long-term.

For institutions, forward commitments **make menu planning easier**: “In the past, we just kind of worked off what was available, and it was kind of making up menus and finding things for different ingredients as we went,” says **Chef George Sigeti of Morrison Healthcare** in Atlanta, Georgia. “Now...when I put a menu together, I know I can run these sweet potatoes for the next 3 to 4 weeks.” Beyond logistics, forward commitments **foster deeper connections** between farmers, buyers, and the places they hold in common. “It’s been amazing to be able to meet some of the farmers and know the impact that we’ve made...in the family’s lives,” says Chef George.



Watch: Chef George and farmers discuss forward commitments

Illustrating Impacts of Forward Commitments

Since the ACRE Collective formed in 2022, 54 forward commitments have been made by institutions throughout the Southeast, up from zero before the ACRE Collective's launch, and the number continues to grow. These partnerships have generated \$2,062,500 in local food sales and supported 43 of small and mid-size farms.

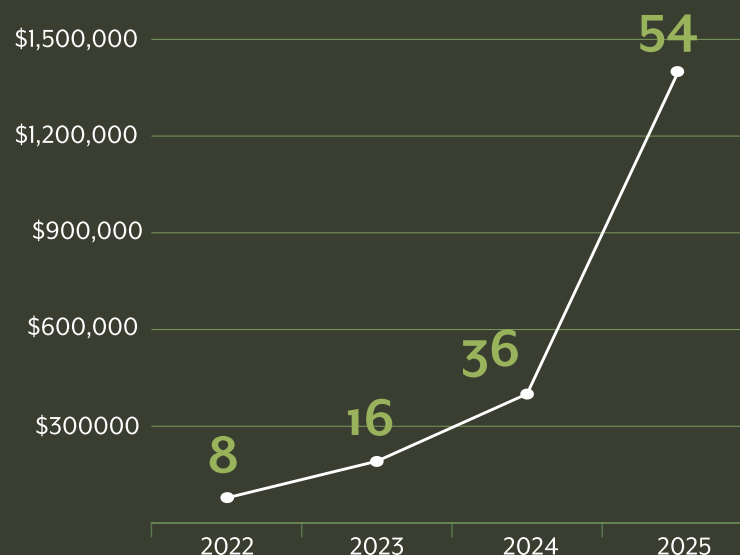
Beyond these numbers, forward commitments represent a **paradigm shift** in the roles institutions and independent producers can play in their local food economies. If forward commitments were widely adopted across a region, producers and buyers could dramatically reshape the food system together as partners in local resilience. Procurement dollars would circulate within the community, supporting more livelihoods and providing producers with the stability and confidence to grow their operations, making local food the norm, not the niche.

A Tool for Transformation

To support the widespread adoption of values-based procurement, including forward commitments, the ACRE Collective is creating a toolkit of guidance, strategies, and legal tools for institutional procurement change. Developed by the **Turner Environmental Law Clinic at Emory University**, the "Legal Toolkit for Values-Aligned Procurement" will include templates, sample contract provisions, and institution-specific

A total of \$2,062,500 in forward commitments have been made by 54 institutions since 2022.

Growth of Forward Commitment Sales | Number of Institutional Partners



considerations that support anchor institutions, sustainability teams, and procurement professionals in actualizing more equitable procurement. By helping institutions integrate values-based food purchasing goals into their procurement protocols, this toolkit has the power to build stronger local food systems nationwide. The toolkit will be free and available to the general public by January 2026.

Building Community with Farmer Town Halls

Because forward commitments represent such a significant shift from conventional sales models, the ACRE Collective launched a series of Farmer Town Halls to give producers space to learn about how this model can benefit their operations while connecting with peers, service providers, and institutional buyers. The gatherings emphasize relationship-building, with in-person meetings proving more meaningful than virtual communications.

The ACRE Collective has hosted four Farmer Town Halls thus far with both new and established farm partners. Each event has been strategically located to increase accessibility and visibility: Fort Valley State University's Extension office (an 1890 land grant institution), the Georgia Grown Innovation Center in Metter, and The Common Market Southeast's warehouse in East Point, Georgia. Collectively, the events have welcomed more than 130 attendees, including farmers, cooperatives, state agency staff, USDA representatives, service providers, and representatives from elected officials' offices.

These town halls are an important outreach tool for producers who may be curious about wholesale markets. The events demystify institutional procurement by illustrating which



Participants at a Farmer Town Hall at The Common Market Southeast warehouse.

institutions are buying, in what quantities, and their feedback about the process. Producers also share their strategies for (and struggles with) scaling up for wholesale markets, reducing the sense of isolation that many beginning and historically disadvantaged farmers face.

Additionally, the town halls offer access to technical assistance and infrastructure support. **Brannon Harris's Mobile Ice Box** of Douglasville, Georgia, is one example: Originally, the local business focused on restaurant deliveries, but Brannon wanted to help local farmers. The ACRE Collective and The Common Market partnered him with a farmer who needed to deliver eggs but had no refrigerator. Thanks to Brannon's mobile refrigeration unit, the farmer was able to reach institutional markets for the first time.

Finally, the events uplift and celebrate the contributions of producers in The Common Market's network. Recognition of standout producers fosters positive peer accountability: For example, **Dayspring Farms** in Danielsville, Georgia, recently won "Newcomer of the Year," and Augusta, Georgia's **Farms 2U** won "Top Producer." By creating a dedicated space to honor producers and deepen their relationships with each other, Farmer Town Halls strengthen an essential part of the local food system.



Top: Dayspring Farms receives the Newcomer of the Year Award.
Bottom: Augusta, Georgia's Farms 2U received a "Top Producer" Award. Ryan Pressley, pictured here, is the farm's operations manager.

Forging Partnerships through Buyer-Producer Meetings

To facilitate connections between institutional food buyers and local producers, ACRE Collective partners have launched a series of in-person buyer-producer meetings. Hosted by The Common Market at their Atlanta warehouse or on partnering farms, the meetings typically include facility tours, farm visits, and structured discussions around values-aligned procurement and forward purchasing commitments. These intentionally immersive events build understanding, trust, and alignment between those who grow or produce food and those who buy and serve it.

Bill Green, Executive Director of The Common Market Southeast, explains that these meetings began in 2022, when his team realized that two primary food service partners, **Morrison Healthcare** and **Aramark**, would benefit from firsthand experiences with local agriculture on the land. “We thought we would have a better conversation and help them better understand the reason if we got them out of their kitchens,” Green recalls.



Farmer Howard Berk of Ellijay Mushrooms leads a tour for Morrison Healthcare chefs during a buyer meeting in summer 2025.

Instead of focusing on the logistics of procurement (the “what” or the “how”), these gatherings emphasize the “why.” Why should a buyer care about supporting historically underserved producers? Why prioritize local food in institutional settings? Why further corporate social responsibility and sustainability goals with local procurement?

Since those first meetings, other major food service management companies, including **Sodexo**, **Bon Appétit Management Company**, and **SAGE Dining Services**, have participated. Farmers and producers who have attended include **Hunter Cattle**, **Brasstown Beef**, **Cornucopia Farms**, **Coastal Georgia Small Farmers Cooperative**, **R&G Farm**, and **BJ Reece Orchards**. A meeting in July 2025 took place on-farm at **Ellijay Mushrooms**, bringing participants even closer to the source of their food. Subsequent meetings have also included K-12 school nutrition directors and their teams.

These gatherings help buyers and producers understand one another in ways that spreadsheets and contracts never could. Bill Green explains that “[i]f customers are primarily viewing the relationship as a transaction, then it’s not a true partnership.” Forward commitments, and the strong relationships that power them, require shared understanding and mutual respect. When a farmer learns why muddy produce cases might be rejected, or when a buyer hears about the challenges of H-2A labor, the cost of GAP [food safety] certification, or the gamble of spending

\$25,000 on inputs for a crop that might fail, it humanizes both sides of the exchange. “The systems that we have do not make it easy for small growers to work with large institutions,” adds **Ever Williams**, formerly of Georgia Organics. These meetings help bridge that gap.

Perhaps most importantly, these face-to-face encounters lead to tangible outcomes. “The whole forward commitment program is powered by these meetings,” says Green. “You can only create true change by creating new experiences.” Tasting the pecans on the availability list, hearing a farmer’s story in the field, or sharing a farm-to-table lunch turns food from a line item on a procurement sheet into something real, organic, and personal. And when that happens, buyers are far more likely to commit to purchasing from local producers in the coming season, creating a new bond that strengthens their shared food system.

“When a farmer learns why muddy produce cases might be rejected, or when a buyer hears about the gamble of spending \$25,000 on inputs for a crop that might fail, it humanizes both sides of the exchange.”

Nurturing the Supply: Producer Investments

An investment in today's agricultural producers is an investment in tomorrow's food supply.

To ensure a stable food supply, the ACRE Collective understands it is essential to support our country's existing small- and mid-size producers. The Collective deployed the following programs with this in mind, and even went a step further, creating conditions that encourage more people to farm or ranch. Together, these programs foster a supportive ecosystem where farmers can both access wholesale buyers and build the operational capacity needed to meet their needs.

Access to Land with The Farms Fund

The Farms Fund is a program of The Conservation Fund, an ACRE Collective partner. Working alongside other ACRE Collective initiatives, the Fund addresses one of the biggest barriers facing farmers entering wholesale markets: access to land. It identifies farmland for sale, purchases it, and matches it with producers ready to scale their operations.



Watch: ACRE partners on land access

From the outset, producers enter into a lease-to-own agreement, with The Conservation Fund providing ongoing support throughout their journey to land ownership. Placing the land under an agricultural conservation easement restricts certain development rights on the land, reducing the land's market value and ultimately making ownership more attainable for the producer. This approach assists agricultural businesses in scaling up and planning for the future. "It's really impressive to see how the farmers expand their vision and really expand their enterprises when they have the tools and resources to do so," says **Justin Nickelson, program manager for the Georgia Farms Fund.**

In Georgia alone, the Farms Fund has helped **13 producers access land, totaling 1,172 acres** across the state since its inception. The program has contributed to the **creation of 51 jobs** and supported the production of over **five million pounds of food.**

The program's sustained, intentional support for producers is also the key to its sustainability: The first producer to partner with the Fund paid off their land purchase in July 2025, with two more on track this year and several more in the pipeline. "The goal is to reinvest the funding from the farm purchases back into the program so we can continue to acquire farmland," says Nickelson.

Most importantly, the program creates a pathway for land ownership for next-generation farmers. With the average age of

a U.S. farmer now at 58, and more than a third of U.S. farmers considered beginners, there is an urgent need for targeted support. Programs like this one help ensure that younger people are not only willing, but able to work the land in the years to come.

Securing long-term access to land also helps farmers working with the ACRE Collective enter wholesale markets, deepening their impact on regional food systems. "Taking farms that had two acres and giving them 100" allows farmers to meet institutional



“When you're building up soils, if you don't have a steady land agreement, it's kind of tough to really build your business... It's really impressive to see how the farmers expand their vision and enterprises when they have the tools and resources to do so.”

Justin Nickelson, program manager for the Georgia Farms Fund

demand and feed more people, says Nickelson. For example: After successfully growing produce for farmers' markets, CSAs, and restaurants, **Rahul Anand of Snapfinger Farm** began selling to wholesale customers — and realized the demand in that market vastly outstripped the capacity of his current farmland. In 2022, The Conservation Fund secured a 197-acre farm in Covington, Georgia, on his behalf. Anand expects to grow on 50 of those acres within the next four years, and to double his revenue within two.

Beyond support for food producers, the program conserves valuable agricultural land in areas threatened by development. This will be essential to maintain a resilient national food supply. Stable land tenure also allows farmers to invest in long-term soil health. Rebuilding organic matter and fostering healthy microbial ecosystems takes time, and without security, those efforts can feel too risky. “When you're building up soils, if you don't have a steady land agreement, it's kind of tough to really build your business,” Nickelson notes. By securing both the land and the livelihoods tied to it, the Farms Fund helps farmers and ecosystems thrive together.

The Farms Fund is one part of a broader ecosystem of support created through the ACRE Collective. While access to affordable farmland is a critical piece, the program works in concert with training, technical assistance, and market access initiatives to ensure farmers can grow viable businesses once they scale up.



Rahul Anand and Carson White of Snapfinger Farm, a Georgia Farms Fund participant.

Access to Capital

The Farmer Loan Fund

Featured in the ACRE Collective's [2024 case study](#), The Common Market established a fund that offers working capital and infrastructure loans to farmers at zero interest. These loans cover farmers' upfront working capital costs, such as seeds, labor, and equipment, before the growing season begins.

"If a farmer gives us a crop plan for \$100,000, we will advance them \$50,000 on the purchase orders for the \$100,000," explains The Common Market Southeast's Bill Green. "And in order to extinguish that debt, the farmers only need to deliver on the crop plan. So it's zero interest, and it's zero out of pocket."

This model reduces farmers' financial burden while ensuring they have the capital to expand their operations, increase output, and meet the rising demand for healthy local food in their communities.

"We've done 28 of those projects [across all Common Market chapters], about \$1.4 million over the past few years," says Green. "We recognize that access to capital can be a huge barrier. And the ACRE Collective and The Common Market have been working to break down that barrier."



“Agriculture is Georgia’s #1 industry, and investing in our state’s farmers and producers is essential to the continued success of Georgia agriculture. Partnerships like the one between the Georgia Grown Innovation Center and the ACRE Collective are vital to strengthening the future of Georgia’s farms, and by pairing direct infrastructure support with technical assistance, we are ensuring that small and independent producers have the tools they need to thrive in wholesale markets.”

Tyler J. Harper, Georgia’s Commissioner of Agriculture

Infrastructure Grants

In its work to help small and independent farms scale up to wholesale readiness, the ACRE Collective developed a new grant program as a direct result of producer feedback: Many producers identified a need for infrastructure investments, including coolers, trucks, fencing, and wash/pack stations. While essential for reaching wholesale markets, these improvements often fall outside the scope of traditional grant programs.

In 2024, [the ACRE Collective awarded \\$115,000](#) in infrastructure grants to ten farms, selected from 36 applicants who collectively requested over half a million dollars in support. An additional \$15,000 was used for tailored technical assistance in collaboration with the Georgia Grown Innovation Center, a project of the Georgia Department of Agriculture.

The grants funded projects that expanded each operation's capacity, from improving crop protection and food safety to increasing labor efficiency and distribution potential. "We were planting everything by hand," recalls **Cedric Berry of Berry Family Farms** in Ludowici, Georgia. "With this new two-row planter, I can do in one day what used to take four or five."

DaySpring Farms in Danielsville added refrigerated storage for grain and pest control, with plans for a no-till drill and milling equipment. **Caribe United Farm** of Oglethorpe and Wilkes County used the funding to purchase a livestock trailer and



“With this new two-row planter, I can do in one day what used to take four or five.”

Cedric Berry of Berry Family Farms, Ludowici GA (above)



chute, increasing their capacity to transport and process animals and allowing for growth in wholesale and retail meat sales. Over in Burke County, **Starlit Roots** installed fencing to keep deer from destroying their harvests.

Beyond helping individual operations, the effects of the grant funds reverberate across the region. Cedric Berry is using his new tools to “help smaller farmers in our area, [who are] still setting things out by hand.” This shared use is an intentional feature of the program, says Bill Green of The Common Market Southeast, describing his hope for collective success: “We’re trying to weave the resources of multiple farms together, solidifying these relationships so they succeed together instead of competing.”

The grant program even has the potential to inspire the next generation to see farming as a viable, sustainable career, says Berry. “Now they see something where they’re not playing in the dirt all day, not working in the evening.”

In the years to come, the benefits of these investments will continue to reverberate for these farms. With more funding, the same transformative support could be extended to additional farms in Georgia and beyond.

Access to Knowledge with Technical Assistance

Recognizing that many barriers to wholesale readiness for new and beginning farmers can be resolved with guidance and access to information, the ACRE Collective has partnered with many technical assistance providers over the years to fill the technical gaps.

For example, in 2024, The Common Market hired **Marcelino Garza** to provide direct technical support to producers. Garza worked one-on-one with 18 growers to develop crop plans, discuss growing techniques, review packaging options, and strategize on equipment needs.

Agricultural consulting firms such as **McIntosh SEED** and **Carter-Miles Farm and Cooperative Planning LLC** also played a vital role, from locating values-aligned producers to guiding them through GAP certification, which opened doors to additional buyers. Both firms used a collaborative approach, bringing farmers together into supportive collectives that allowed them to aggregate resources and share expertise. This helped The Common Market streamline supply chains and meet market demand.

In addition, **Georgia Organics** regularly hosts farmer field days in collaboration with ACRE Collective partners to engage growers on topics related to business development, food safety, and post-harvest handling and accessing organic and institutional markets.

The Conservation Fund also coordinates frequent outreach and educational training, especially for growers in the Farms Fund network, including topics like H2A and farm visa worker training for growing farm businesses, wholesale readiness training sessions, and farm financing.

The partnership with the **Georgia Department of Agriculture's Georgia Grown Innovation Center** bolsters the implementation of the ACRE Collective's infrastructure grant program by making tailored technical assistance available to awardees.

DF&H Farm purchased drip irrigation and a seeder with their ACRE Collective infrastructure grant, and the Georgia Grown Innovation Center provided support in seamlessly implementing them into the farm's regular practices. ACRE Collective partners also connected the farm's owners to resources that can help them grow, including **Cultured AG**, an agricultural consulting company, and key staff at the **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**.

With their ACRE Collective infrastructure grant, Berry Family Farms purchased a two-row planter. The **Georgia Grown Innovation Center** provided guidance on equipment selection and, after purchase, assisted farmers on its use to increase yields, reduce labor costs, and build equity through ownership of essential infrastructure. The resulting savings supported reinvestment in both their cattle operation and mobile store fund.

Some forms of technical assistance migrated from the fields and into digital realms: Danielsville's **DaySpring Farm**, for example, requested guidance on best marketing practices to grow their business.

A regenerative grain farm, Dayspring Farms, used its grant funds to create a refrigerated storage room for grain storage and pest control. The refrigerated storage will prevent grain loss and support the expansion of the farm's capacity. Co-owner Murray Brett shared his desires to grow and sophisticate his operations, but he feared taking on debt, noting: "This grant was right on time."



Celebrating Champions: Institutions Investing in Their Communities

Spotlighting the trailblazers transforming institutional procurement will accelerate the shift toward a sustainable food future.

Recognition is a powerful driver of behavior change. The ACRE Collective's programmatic manifestation of this concept, the **Farmer Champion Award**, has successfully celebrated institutional leaders investing their food purchasing dollars into the community.

Originally launched by Georgia Organics, the Farmer Champion Award recognized restaurants and food businesses investing in their local food system. In 2024, through partnership with the ACRE Collective, the program expanded to include institutions of higher education: **Spelman College, Oglethorpe University, Mercer University, and Agnes Scott College** were the first to be recognized for their support of local agriculture in their home state of Georgia. These schools were recognized at the Farmer



Top, from left: Georgia's Agriculture Commissioner Tyler J. Harper, Aramark's Resident District Manager for Mercer Culinary Group Ed Roberston, Executive Director of The Common Market Southeast Bill Green, and Mercer's Executive Chef Vivian Floyd at the Farmer Champion Award Ceremony. Bottom: Members of The Georgia ACRE Collective join in celebration at the 2024 Farmer Champion Award Ceremony.

Champion Awards ceremony held during [SOWTH](#), a conference where buyers and producers convened in person. The ACRE Collective's four higher education partners received awards as part of a ceremony featuring The Common Market's Bill Green and Georgia Agriculture Commissioner Tyler J. Harper.

The program provides a platform to highlight an important and sometimes-overlooked aspect of local procurement: buyer readiness. **Ever Williams, former program manager for Georgia Organics**, defines buyer readiness as a “willingness to pivot and... learning to trust each other when things go wrong.” Champions demonstrate how institutions can meet producers halfway, prioritizing the relationship over the transaction, bridging gaps, and building trust. “It’s important to recognize these institutions and businesses, because there are a lot easier ways to get food for the people [they’re] serving,” says Williams. “This is a lot more meaningful.”

Although Georgia Organics’s funding for the Farmer Champion Awards has concluded, the program continues uninterrupted: Beginning in fall 2025, [The Common Market](#) assumed management of the program with an expanded focus.

In 2026, The Common Market will recognize leaders from various institutional sectors—universities, hospitals, K-12 public and private schools, and corporate cafeterias—as Farmer

Champions. The Common Market uplifts these Champions’ procurement practices in blogs, social media, and [press coverage](#). The resulting visibility inspires peer institutions to follow the Champions’ lead and sends a powerful message to community members and stakeholders about the values these institutions uphold.

By joining in common cause with farmers and ranchers through their procurement practices, these institutions are expanding the local food system, extending it into the community, and providing many with new access to fresh, healthy food. The Common Market’s stewardship of the Farmer Champion program works to normalize this approach, providing a model and incentive to other institutions to make similar commitments. Over time, the program aims to create a culture that supports, sustains, and even expects values-based procurement.

“ It’s important to recognize these institutions and businesses, because there are a lot easier ways to get food for the people [they’re] serving.”

Ever Williams, former program manager for Georgia Organics

Planning for the Future

In this uncertain policy environment, it is more urgent than ever for food system advocates, producers, and institutional buyers to collaborate on large-scale, lasting change. The ACRE Collective's approach to this exigency begins with deep collaboration and building trust across the food system. By seeking meaningful buy-in from all stakeholders, the ACRE Collective anchors long-term commitment to values-based procurement and creates meaningful new access to wholesale markets for small and mid-scale farms.

The ACRE Collective's greatest successes stem from this broad involvement: forward commitments provide planning security for producers; equipment grants, loans, and support for land access help scale their capacity; and institutions, in turn, benefit from dependable, mission-aligned supply chains.

"92% of American farms qualify as small or mid-scale," says **Haile Johnston, The Common Market's co-founder**. Never having had these opportunities to sell into wholesale markets, farmers now tell him they are enjoying market participation differently than ever before. Meanwhile, "people have responded" to communications about local and values-based procurement, motivating the leadership teams of anchor institutions to sustain local procurement.

From these accomplishments, we can glean important lessons or best practices that could be deployed by others seeking to transform their food systems.

- ▶ **Relationships are the foundation of any resilient food system.** Sustained collaboration and shared goals, not transactional exchanges, drive long-term transformation. Bill Green of The Common Market Southeast observes: "Food system work is collaborative work. You can't do it in isolation." A healthy food system is deeply interconnected, and no single actor can do it alone.
- ▶ **Institutions need both incentives and infrastructure to change their purchasing patterns.** Even modest marginal incentives can influence procurement choices, but maintaining values-aligned local food systems over time requires training, logistical support, and social investment in a culture of local procurement.
- ▶ **Producers thrive when they can count on reliable markets.** Especially for small and mid-size producers, forward-looking support such as equipment, staffing, and technical assistance is necessary to facilitate participation and scaling production.
- ▶ Finally, for change that gathers momentum across the food system, it's essential to **measure and regularly share meaningful outcomes**. Publicizing the number of forward commitments, new accounts, acres protected, and grants awarded gives shape and legitimacy to success stories, which in turn reinforces positive behaviors and invites future investment.

Conclusion

When communities have reliable access to nutritious food, they are healthier, safer, and more resilient. Achieving this vision requires inviting more people into the work of food production and distribution, and strengthening the values-based relationships that sustain us all.

Connecting to each other may be the essential key to our survival, and the time to fight for that survival is now. “Food security is national security,” says **The Common Market Southeast’s Bill Green**, and that means aligning our belief systems with real budgetary commitments.

The ACRE Collective will continue striving for holistic food system transformation, one relationship at a time. Fundamentally, this work is not about selling more produce, it’s about shaping a future we want to live in. No small task, but as Haile Johnston observes, “hundreds of doors have been opened, and we’re working to keep them open going forward.”

Green agrees, noting that we’re stronger when joined together in this common cause: “Food connects people; food creates fellowship,” he concludes.

A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding two halves of a pink radish. The radish halves are cut lengthwise, revealing a vibrant pink interior with a white core. The person is wearing a light-colored, patterned shirt. The background is a lush green field of foliage. A green arrow-shaped graphic points to the right, containing text.

For more information, visit **The Georgia ACRE Collective** online.