

SAVING AMERICA'S WORKING LANDS

A National Conference Hosted by American Farmland Trust

DALLAS, TEXAS | APRIL 23-25, 2025

Facilitated Discussion: Planning for Environmental Change FACILITATORS



Sam Smidt

National Land Use and Protection Research Initiative Director
American Farmland Trust

Sam Smidt joined American Farmland Trust as the National Land Use and Protection Research Initiative Director in May 2023. He most recently was an Assistant Professor at the University of Florida in the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences where he was the director of the Land and Water Lab and Early Career Faculty Fellow for the Water Institute. His lab was widely awarded for elite teaching and research related to sustainable agricultural and natural resources management. Sam is an experienced researcher and leader with specialties including GIS, data analytics, science communication, and data visualization. He has an extensive agricultural background and is particularly skilled at evaluating and modeling land transformation impacts on human and natural systems. His active partnerships include private, non-profit, governmental, and intergovernmental organizations, and he is currently funded by the United States Department of Agriculture and National Science Foundation. Sam is a Midwest native raised in the Pumpkin Capital of the World, and he has graduate degrees in earth and environmental science and policy from Michigan State University and the University of Iowa. He is located in Gainesville, FL, where he operates a small organic Christmas tree farm with his wife and two boys.



Katie Pisarello

Senior Scientist

American Farmland Trust

Katie Pisarello is a Senior Research Scientist for AFT's Land Use and Protection Research group. Before joining AFT in 2024, she worked as a research scientist and systems modeler for USDA-ARS. Katie evaluates the complex agricultural system as a whole by applying statistical, machine learning, and systems modeling techniques using variety of data across fields and scales. Katie has a multi-disciplinary background and is a graduate of the University of Georgia (B.S., Environmental Economics) and the University of Florida (Ph.D., Soil and Water Sciences, Postdoctoral Fellow in Wildlife Ecology). She lives in small farming town in south Georgia with her husband and almost 2-year-old daughter, where they enjoy all kinds of agro-tourism, hiking, and gardening.



Casey Mitchell

Lead Cartographer

American Farmland Trust

Casey Mitchell joined the American Farmland Trust's Land Use and Protection Research team in January 2024. Before joining AFT, Casey utilized cartography to advance Philadelphia's "Green City, Clean Waters" initiative, a 25-year plan to restore local waterways by implementing green stormwater infrastructure. She has also worked as an urban farmer and is passionate about urban agriculture as a tool for fostering community and combating food insecurity. Casey earned her Bachelor of Arts from Temple

University's Department of Geography, where she studied Landscape Architecture, Environmental Studies, and Geographic Information Systems. She resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with her partner and two cats, Mala and Turtle.



Theresa Nogeire McRae

Landscape Ecologist

American Farmland Trust

Theresa collaborates with colleagues on the land use team and across AFT to research spatial patterns of land-use change, ecosystem services, climate-smart strategies and wildlife ecology in agricultural landscapes. She brings expertise in ecology, water resources, quantitative modeling, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Theresa's research on multifunctional landscapes and conservation has been widely published in academic journals. She also taught and advised graduate students in ecology, geographic information science, sustainable agriculture, and other courses at Oregon State University, where she holds a courtesy faculty appointment, as well as Colorado State University, University of Washington, and University of California Santa Barbara. Theresa holds both a Doctorate and Masters' of Environmental Science and Management from UCSB, a Bachelor of Arts in Biology from Vassar College, and was a postdoctoral fellow with the American Association of University Women. She lives and grows food with her two kids in Corvallis, Oregon.