

# SAVING AMERICA'S WORKING LANDS

A National Conference Hosted by American Farmland Trust

**DALLAS, TEXAS | APRIL 23-25, 2025**

## **Plenary Session: The State of America's Working Lands SPEAKERS**



### **John Piotti**

President and Chief Executive Officer  
American Farmland Trust

John Piotti has worked at the forefront of sustainable agriculture since the early 1990s, first in Maine, and now nationally. In 2016, he became President of American Farmland Trust, bringing new energy to this storied organization that launched the conservation agriculture movement. Under John's leadership, AFT has engaged in the most comprehensive study of American land use ever conducted, helped secure billions of dollars in federal funding to protect farmland and promote climatesmart agriculture, and launched new initiatives that advance regenerative farming practices and support next generation farmers. Prior to joining AFT, John served as President of Maine Farmland Trust, which during his tenure became recognized as one of the most innovative and impactful farm-support groups in the nation. John has also served in the Maine State Legislature, where he chaired the Agriculture Committee and was later elected House Majority Leader. In 2013, John was named to Maine Magazine's inaugural list of one of the 50 people who have done the most for the state. In 2005, he received a prestigious Eisenhower Fellowship, which he used to study agricultural policy in Europe. John holds three degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: in engineering, public policy, and systems management.



## **Chad Ellis**

Chief Executive Officer

Texas Agricultural Land Trust

Chad Ellis is the Chief Executive Officer for Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT). Chad Ellis brings a wealth of land conservation experience, most recently in his work for the Noble Research Institute, the largest nonprofit agricultural research organization in the U.S. Mr. Ellis has over 20 years of experience working directly with producers and land managers implementing stewardship focused management. Ellis not only promotes and advocates land stewardship principles, he also implements it within his own family operation in Lohn, Texas. Mr. Ellis is passionate about helping empower the producer to be better tomorrow than they are today. Ellis brings deep connections and experience with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, where he served in increasingly responsible roles for a decade. He also currently serves on an executive advisory board to the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.



## **Sarah Fulton-Smith**

Texas Regional Director

American Farmland Trust

Sarah leads AFT's programs in Texas and joined AFT in March of 2023. As a seventh-generation Texan, she is excited to expand AFT's presence in Texas, and to work with partners across the diverse landscape of the state to address the urgent need to protect land and promote environmentally sound farming practices. Sarah has worked at the intersection of agriculture and climate change issues throughout her career as a policy advocate, a researcher and a landowner/ operator. For the last several years, she has

been operating her own farm and small business in Maryland where she collaborated with local partners to permanently protect the farm and implemented several conservation agreements. Previously, she worked at the UN Foundation and the UN FAO, focusing on sustainable land use, bioenergy, and other agriculture/ climate change issues bringing together stakeholders to advance policy. Sarah holds an MPA from Columbia University, and a BS in Bioenvironmental Sciences from Texas A&M University. She is a doctoral candidate at Colorado State University in Soil and Crop Sciences studying the contribution of crop residues and roots to soil organic matter formation and carbon sequestration.



*Facilitator*

**Cris Coffin**

Senior Policy Advisor; Director, National Agricultural Land Network  
American Farmland Trust

Cris helps guide AFT's federal and state policy engagement. She also directs the National Agricultural Land Network, which supports state and local governments, land trusts, agricultural service providers, planners, and conservation organizations and builds their capacity to advance farmland protection. From 2015 to 2018, Cris served as policy director for Land For Good, a New England-based organization with which AFT often collaborates. But before that, Cris served as AFT's New England director for fourteen years. She has held several positions in the U.S. Senate, including as professional staff on the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry and as chief of staff to Senator Herb Kohl. She has worked for Resources for the Future and the Vermont Department of Agriculture. Cris co-chairs the Massachusetts Food System Collaborative and serves on her town's Agriculture Commission. Cris farms part-time with her husband, running a small, pastured poultry operation in western Massachusetts. She is an alumna of the University of Massachusetts-Amherst and holds a Juris Doctor from Georgetown University.