

SAVING AMERICA'S WORKING LANDS

A National Conference Hosted by American Farmland Trust

DALLAS, TEXAS | APRIL 23-25, 2025

Session: Stacking Conservation Outcomes

SPEAKERS



Andy James

Director of Additive Conservation

Texas Agricultural Land Trust

Andy James' natural resource career got started at a very tender age. At a time when many teens are slinging burgers at a fast-food joint, Andy James was conducting vegetation transects with Texas A&M graduate students for a research project at Fort Hood. "I got involved in 4-H as a kid, and really got into plant identification," recalled James. "The local plant identification team in my hometown of Gatesville competed all over the state and we were pretty good." The team's reputation caught the attention of a Texas A&M professor, who asked James' 4-H coach if he might want a part-time summer job helping grad students. That's how James' conservation career was launched when he was just 15. That high school connection led to a Bachelor of Science degree in Rangeland Ecology and Management at Texas A&M, followed by a master's degree in Natural Resource Management at the Borderlands Research Institute at Sul Ross State University. His first full-time professional job was at the Natural Resources Conservation Service, where he learned the ins and outs of natural resource management and all about the many programs available to landowners. He also met Chad Ellis there, who would later go on to become the CEO of the Texas Agricultural Land Trust, and the two kept in touch over the years. In 2014, James accepted a position at Texas A&M's Natural Resources Institute, which conducts extensive research about Texas land trends. That work involved him in all aspects of the tools being used to conserve agricultural land in

Texas, including the work of the Texas Agricultural Land Trust (TALT). “I’ve always been interested in conservation and agricultural easements to protect working lands, and it was great to see TALT’s evolution from a fledgling organization to an entity that is really making a difference on the landscape of Texas,” he said. In 2019 he earned his real estate license, which further enhanced his portfolio of skills. In late 2020, Chad Ellis asked James to join the TALT team on a part-time basis to assist with conservation easement transactions, as well as many other aspects of TALT’s work. In September 2021, James came on board fulltime as TALT’s Land Transaction Manager. “It all came together and this new position is allowing me to use every skill I’ve learned along the way to further TALT’s mission of keeping Texas big, wide and open,” said James. “It’s a great opportunity and I am really happy to be part of the TALT team.”



Michelle Perez

Water Initiative Director

American Farmland Trust

Michelle leads AFT’s efforts to achieve better water quality and reduce agricultural non-point source pollution through a comprehensive initiative with links to outcomes quantification, soil health, climate, and ecosystem markets. Michelle previously served AFT as a senior policy specialist, where she researched, developed, and promoted innovative agricultural and conservation policies.

Before joining AFT, Michelle worked at World Resources Institute, leading projects on nutrient trading, developing nutrient assessment tools, and quantifying environmental outcomes. She previously worked for Environmental Working Group and Alliance to Save Energy. During her career, Michelle has published numerous reports and papers. She currently serves as council member of the Soil Water Conservation Society’s National Capital Chapter. She is an alumna of Occidental College where she studied biology. She holds a Doctorate in environmental policy from the University of Maryland School of Public Policy where her dissertation was a three-state comparative case study of farm nutrient management regulations in Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia.

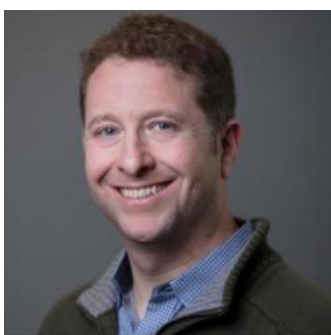


Douglas Wolfgang

Executive Secretary

PA Department of Agriculture

Doug currently serves as the Executive Secretary of the Pennsylvania State Conservation Commission, a position he has held since January 2023. In this role, he oversees the allocation of funding and resources to local governments and partner organizations, as well as providing funding and technical assistance for agricultural best management practices. These efforts are aimed at protecting water quality, enhancing soil health, and ensuring farm viability, particularly within the Chesapeake Bay watershed and across the state. Doug's roots trace back to a grain farm in Schuylkill County, PA. He earned his Bachelor's degree in Geo-Environmental Studies from Shippensburg University in 1994. His career began at the Lebanon County Conservation District, where he worked from 1994 to 1998, before joining the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Farmland Preservation. Since 2007, Doug has had the privilege of serving as the Director of the nationally recognized Pennsylvania Farmland Preservation Program, which focuses on the permanent agricultural conservation easement purchase program.



Facilitator

Ben Kurtzman

Director of Land Protection Projects

American Farmland Trust

Ben directs AFT's in-house land trust function and is responsible for the stewardship of AFT's easements and fee lands. He previously managed law and policy research for AFT's

Farmland Information Center. He has authored numerous research reports, fact sheets, and technical memoranda on farmland protection. Ben is a producer of “The Barber Farm,” an award-winning film documenting his in-laws’ efforts to protect their farm in Vermont. Ben completed undergraduate work at the University of Vermont and holds a degree in law from Suffolk University. Ben lives in Northampton, Massachusetts.