



The South Carolina Land Trust Network (SCLTN) unites land trusts throughout the state to amplify the power of permanent land conservation. The rapid growth of our state, coupled with the ambitious goals of the General Assembly and Governor McMaster, has put conservation on the minds of many voters. This prompted the SCLTN to interview candidates to better understand their perspectives on these issues.

This 10-question survey was sent to all Commissioner of Agriculture candidates. The narrative below brings together the responses from each candidate who responded.

COMMISSIONER OF AGRICULTURE SURVEY RESPONSES

1. Do you enjoy spending time outdoors? If so, what are your favorite outdoor activities or memories in nature?

Blanding: Absolutely. Some of my earliest memories are connected to the land. I come from a farming family in Clarendon County, and for generations, our family's life was tied to the soil, forests, and fields of South Carolina. Today, my favorite outdoor activities include hiking and exploring national parks, adventurous activities like ziplining, and beholding natural features like waterfalls, mountains, and forests. But for me, being outdoors has never just meant recreation. It has also meant walking through the pastureland and spending time with family. The land is part of how I understand where I come from and who I am. That is one of the reasons conservation is personal to me and why I studied both agricultural and environmental systems. When we protect farmland and natural resources, we are protecting places where families can work, live, build memories, and pass something meaningful to the next generation.



Simpson: Of course! I love the outdoors, especially on my farm or with my golden retriever Manning. I also enjoy hiking, running, and being in the mountains.

2. *Are you aware of any recent conservation of farmland initiatives or projects you believe are a good model that can be replicated across the state?*

Blanding: Absolutely! I think South Carolina's Working Agricultural Lands Protection Fund is an important model because it recognizes that farmland conservation and agricultural viability are interconnected. We need to protect land, but we also need to ensure that farmers have the ability to continue working that land. I would like to see that approach expanded across the state through stronger partnerships between the SC Department of Agriculture (SCDA), Conservation Bank, land trusts, conservation districts, and farmers. I also think we should learn from successful local conservation partnerships and replicate what works at a larger scale. Different regions of South Carolina have different agricultural systems, development pressures, and conservation priorities, so a statewide strategy should give local partners the flexibility to respond to those differences. Ultimately, the model I want to replicate is farmer and landowner-driven conservation backed by meaningful scientific, financial, and technical support. If we make conservation practical and economically viable for landowners, we can protect significantly more farmland while keeping it in productive use.

Simpson: Absolutely. One that I am particularly proud of is South Carolina's Working Agricultural Lands Preservation Act. During my time serving as Governor Henry McMaster's Agricultural Advisor, I had the opportunity to help advance this effort, which Governor McMaster signed into law in 2024. The Act created the Working Farmland Protection Fund in the South Carolina Conservation Bank, which allowed working farms to stay privately owned, while also being protected from development. So far over 5000 acres of land have been protected. Conservation easements are another effort that has successfully protected farms across South



Carolina, and I believe we should continue building on that model. We need to continue to give farmers, timber producers, and landowners the tools to keep that land in their families and protected from unnecessary overdevelopment.

3. South Carolina is currently the fastest-growing state in the nation. Do you think that current land conservation efforts are balancing this growth adequately? Why or why not? What specific steps would you take to balance growth with conservation?

Blanding: Our conservation efforts are doing important work, but the pace of growth means we cannot assume that what worked in the past will be sufficient for the future. I don't believe we should frame this as growth versus conservation. People and businesses are coming to South Carolina because they see opportunity or are returning home like I did. We should welcome responsible growth while protecting the farms, forests, water resources, and rural communities that make South Carolina special. However, we also need to protect priority working farmlands, forests, other important lands like wetlands and rural landscapes before development pressure becomes overwhelming. We should expand voluntary conservation incentives and better coordinate land-use and infrastructure planning. I would also make conservation an economic strategy. Preserving farmland keeps land available for agricultural production, supports rural economies, protects our food system, and reduces development pressure elsewhere. South Carolina can grow, but we need to grow smarter, not simply larger.

Simpson: South Carolina has lost more than 400,000 acres of farmland over the last two decades. That should concern everyone who cares about the future of agriculture in our state. We should never take good, working, productive agricultural land out of production when there are better alternatives available. Once farmland is paved over or developed, it is borderline impossible to get back. Protecting that land is not only about conservation; it is about protecting our food supply, our rural economy, and South Carolina's agricultural heritage. I believe we can do a better



job balancing growth with conservation without standing in the way of economic development. We should be encouraging development in appropriate areas while encouraging farmers and landowners to utilize tools like conservation easements and the Working Lands Act to keep farmland in production. As Commissioner of Agriculture, I will be an advocate for the small farmer when development threatens productive farmland. I would also work to strengthen the profitability of our farms, because ultimately the best way to protect working farmland is to keep it profitable.

4. Do you support the State's ambitious goal of protecting seven million acres by 2050? Why or why not? What do you see as challenges to reaching this goal?

Blanding: Yes, I support the goal of protecting seven million acres by 2050. South Carolina's conservation future has to be ambitious because our development pressures are aggressive. But achieving the goal will require more than setting a target. We need sustained investment in conservation programs, stronger partnerships with land trusts, better technical assistance, and greater education and awareness to landowners about their options. If we want millions more acres protected, we need to give landowners practical and viable reasons to choose conservation. We also have to make sure conservation reaches working farms, family forestland, and historically underserved landowners and communities that have not always had equal access to conservation resources. Seven million acres is an ambitious goal, but I believe it is achievable if South Carolina treats land conservation as a long-term investment rather than a one-time initiative.

Simpson: I fully support these conservation goals while respecting private property rights and keeping working lands working. The greatest challenge will be competing economic pressures on landowners. With land values in SC skyrocketing, there is tremendous pressure to sell, especially when our agriculture sector is hurting right now. The challenge is to make programs, like conservation easements, competitive enough for it to make sense for farmers and landowners to take advantage of.



5. What do you see as the greatest challenges for SC farmers and what are some solutions?

Blanding: South Carolina farmers are being squeezed and stressed from multiple directions, from rising land prices and development pressure, input and operational costs, access to capital and markets, processing limitations and inaccessibility, labor challenges, and farm succession issues. My approach is to look at the entire agricultural system, not just production. Farmers need access to land, capital, markets, processing, and technical assistance. That means strengthening land-access programs, expanding conservation tools for working farmland, investing in local and regional infrastructure for processing and manufacturing raw goods, and making it easier for beginning farmers to enter the industry. We also have to address heirs' property and farm succession so that families can maintain ownership and keep land productive, and help under-utilized land become active or restore them into wildlife habitats. Most importantly, farmland preservation and farm viability have to go hand in hand. Keeping farmland working only matters if farmers can actually afford to keep farming it.

Simpson: Profitability. SC farmers have been consistently faced with high input costs, pressure from development, limited processing for their products, burdensome red tape and over-regulation, lack of workforce, and the current issues with drought plaguing SC have put a tremendous strain on our farmers. We must expand the markets for our goods in SC by also expanding our infrastructure and processing capacity in-state to help alleviate some of the current input costs. We must also recruit agribusiness with the same intensity that SC has recruited manufacturing while also advocating for more SC grown products to reduce our reliance on imported goods, thereby increasing profitability for our farmers. Additionally, cutting unnecessary regulations and promoting workforce development and agriculture education in the classroom would expand further opportunities for the growth of the ag sector in SC.



6. *How do you see SC agriculture advancing in the next ten years?*

Blanding: I see South Carolina agriculture becoming more diversified, innovative, and connected to local markets and communities. We should continue supporting our traditional commodity agriculture while creating opportunities in specialty crops, conservation agriculture, agroforestry, livestock, aquaculture, food processing, agritourism, and emerging agricultural technologies. But agricultural advancement cannot simply mean bigger farms or more production. Success should mean more South Carolina farmers staying viable, more young people entering agriculture, more agricultural products being processed here, and more of the economic value generated and the food produced by our farms stay in South Carolina. That is the vision behind my Growing Together plan: an agricultural economy where farmers, consumers, communities, and natural resources are all part of the same future.

Simpson: I want to see SC agriculture become a national model in all areas. Over the next decade we need to aggressively recruit and grow agribusiness and agricultural infrastructure to bring SC to the forefront. The increased implementation of precision ag and technology will make our farms more efficient and profitable, strengthening our rural economies. Our initiatives to bring agriculture back to the classroom will help develop the next generation of business owners and leaders in agriculture.

7. *SCLTN has supported increased funding for the South Carolina Conservation Bank's "Working Ag Fund"; would you support expanding this incentive? Are there other incentives for land conservation that you support?*

Blanding: Wholeheartedly yes, I support expanding the Working Agricultural Lands Protection Fund because protecting working farmland is central to keeping South



Carolina agriculture viable. That is why Protection is one of the three pillars of my Growing Together plan. Protection means protecting the land farmers depend on, preserving our agricultural heritage, and ensuring that development pressure does not make farming impossible for the next generation. That's why I support sustained investment in the Working Ag Fund and other conservation easements. I also want SCDA to help landowners access farmland preservation and retention tools, expand land access and transition assistance for beginning farmers, and make conservation programs easier to navigate, particularly for family farmers and landowners who have historically had less access to these resources. Conservation and agricultural viability should not be separate goals. If we want to keep farms working, we have to make it possible for farmers to stay on the land. SCDA should serve as a partner by connecting landowners with conservation organizations, technical assistance, and funding opportunities.

Simpson: I support strengthening programs that help keep working farms in production. The Working Ag Fund is a fantastic program that recognizes the farmland itself as part of SC's agricultural infrastructure. I would back an increase in its incentive and funding if we could demonstrate the program has created the demand and will continue to be effective in protecting our working ag land. Additionally, I'm all for exploring other incentives with estate planning to keep family farms in those families, public and private partnerships, and other incentives that make protecting farmland financially viable.

8. How do you see SC's Agricultural Industry addressing water quality and water supply?

Blanding: Water is agricultural infrastructure, and without reliable and clean water, we cannot have a reliable agricultural economy. Agriculture needs to be part of South Carolina's broader water conversation as a partner in protecting our water resources, not just a user of the water. We should expand practices that improve soil



health, reduce erosion and runoff, protect riparian areas, improve irrigation efficiency, and increase the ability of agricultural soils to retain water. Farmers also need predictable access to water, particularly as population growth and development increase competition for the resource. That means agriculture needs a stronger voice in statewide water planning. Ultimately, water is a shared resource that requires shared responsibility. We need policies that help farmers conserve water and protect water quality while ensuring that agriculture remains a viable part of South Carolina's future.

Simpson: Water is one of the most critical resources to agriculture, and being good stewards of its usage is essential in protecting our natural resources. We should explore and encourage water usage practices that reduce strain on our water table, improve soil health, reduce erosion and protect areas from dangerous run-off. The department of agriculture needs to be a partner, not an adversary with both DES and our farmers. We need to provide support to our producers by giving them the necessary tools to conserve water while remaining productive.

9. There has been a lot of recent debate in the legislature about growth management and we can expect to hear more in 2027: do you have any thoughts on pressures on farm and timberland conversion (e.g. population growth, changes in the timber industry, infrastructure siting, energy infrastructure) and solutions for South Carolina?

Blanding: Farmland and timberland are not simply vacant land waiting to be developed. They are working landscapes that produce food, support rural economies, provide wildlife habitat, protect watersheds, and contribute to the character of our communities. At the same time, South Carolina needs housing, roads, energy infrastructure, manufacturing, and other economic



development. We cannot simply try to stop growth. We need to be much more intentional about where and how growth happens. That means stronger coordination among state agencies, local governments, conservation organizations, utilities, and landowners so that high-value agricultural and natural resources are considered before major infrastructure decisions are made. We should also expand voluntary incentives that make conservation economically viable for landowners. If we are serious about protecting farms and forests, we have to consider it early on, not after development decisions have already been made.

Simpson: This has been and will continue to be one of the most important and pressing issues facing the state right now. While some development is necessary to keep the state moving forward, it should not be at the expense of our rural communities in our forests and farmlands. I believe in a collaborative approach where everyone had a seat at the table. We need to identify the areas of the state that are most under threat with the pressure of development and provide the right incentives to protect them – whether that be through voluntary programs, increasing their profitability, or bringing in the needed infrastructure to better support their agribusiness.

10. Do you have other perspectives regarding land conservation that you would like to share?

Blanding: My perspective on conservation is shaped by having worked on both sides of the issue, as a former soil conservationist aide for the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service agency and as an advocate for conservation policy through the Union of Concerned Scientists' Food & Environment program. I have seen firsthand how valuable programs like the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Conservation Stewardship Program can be for farmers. I have also seen their limitations. These programs are chronically underfunded and routinely oversubscribed, meaning farmers who want to implement conservation practices often cannot get the resources they need.



I believe South Carolina should be filling those gaps. SCDA should be the primary resource and partner for South Carolina farmers, not simply a pass-through to USDA. If a farmer wants to improve soil health, conserve water, or adopt other conservation practices, the state should have the capacity to help them do it. That means building state-level programs that complement, not duplicate, federal conservation programs and investing in the technical assistance providers and funding necessary to reach more farmers. We shouldn't tell South Carolina farmers to wait for Washington to fund conservation. We should build the capacity here at home to help them steward the land.

Simpson: As a fifth-generation farmer, I have had the privilege of growing up and working on land that my family has been tilling and tending for over 100 years. I believe it is not only in our best interest, but also my duty to ensure that the next generation has the same opportunity I did to grow up on a farm, work the land, and enjoy God's beautiful creation here in South Carolina.

At the heart of why I am running for Commissioner of Agriculture is a commitment to protecting our farms, our families, and our future. As Commissioner, I want to bring together stakeholders from every corner of our agricultural community, from farmers and timber producers to conservation organizations and state and local leaders, around one simple goal: protecting South Carolina's agricultural heritage while ensuring that the next generation has the opportunity not only to enjoy it, but to build upon it and succeed.

Additionally, candidates were given the opportunity to submit a 250-word statement.

Simpson: Please provide a brief statement (250 words or less) describing your overall conservation philosophy and how it would influence your decisions if elected.



As a fifth-generation South Carolina farmer, I believe we are on the frontlines for land stewardship and conservation. Especially right now with the rapid growth in SC, farmers, foresters, and landowners understand better than anyone that we have a responsibility to take care of the land today so it remains productive for generations to come. I was raised on a Century Farm in Home Branch where we would do anything to protect our family's sacred land.

My conservation philosophy is centered on protecting working lands, while respecting private property rights, and pursuing voluntary, locally driven solutions. South Carolina is growing rapidly, but growth should not come at the expense of our working farmland, forests, wetlands, and rural communities that make our state's heritage so special.

As Commissioner of Agriculture, I would work with farmers, landowners, conservation organizations, local governments, and the private sector to provide landowners with more tools to keep agricultural land in production. I support voluntary conservation easements, investments in working farmland preservation, and policies that make farming economically. I want to make our farmers so profitable, that selling out isn't even a thought that crosses their mind.

Additionally, we must also be good stewards of our land here in South Carolina, and as a farmer I think we know firsthand the importance of caring for the land we live and work on. Conservation must also include responsible management of our soil, water, forests, and wildlife habitat, while also advocating for responsible practices like regenerative ag. My goal would be to grow South Carolina while protecting the agricultural heritage and natural resources for generations to come.