



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 gubernatorial candidates. The narrative below brings together the responses from each candidate on each question.

GUBERNATORIAL SURVEY RESPONSES

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

Addison: Yes. I particularly enjoy fishing, paddle boat rides, and jet skiing. One memory that stands out is taking my youngest daughter fishing for the first time, and she caught 14 brims, she named each one of them. Those experiences remind me that conservation is not an abstract policy question; it is about protecting places where people make memories and connect with the world around them. I want South Carolina's children and future generations to have opportunities to enjoy the outdoors, regardless of where they live or their family's income.

Johnson: Yes, I love spending time outdoors with my family and at times when I need to center and reconnect. We hike, fish, bike, and swim. One of my favorite places is the Sesquicentennial State Park.



Wilson: Absolutely. One of my favorite places to spend time outdoors is Harbison State Forest. One of my best memories was going there with my son Michael for his Eagle Scout project, where we built a bridge together. Getting outdoors, working with my hands, and spending that time with my son made it a memory I'll always treasure.

2. *What is your favorite public park or protected natural area in SC?*

Addison: My favorite is Cheraw State Park in Cheraw, SC. What makes it special to me is it is where I learned to swim, and enjoy family reunions and vacations. It represents the kind of natural inheritance I want future generations to enjoy.

Johnson: Sesquicentennial State Park. It's not far from my house. This is where I like to hike and clear my thoughts.

Wilson: Some of my fondest memories are from time spent along South Carolina's coastal waterways and marshlands. There's something iconic about the Lowcountry landscape. The salt marshes, pluff mud, dunes, and waterways are part of what makes South Carolina home. Every time I'm there, it takes me back to childhood vacations with my family and reminds me how fortunate we are to have such beautiful natural places in our state.

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?*

Addison: South Carolina led the nation in percentage population growth between July 2024 and July 2025, according to the Census Bureau's latest



annual state estimates. That makes the connection between growth and conservation especially important. My view is that protecting individual properties, although valuable, is not enough by itself. I would not call the balance adequate unless conservation priorities are also reflected in decisions about housing, roads, water, sewer capacity, and public investment. As governor, I would seek a coordinated, publicly accessible map of priority conservation lands and infrastructure capacity. I would work with local governments to encourage redevelopment and needed housing in suitable, already-served areas, while directing voluntary conservation efforts toward working lands, drinking-water sources, floodplains, and connected wildlife habitat. I would also support planning assistance for smaller communities and publish annual measures of land protection, development patterns, and infrastructure needs. The objective would be better-directed growth, not a blanket prohibition on development or a policy that makes housing less attainable.

Johnson: South Carolina has made meaningful progress, but I do not believe our current efforts are fully keeping pace with growth. People are moving here because of our quality of life, and we have a responsibility to protect the land, water, and communities that make this state attractive. Growth should bring opportunity without leaving existing residents with overcrowded roads, greater flooding risks, and the loss of productive farmland. As governor, I would support dependable funding for the Conservation Bank, prioritize voluntary protection of working farms and forests, and help local governments coordinate conservation with housing and infrastructure planning. I would encourage redevelopment of vacant and previously developed properties, direct infrastructure investments toward areas prepared for growth, and protect important watersheds and floodplains. We



need room for affordable homes and new businesses alongside a clear plan for preserving our natural resources.

Wilson: South Carolina's growth is an opportunity, but we have to manage it responsibly. We should not stop growth, but we also should not allow growth to erase the character of the communities attracting people here in the first place. As Governor, I would prioritize responsible infrastructure planning, local decision-making, private property rights, voluntary conservation, and the preservation of working farms and forests. We also need greater accountability for how state infrastructure and conservation dollars are spent. The goal should be straightforward: accommodate growth while protecting the places and resources that make South Carolina special.

4. Do you support the State's ambitious goal of protecting 10 million acres by 2050? Why or why not? What do you see as challenges to reaching this goal?

Addison: Yes. I would support working toward the 10-million-acre aspiration through voluntary, science-informed, and fiscally responsible conservation. I would treat the statutory 7-million-acre benchmark as an important planning milestone, while evaluating a credible path toward the larger goal. For me, success should mean more than reaching an acreage total. I would prioritize meaningful protection of water resources, working farms and forests, wildlife connections, cultural landscapes, and appropriate opportunities for public recreation. I would not support pressuring unwilling owners merely to meet a numerical target. The challenges I would plan for include land acquisition costs, competition for public funding, landowner participation, fragmented ownership, and the expense of permanent stewardship. I would seek a verified baseline, clear definitions of protected



land, five-year milestones, and reporting that avoids double-counting acreage. Any plan should include long-term management and a realistic assessment of funding, rather than an unfunded promise.

Johnson: Yes. I support the goal of protecting 10 million acres by 2050 through voluntary partnerships, responsible investment, and respect for private property rights. A long-term goal gives South Carolina a framework for protecting drinking water, productive farmland, working forests, wildlife habitat, and places families can enjoy. The challenges include rising land prices, development pressure, reliable funding, and the capacity to manage protected land over time. Landowners also need confidence that conservation agreements will respect the uses they negotiate, including appropriate farming and forestry activities. I would establish measurable milestones and public reporting, with clear accounting of permanently protected acreage. We should measure success by both the acreage conserved and the benefits delivered to communities.

Wilson: I support South Carolina continuing to aggressively conserve important land, provided we do it responsibly, respect private property rights, prioritize voluntary conservation, and ensure taxpayers receive value for their investment. I believe the focus should not simply be on reaching an acreage number. We should prioritize protecting the right land, including working farms and forests, wildlife habitat, watersheds, historic properties, and areas important to outdoor recreation. South Carolina has already demonstrated what public-private partnerships can accomplish. In less than a decade, nearly 400,000 acres of historically or environmentally significant land have been preserved, including a 62,000-acre conservation easement in the Pee Dee.



5. *Should more conservation land be available to the public in South Carolina? Why or why not?*

Addison: Yes, where access is compatible with conservation, safety, and the rights attached to the property. I want more South Carolinians to have reasonable opportunities to walk, fish, paddle, observe wildlife, learn local history, and enjoy nature. I would prioritize communities with limited access to parks and outdoor recreation, including practical access for older adults and people with disabilities. New projects should address trails, safe entrances, parking where appropriate, visitor information, maintenance, and staffing, rather than simply announcing an acquisition. However, I would not treat every protected property as a public park. Many private conservation easements do not require public access, while Conservation Bank-funded easements are subject to specific statutory access provisions. I would respect the terms of each agreement and applicable funding requirements. My goal would be more meaningful public access on suitable lands, with appropriate protections for sensitive habitat, working farms and forests, and private property.

Johnson: Yes, where public access is appropriate and can be managed responsibly. South Carolinians should have more opportunities to fish, hunt, hike, paddle, and experience the outdoors, including families who cannot afford expensive recreational activities. I would prioritize access in communities with limited parks and outdoor opportunities.

Wilson: Yes, where public access is appropriate and consistent with the purpose of the property. South Carolinians should have opportunities to hunt,



fish, hike, and enjoy our natural resources. At the same time, conservation does not always require government ownership. Voluntary conservation easements can protect important land while keeping farms and forests privately owned and economically productive. We should pursue a balance between public access, conservation, working lands, and private property rights. The Attorney General's Office has previously recognized South Carolina's statutory interest in promoting public beach access.

6. *SCLTN has supported increased funding for the South Carolina Conservation Bank and increases for conservation easement state income tax credits. Would you support expanding financial incentives for private conservation easements? If so, what are some additional ideas?*

Addison: Yes. I would support increased, dependable funding for the South Carolina Conservation Bank and carefully structured increases in conservation tax incentives, subject to fiscal review and measurable public conservation benefits. I would also pursue assistance with transaction costs, such as surveys, appraisals, and independent legal advice, so participation is not limited to landowners who can readily absorb those expenses. I would support competitively awarded purchases of conservation easements from willing owners who cannot afford to donate development rights, with priority for important working lands and natural resources. South Carolina already provides carryforward and transfer mechanisms for qualifying unused conservation credits. I would seek clearer guidance and efficient administration so eligible owners can make informed use of those provisions. I would also seek separately authorized funding for long-term stewardship and easement monitoring, rather than assuming acquisition funds can pay every ongoing expense. Any expansion should include reliable valuations,



transparent award decisions, and safeguards against conflicts of interest. I would work with the General Assembly to set funding levels after reviewing costs and competing needs.

Johnson: Yes. I support strengthening conservation easement incentives and providing dependable funding for the South Carolina Conservation Bank, with clear standards and accountability. Voluntary easements offer a practical way to protect important land while allowing families to retain ownership and agreed-upon agricultural or forestry uses. Beyond stronger state income tax credits, I would support matching funds that attract federal and private investment, assistance with appraisal and legal costs for qualifying landowners, and targeted purchases of development rights on threatened working farms and forests. I would also explore ways to make incentives more useful to landowners with modest incomes or limited tax liability. Independent valuations, enforceable agreements, and adequate stewardship funding should accompany these investments so taxpayers receive lasting conservation value.

Wilson: I support looking at responsible incentives that encourage voluntary private conservation, particularly when they help South Carolina families keep working farms and forests intact. Any expanded incentive should be transparent, fiscally responsible, respect private property rights, and demonstrate real conservation value for taxpayers. I would also look for ways to reduce unnecessary barriers to voluntary conservation and strengthen partnerships among landowners, land trusts, and the private sector. South Carolina is already using voluntary conservation easements to preserve working agricultural and forest lands, providing a foundation we can build upon.



7. *What is the role of the state government to support land conservation? The local government? Private industry?*

Addison: State government should establish statewide priorities, coordinate resource and infrastructure agencies, propose dependable funding, and provide technical assistance. As governor, I would seek consistent planning across transportation, water, economic development, agriculture, forestry, and conservation, while respecting each agency's legal authority. Local governments should bring community knowledge into land-use and infrastructure decisions, engage residents early, and identify locally important landscapes. I would support their planning capacity and regional cooperation rather than assume that a single statewide development pattern fits every community. Private industry should be a partner in responsible site selection, redevelopment, efficient land and water use, and voluntary conservation. I would encourage businesses to address project impacts early and contribute to durable stewardship, without treating a conservation donation as a substitute for complying with environmental requirements. Land trusts and landowners should be central partners throughout this work. I would look to their local relationships and conservation expertise while keeping public decisions transparent and accountable.

Johnson: State government should establish conservation priorities, provide reliable funding and scientific information, coordinate agencies, and help communities secure federal and private resources. It should also protect water quality and ensure that major infrastructure decisions account for conservation needs. Local governments should lead land-use planning, guided by residents and a realistic understanding of infrastructure capacity.



The state should help smaller and rural communities obtain the planning expertise they need. Private industry should be an active partner through responsible development, sustainable forestry and agriculture, conservation agreements, and investment in stewardship. Landowners and land trusts are essential partners as well. The strongest approach gives each participant clear responsibilities and brings them together early enough to solve problems.

Wilson: Each has an important role. State government should establish a responsible framework, protect natural resources, support voluntary conservation, and ensure taxpayer dollars are spent transparently and effectively. Local governments should have a strong voice because local communities understand their growth pressures, land-use needs, and community character. Private landowners, farmers, foresters, businesses, and conservation organizations should remain essential partners. Conservation should not be something government simply imposes on landowners. As Attorney General, I have defended the principle that states should retain authority over their lands and waters rather than unnecessarily ceding that authority to Washington.

8. *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 land use changes (e.g. population growth, changes in the timber industry, farmland turnover, infrastructure siting, energy infrastructure) and solutions for South Carolina?*

Addison: I would address these pressures together rather than make disconnected decisions about development, conservation, and infrastructure. For population growth, I would support enough housing in



suitable locations, redevelopment of previously used sites, and infrastructure planning that considers water supply, wastewater capacity, transportation, and flood exposure. I would ask state agencies and local partners to evaluate cumulative impacts, not only one project at a time. For forestry and agriculture, I would support sustainable production, market opportunities, voluntary working land easements, and succession assistance that helps families keep land productive across generations. My objective would be to keep farms and forests economically viable while protecting their conservation values. For roads, utilities, and energy facilities, I would seek early comparison of alternative locations and routes. Where technically appropriate, I would favor previously disturbed sites, rooftops, and existing infrastructure corridors over unnecessary conversion of high-value habitat or productive farmland. Energy planning should consider reliability and affordability alongside land, water, community impacts, and end-of-life restoration responsibilities. I would work with the General Assembly on needed authority and resources and involve affected communities before major commitments are made. Rural communities should have a meaningful voice, not simply be expected to absorb the impacts of statewide growth.

Johnson: We need to address these pressures together. Housing, agriculture, timber production, transportation, and reliable energy all require land. Decisions made separately can create expensive conflicts and leave communities struggling to catch up. I would support regional coordination where growth crosses county lines, stronger assistance for local planning, and closer alignment between development decisions and roads, water, sewer, and school capacity. We should encourage housing and business development in suitable areas with existing infrastructure while helping



farmers and forest owners keep their land productive and financially viable. For energy and other major infrastructure, I would favor early evaluation of alternative sites and routes, meaningful community participation, and use of existing corridors or previously disturbed land where feasible. South Carolina needs reliable, affordable energy and predictable permitting. Clear standards established early can help projects move forward while reducing unnecessary damage to farmland, waterways, and communities.

Wilson: South Carolina is growing rapidly, and we need to plan for that growth rather than constantly reacting to it. That means protecting working farms and forests, respecting private property rights, ensuring local communities have a meaningful voice in land-use decisions, and coordinating infrastructure, economic development, energy, and conservation planning. We need reliable and affordable energy and infrastructure capable of supporting a growing state, but development should be responsible and account for its impact on surrounding communities and natural resources. The answer is not to stop growth. It is to manage growth responsibly while protecting the South Carolina we want to pass on to the next generation.

9. *What do you see as the greatest conservation successes in SC in the last ten years?*

Addison: Among the successes I would highlight are projects that combine durable land protection with practical benefits for communities. The Pee Dee Basin Initiative is a major example. Its 2025 completion protected more than 62,000 acres along or near the Pee Dee, Santee, and Black Rivers, with much of the land continuing in sustainable timber production. I value that



combination of large-scale conservation and working-land protection. The Snow's Island Assemblage is another. The 7,600-acre project celebrated in 2024 protected land at the Lynches and Great Pee Dee Rivers, combining historic preservation, wildlife habitat, and flood-mitigation benefits. I would also recognize the expansion of public park opportunities, including May Forest State Park's opening in 2023 and Pine Island State Park's opening in 2025. These are tangible examples of opening additional places for the public to enjoy. What I would build on is the partnership approach: willing landowners, conservation organizations, public agencies, local governments, and private supporters working toward lasting results. I would judge future projects by the quality of those results, not just the size of an announcement.

Johnson: The Pee Dee Basin Initiative stands out. Its permanent protection of more than 62,000 acres demonstrates how conservation can preserve working forests, support rural livelihoods, protect waterways, and expand recreation opportunities through cooperation among public agencies, private landowners, businesses, and conservation organizations. The Black River conservation effort and establishment of Black River State Park are another major achievement. That partnership connects land protection with flood resilience, outdoor access, and economic opportunity for nearby communities. I also value projects such as the 2022 protection of historic Soapstone Baptist Church and its grounds in Pickens County. It shows that conservation can preserve the places that carry our history and community identity. These successes deserve recognition across party lines and offer practical models for future work.

Wilson: One of South Carolina's greatest successes has been its ability to bring together landowners, conservation organizations, businesses, local



communities, and state government. In less than ten years, South Carolina has preserved nearly 400,000 acres of historically or environmentally significant land. That includes working farms and forests, historic and cultural sites, outdoor recreation areas, new state parks, and the largest conservation easement in state history, protecting 62,000 acres in the Pee Dee. Those successes demonstrate that economic growth, private property rights, and conservation do not have to be mutually exclusive.

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

Addison: I want conservation policy to protect people and their relationship to the land, as well as the land itself. I would support assistance with clear title, heirs' property issues, and estate planning so families can evaluate conservation options without being pressured into agreements they do not understand. Owners should have access to independent advice about permanent restrictions, retained rights, responsibilities, and financial consequences. I also believe conservation priorities should recognize cultural landscapes, historic cemeteries, rural communities, African American and Gullah Geechee heritage, and tribal cultural sites, with the participation of the people connected to those places. Finally, I would encourage partnerships with schools, colleges, health professionals, and veterans' organizations to use appropriate public lands for outdoor education, recreation, and wellness activities. I would pair land protection with practical stewardship, including restoration, litter prevention, and care of existing public spaces. My guiding principle would be straightforward: protect South Carolina's natural inheritance while respecting ownership, expanding opportunity, and earning the public's trust.



Johnson: As a conservation-minded South Carolinian, I believe protecting our land is a responsibility we owe our children, and it should be something South Carolinians can work on across political differences. Conservation should deliver practical benefits: clean drinking water, productive farms and forests, protection from flooding, and affordable opportunities to enjoy the outdoors. It should also include landowners who need help navigating the process, especially families working to retain inherited land. My approach would be to listen to communities, pursue voluntary partnerships, and insist on measurable results. We can welcome new jobs and homes while protecting the resources and places that make South Carolina home.

Wilson: Conservation and private property rights should go hand in hand. As Attorney General, I have worked to protect both South Carolina's natural resources and the rights of the people who live, work, farm, and own property here. I have challenged federal regulations that would unnecessarily expand Washington's authority over South Carolina farmers, landowners, waterways, and property. I have also taken action when South Carolina's natural resources were threatened. I went to court to help protect our coast from offshore drilling and seismic testing that could harm our marine resources, fishing industry, tourism economy, and coastal communities. My office has also brought legal action against major companies over PFAS, or "forever chemical," contamination of South Carolina's drinking water, waterways, soil, and other natural resources. I have defended South Carolina's interests involving the Savannah River and advocated for sustainable, state-led fisheries management. As Governor, my approach would be guided by that same principle: protect South Carolina's natural heritage, respect the people



who own and work the land, and make sure future generations inherit a state that still looks and feels like South Carolina.