



**SOUTH CAROLINA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY &
LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE**

Meeting Packet
January 29, 2026

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AGENDA



**SOUTH CAROLINA
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY &
LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE**

Chair Jeffrey E. "Jeff" Johnson

Lucas Atkinson
William H. Bailey
Phillip Bowers
Gary S. Brewer Jr.
Kambrell H. Garvin
Leon Douglas "Doug" Gilliam

Lewis Carter
Research Director

Charlie LaRosa
Research Analyst

Wendell K. Jones
Kathy Landing
John R. McCravy III
Annie E. McDaniel
Timothy A. "Tim" McGinnis
Travis A. Moore

Cathy Greer
Administrative Coordinator

Vice-Chair Chris Wooten

Scott Montgomery
Michael Rivers
Richard B. "Blake" Sanders
Marvin "Mark" Smith
Robert Williams
Paul B. Wickensimer

Roland Franklin
Legal Counsel

Riley McCullough
Research Analyst

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Columbia, South Carolina 29211 Telephone:
(803) 212-6810 Fax: (803) 212-6811
Room 228 Blatt Building

Agenda

Thursday, January 29, 2026
Immediately Upon Adjournment
110 – Blatt Building

- I. Approval of minutes
- II. Discussion of the following:
 - Education and Cultural Affairs Subcommittee – Study of the South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission
 - Economic Development, Transportation, and Natural Resources Subcommittee - Study of the South Carolina Conservation Bank
- III. Discussion of Committee administrative matters
- IV. Adjournment

MINUTES



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MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, March 19, 2025
1:30 p.m.
Room 110 – Blatt Building

I. Archived Video Available

Pursuant to House Legislative Oversight Committee Rule 6.7, South Carolina ETV was allowed access for streaming the meeting. You may access an archived video of this meeting by visiting the South Carolina General Assembly's website (<http://www.scstatehouse.gov>) and clicking on Committee Postings and Reports, then under House Standing Committees click on Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight. Then, click on Video Archives for a listing of archived videos for the Committee.

II. Attendance

The Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight Committee meeting was called to order by Chair Jeffrey E. "Jeff" Johnson on Wednesday, March 19, 2025, in Room 110 of the Blatt Building. Representatives William Bailey and Scott Montgomery were absent from the meeting. All other members were present for all or a portion of the meeting.

III. Minutes

House Rule 4.5 requires standing committees to prepare and make available to the public the minutes of committee meetings. The minutes are not required to be verbatim accounts.

IV. Approval of Minutes

Representative McCravy made a motion to approve the minutes from the prior meeting. A roll-call vote was taken, and the motion passed.

Vote on Motion by Rep. McCravy to Approve Minutes from December 4, 2024

Member	Yea	Nay	Not Voting
Lucas Atkinson	x		
William H. Bailey		x	
Phillip Bowers		x	
Gary S. Brewer, Jr.	x		
Kambrell H. Garvin		x	
L. Douglas "Doug" Gilliam		x	
Jeffrey E. "Jeff" Johnson	x		
Wendell Jones	x		
Kathy Landing	x		
John R. McCravy, III	x		
Annie McDaniel	x		
Timothy A. "Tim" McGinnis		x	
Travis A. Moore	x		
Scott Montgomery		x	
Michael Rivers	x		
Richard B. "Blake" Sanders	x		
Marvin "Mark" Smith	x		
Robert Williams	x		
Paul B. Wickensimer	x		
Chris Wooten	x		

V. Agency Presentations and Committee Discussion

1. Committee Opening and Overview of Meeting Procedures

Chair Johnson welcomed members and attendees and reviewed the following procedural items:

- Microphone and audio limitations
- Livestream and archived video availability
- Rules for public testimony
- Oath requirement for speakers
- Time limits and decorum
- Clarification that the Committee does not intervene in individual disputes with state agencies

Roll was taken, and prior meeting minutes were approved.

2. Administrative Law Court (ALC)

Presenter: Chief Administrative Law Judge Ralph K. Anderson II

Items presented:

- Structure and jurisdiction of the court (six judges; ~50% trial / ~50% appellate)
- Contested case hearings (de novo; no jury trials)
- Appeals standards (substantial evidence; no reweighing of facts)
- Responsibilities including regulations hearings, declaratory rulings, and injunctive authority
- Office of Motor Vehicle Hearings caseload (>6,000 cases/year)
- Current challenges: staff retention, competitive salaries, and technology modernization

Committee discussion included questions on backlog management, e-filing implementation, survey feedback, and public perceptions about agency favoritism.

3. South Carolina Conservation Bank

Presenters: Director Raleigh West and Board Chair Mike McShane

Items presented:

- Mission to conserve farms, forests, historic sites, and public-access lands through voluntary agreements
- Achievements to date:
 - 400,000 acres protected
 - 500+ grants statewide
 - \$287 million in state funding leveraged into \$1.1 billion in conservation value (~1:4 ratio)
- Emphasis on voluntary landowner participation and private property rights
- Partnerships with state and federal agencies, local governments, and land trusts
- Board priorities: statewide conservation mapping, threat assessment, maximizing leverage, expanding public access

Public testimony emphasized:

- Working forest initiatives
- Increased public recreation opportunities
- Successful partnerships with land trusts, Farm Bureau, and Palmetto Trail

Speakers: Kate Schaefer; David Jones (State Forestry Commission); Mary Rowe (Palmetto Trail); Lyles Cooper (Pee Dee Land Trust); Brian Harrison (Farmer); Gary Spires (SC Farm Bureau Federation)

4. South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE)

Presenter: State Superintendent Ellen Weaver

Items presented:

- SCDE mission to serve students, support teachers, empower parents, and engage communities
- Goal of 75% of students at or above grade-level by 2030
- Governance structure from federal guidelines to local school districts
- Funding profile: ~10% federal, ~90% state/local, ~\$8B overseen by the department
- Teacher pay increases of 47% since FY18-19
- Key initiatives:
 - Shift from compliance to support model
 - Teacher recruitment and retention strategies
 - Implementation of statewide cell phone policy
 - Modernization of facilities guidance for charters
 - Monitoring potential federal DOE restructuring

Public testimony addressed:

- Data-driven leadership practices
- Equity in education
- Education Savings Account (ESA) program impacts
- Family perspectives on cell phone restrictions

I. Speakers: Barrett Jackson (Principal); Brian Newsome; Xavier Burrell, and Sandra Gray

5. South Carolina Department of Insurance (DOI)

Presenter: Director Michael Wise

Items presented:

- Agency responsibilities: solvency regulation, product/rate review, market conduct, PBM licensing, and insurance fraud investigations
- Focus on transparency and consumer education

- Committee members commended Director Wise for departmental responsiveness and national leadership

6. State Law Enforcement Division (SLED)

Presenter: Chief Mark Keel

Items presented:

- SLED's statewide support role for local law enforcement
- Law enforcement misconduct investigations and arrest statistics
- Citizen complaint intake and review process
- Improvements to Concealed Weapons Permit (CWP) processing
- Hiring practices and recruitment strategies
- De-escalation and community outreach initiatives
- Challenges related to forensic laboratory backlogs

7. South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission

Presenters: Director Katie Harrison and Board Chair Dr. Boone Hopkins

Items presented:

- Need-based grants for students attending eligible private colleges
- Program impact:
 - Over 500,000 grants issued
 - Estimated \$994 million in cost avoidance for the state
- Average award of ~\$4,391 compared to ~\$27,000 in average private-college tuition
- Strong student outcomes and increased access to higher education

8. South Carolina Department of Employment and Workforce (DEW)

Presenter: Executive Director William Floyd

Items presented:

- Mission to connect job seekers with employers
- Division responsibilities: Unemployment Insurance, Workforce Development, Employment Services, Labor Market Information
- Rural outreach through SC Works road trips
- Leadership role in the Coordinating Council for Workforce Development under Act 67
- Continued vigilance against UI fraud
- Committee discussion on service improvements and workforce diversity

9. South Carolina Vocational Rehabilitation Department (VR)

Presenter: Commissioner Felicia Johnson

Items presented:

- Mission to support competitive employment for individuals with disabilities
- Annual program impact:
 - 22,000 individuals served
 - 4,000 successful job placements
- Infrastructure: 31 offices, 27 job readiness centers, 207 employer partners
- Strong interagency collaboration with DOE, DMH, PPPPS
- Disability Determination Services challenges related to federal hiring limits and security requirements

Public testimony highlighted:

- Intake barriers and inconsistent eligibility communication
- Coordination issues with DDSN
- Delays in post-secondary VR services
- Concerns about case closure timing and continuity
- Positive employer partnerships and immediate interest in hiring VR clients

VI. Adjournment

- Chair Johnson thanked agency officials, partners, and public speakers for their contributions.
- There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.

SC CONSERVATION BANK OVERVIEW

SOUTH CAROLINA CONSERVATION BANK OVERVIEW

SOUTH CAROLINA CONSERVATION BANK

EMPLOYEES

5

Authorized FTEs

TOTAL FUNDING

\$31,260,315

MISSION

To improve quality of life for South Carolina taxpayers and boost economic prosperity by conserving our resource lands, farmlands, forest lands, wetlands, historical properties, archaeological sites, and urban parks.

HISTORY

In 2000, individuals embarked on an effort to identify significant South Carolina lands and determine how they could be protected and sustained. This effort resulted in the Land Legacy Initiative—a grassroots effort by many individuals, groups, and businesses that found a need to preserve greenways, open spaces, and parks in urban areas in order to promote balanced growth, well-being, and quality of life in South Carolina.

The Land Legacy Initiative also uncovered a critical need to fund the preservation of—and public access to—many types of South Carolina land, including wildlife habitats, natural areas, historical sites, sites of unique ecological significance, forestlands, farmlands, watersheds, open space, and urban parks.

Accordingly, the South Carolina General Assembly, in a bipartisan effort, passed the South Carolina Conservation Bank Act, which was signed and ratified by the Governor in April 2002.

BOARD

The South Carolina Conservation Bank Act establishes a seventeen-member board to govern the Conservation Bank. The board consists of:

- ❖ The Chairman of the Board for the Department of Natural Resources, the Chairman of the South Carolina Forestry Commission, the Commissioner of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Transportation and the Director for the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism all of whom serve ex officio and without voting privileges.
- ❖ Three members appointed by the Governor from the state at large.
- ❖ Four members appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, one each from the third, fourth, and sixth Congressional Districts and one member from the state at large.
- ❖ Four members appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, one each from the first, second, fifth, and seventh Congressional Districts.

WAYS TO SAVE LAND

The Conservation Bank's principal purpose and program is to review and award competitive grants to qualified

1. Fee Simple Acquisitions
2. Conservation Easements

From its founding in 2002 through the end of fiscal year 2023, the South Carolina Conservation Bank has conserved 359,273 acres of land across the state and awarded more than \$202 million dollars in grants.

FEE SIMPLE ACQUISITIONS*	CONSERVATION EASEMENTS*
208 Total # of Projects	318 Total # of Projects
123,803 Acres Conserved	282,647 Acres Conserved
\$169,142,935 Grants Awarded	\$122,110,673 Grants Awarded

*As of 5/19/2025

SC CONSERVATION BANK EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2025



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
of the
SOUTH CAROLINA
CONSERVATION BANK STUDY

FINDINGS

During the study of the South Carolina Conservation Bank, the Economic Development, Transportation, and Natural Resources Subcommittee (Subcommittee) of the House Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight Committee (Committee) adopts 10 findings.

Findings note information a member of the public or General Assembly may seek to know or on which they may desire to act.

FINDING ONE

The South Carolina Conservation Bank plays a vital role in preserving the state's forestlands, farmlands, and wetlands, which contributes to the state's economy in various direct and indirect means.

FINDING TWO

The Conservation Bank utilizes conservation easements and fee simple acquisitions as its primary tools to protect land, with average costs of \$437 per acre for easements and \$1,804 per acre for fee simple acquisitions.

FINDING THREE

Landowners who conserve property through the Conservation Bank may be eligible for a South Carolina state income tax credit equal to 25% of the appraised value of the conservation easement, capped at \$250 per acre and \$52,500 per year, as well as federal income and estate tax deductions.

FINDING FOUR

The Conservation Bank is governed by a 17-member board and operates with only four full-time employees, making it one of the smallest state agencies by staff size.

FINDING FIVE

The Conservation Bank targets land protection projects that align with state priorities as well as objective, subjective, and financial criteria.

FINDING SIX

The Conservation Bank operates as a standalone state agency with a narrow, specialized focus on land conservation, which enables it to act quickly and secure high priority properties before opportunities are lost.

FINDING SEVEN

The Conservation Bank does not negotiate real estate transactions directly; instead, it relies on land trusts and other partners to structure deals and ensure compliance with conservation easements terms.

FINDING EIGHT

Recent increases to the Conservation Bank's budget reflect a legislative focus on transparency and fiscal accountability.

FINDING NINE

The Conservation Bank leverages reimbursable grants to enable land trust partners to act quickly in competitive real estate markets, while also providing time to pursue and secure matching federal funds.

FINDING TEN

As part of the state's annual budget process, each agency must identify a 3% reduction in general fund appropriations in case strategic cuts are required. For the Conservation Bank, a 3% reduction in FY 2025-26 amounts to \$487,809.

RECOMMENDATIONS

During the study of the South Carolina Conservation Bank, the Economic Development, Transportation, and Natural Resources Subcommittee (Subcommittee) of the House Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight Committee (Committee) adopts 10 recommendations.

With any study, the Committee recognizes these recommendations (e.g., continue, curtail, improve areas potentially, and/or eliminate agency programs, etc.) will not satisfy everyone nor address every issue or potential area of improvement at the agency. Recommendations are based on the agency's self-analysis requested by the Committee, discussions with agency personnel during multiple meetings, and analysis of the information obtained by the Committee. This information, including, but not limited to, the Initial Request for Information, Accountability Report, Restructuring Report, and videos of meetings with agency personnel, is available on the Committee's website.

Modernization of Laws

RECOMMENDATION ONE

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider enacting legislation that establishes a statewide conservation goal such as conserving 30% of the state's land by 2030 as proposed in H.5125 (2020).

RECOMMENDATION TWO

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider enacting legislation to designate the Conservation Bank as the central clearinghouse for state funds used by agencies for strategic land acquisitions.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-30(d) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to establish a \$100,000 minimum financial threshold for non-profit entities to qualify as eligible trust fund recipients.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-40 (A) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to expand the Bank's board from 17 to 18 members by adding the Chief Resilience Officer of the South Carolina Office of Resilience as an ex officio member.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-50 (B) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to better reflect how information is shared and disseminated to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and General Assembly.

RECOMMENDATION SIX

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-70 (F)(2) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to provide for staggered two-year terms for members of the grant review committee.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-80(D) (2008) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to remove the requirement that the Bank must be named as an insured on a title insurance policy approved to the board.

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-80(G)(1) (2008) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to align the language with federal and state tax laws so that the language marries with the perpetuity requirement underpinning tax laws associated with conservation conveyances, and to specify judicial extinguishment as the sole method for removing conservation restrictions.

RECOMMENDATION NINE

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-100 (2008) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to clarify that public access is required only when grant funds are used to acquire land in fee simple.

RECOMMENDATION TEN

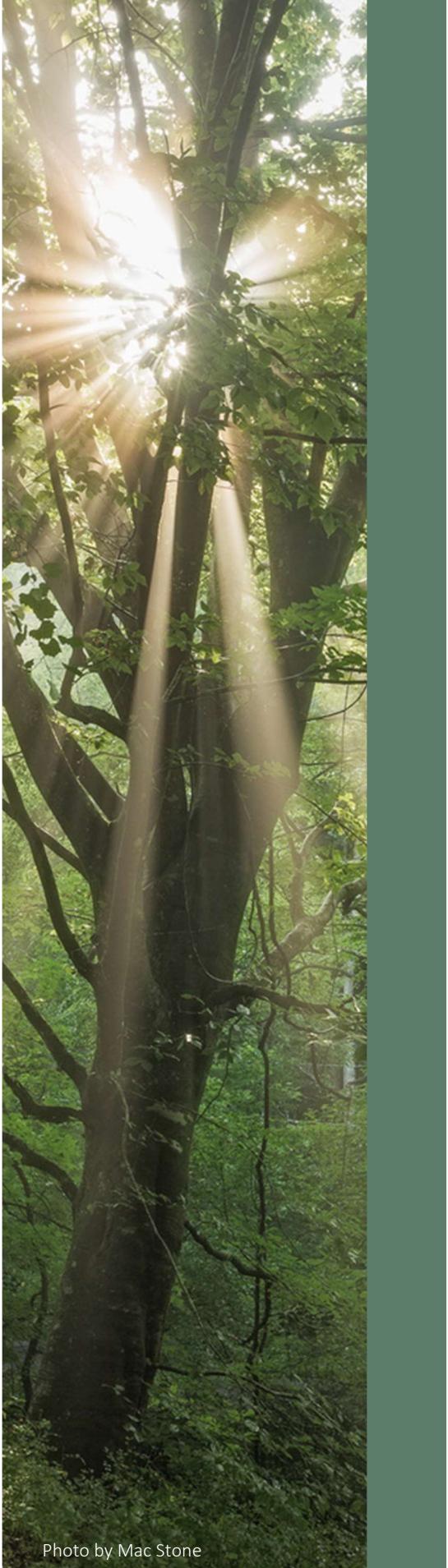
The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-110(A) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to clarify that grant funds may be disbursed at or after a closing.

SC CONSERVATION BANK STUDY REPORT

2025



**STUDY of the
SOUTH CAROLINA
CONSERVATION BANK**



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South Carolina House of Representatives **GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY & LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE**

Chairman Jeffrey E. "Jeff" Johnson

Vice-Chair Chris Wooten

AUTHORITY

The Legislative Oversight Committee, created in December 2014, is a vehicle for oversight used by the House of Representatives. The Committee's specific task is to conduct legislative oversight studies and investigations of state agencies at least once every seven years. The Committee has the authority to conduct studies at any time of state agencies within the Committee's jurisdiction, even outside of the seven-year cycle.

VISION

For South Carolina agencies to become, and continuously remain, the most effective state agencies in the country through processes which eliminate waste and efficiently deploy resources thereby creating greater confidence in state government.

MISSION

Determine if agency laws and programs are being implemented and carried out in accordance with the intent of the General Assembly and whether they should be continued, curtailed, or eliminated. Inform the public about state agencies.



Economic Development, Transportation, & Natural Resources Subcommittee

Chairman

Travis A. Moore

Gary S. Brewer Jr.

Wendell K. Jones

Scott Montgomery

Richard B. "Blake" Sanders



Education & Cultural Affairs Subcommittee

Chairman

Timothy A. "Tim" McGinnis

Phillip Bowers

Michael Rivers

Paul B. Wickensimer

Robert Williams



Healthcare & Regulatory Subcommittee

Chairman

John R. McCravy III

Lucas Atkinson

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Marvin "Mark" Smith



Law Enforcement & Criminal and Civil Justice Subcommittee

Chairman

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SOUTH CAROLINA

CONSERVATION

BANK

MISSION

The mission of the South Carolina Conservation Bank is to improve the quality of life in South Carolina by conserving significant natural resource lands, wetlands, historical properties, archeological sites, and urban parks.

HISTORY

In 2000, individuals embarked on an effort to identify significant South Carolina lands and determine how they could be protected and sustained. This effort resulted in the Land Legacy Initiative—a grassroots effort by many individuals, groups, and businesses that found a need to preserve greenways, open spaces, and parks in urban areas in order to promote balanced growth, well-being, and quality of life in South Carolina.

The Land Legacy Initiative also uncovered a critical need to fund the preservation of—and public access to—many types of South Carolina land, including wildlife habitats, natural areas, historical sites, sites of unique ecological significance, forestlands, farmlands, watersheds, open space, and urban parks.

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- Four members appointed by the President Pro Tempore of the Senate, one each from the first, second, fifth, and seventh Congressional Districts.



FINDINGS

During the study of the South Carolina Conservation Bank (SCCB), the Economic Development, Transportation, and Natural Resources Subcommittee adopted ten findings pertaining to economics, easements, income tax credits, leadership, project criteria, agency independence, land trusts, reimbursable grants, and budget.

Findings note information a member of the public or the General Assembly may seek to know, or upon which they may desire to act.

1

FINDING ONE

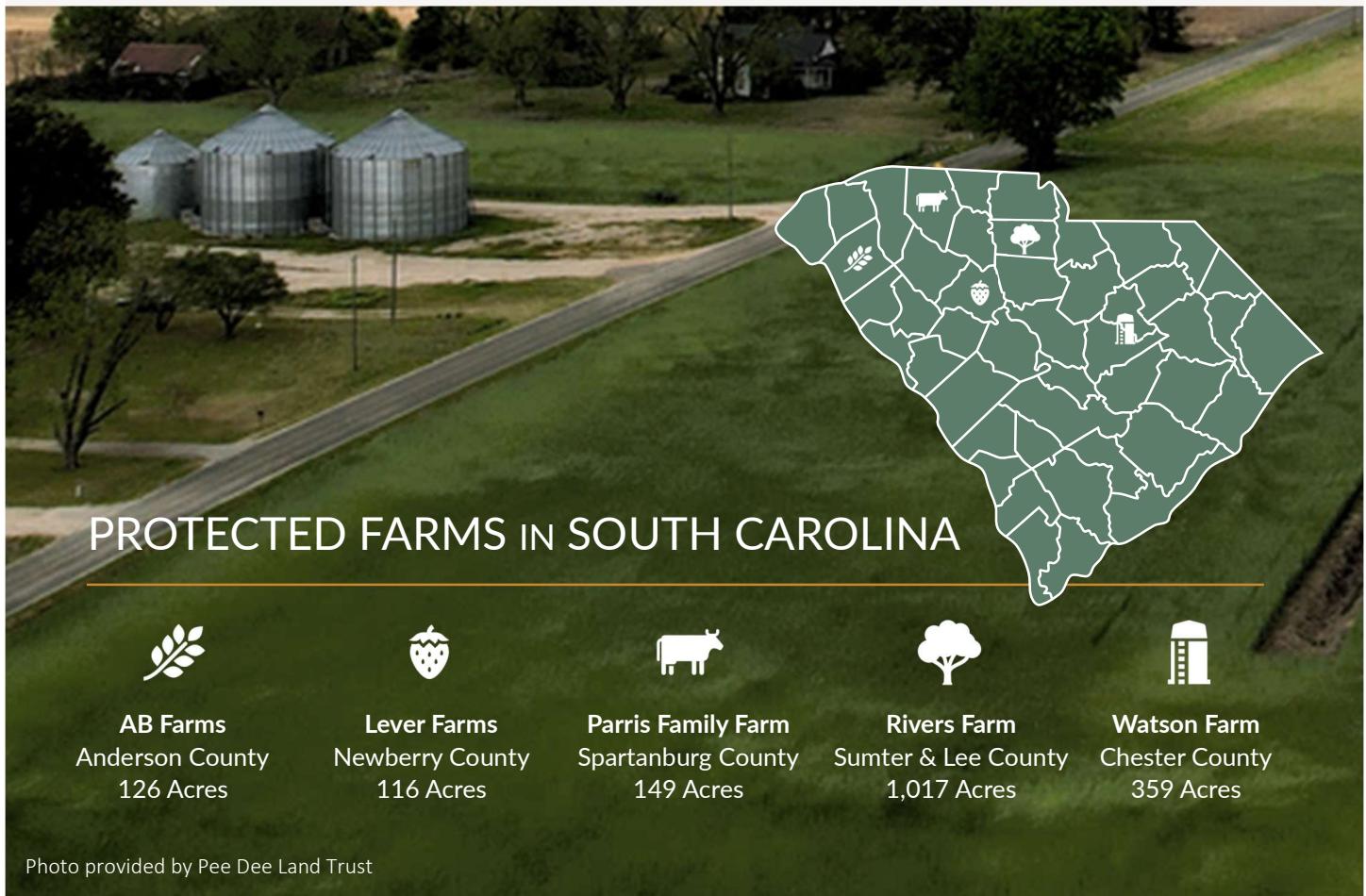
The South Carolina Conservation Bank plays a vital role in preserving the state's forestlands, farmlands, and wetlands, which contributes to the state's economy in various direct and indirect ways.

The SCCB's mission is "[t]o improve the quality of life in South Carolina through the conservation of significant natural resource lands, wetlands, historical properties, archeological sights, and urban parks."¹ The Bank accomplishes its mission, in part, through the issuance of grants for the purpose of securing lands for these vital interests. Since its inception, the SCCB has awarded approximately \$359 million in grants, helping protect more than 413,746 acres across the state. This investment translates to an average cost of \$869 per acre.² Through strategic partnerships with the federal government, state agencies, and private philanthropy, each dollar granted by the SCCB helps safeguard nearly four dollars of real estate.³

Agriculture is one of the state's leading industries and underscores the economic significance of the Bank's work. With more than 22,600 farms and 4.6 million

acres of farmland, agriculture is South Carolina's largest private industry, supporting 259,215 jobs and generating \$51.8 billion in annual economic impact.⁴ By helping landowners preserve agricultural land through voluntary conservation easements, the SCCB assists in ensuring the continuity of agricultural activities, and supports and sustains rural communities by protecting farm-based businesses and related economic output.⁵

In addition to supporting South Carolina's agriculture industry, the SCCB collaborates with military installations across the state to prevent land use conflicts and preserve critical training grounds. In FY 2023 alone, South Carolina received \$6.5 billion in defense spending "which provide[d] direct funding for the Department of Defense (DOD) personnel salaries, defense contracts, and construction of military facilities in the state."⁶ Since 2006, Beaufort County and the United States



PROTECTED FARMS IN SOUTH CAROLINA



Farm Name	County	Acres Protected
AB Farms	Anderson County	126 Acres
Lever Farms	Newberry County	116 Acres
Parris Family Farm	Spartanburg County	149 Acres
Rivers Farm	Sumter & Lee County	1,017 Acres
Watson Farm	Chester County	359 Acres

Photo provided by Pee Dee Land Trust

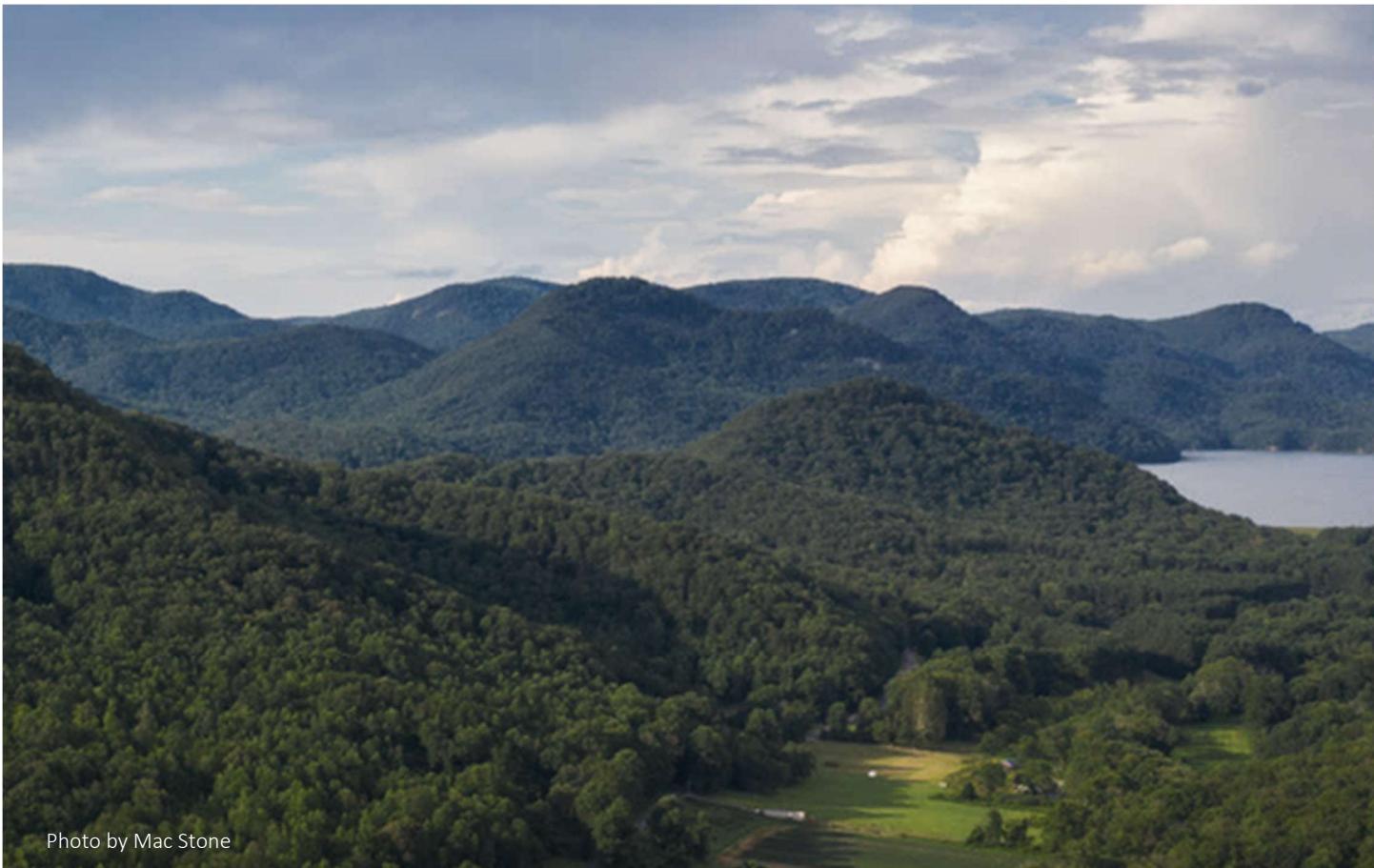


Photo by Mac Stone

Department of Defense have benefitted from the Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program, which funds land protection to prevent land uses that would otherwise interfere with or restrict military operations around Marine Corps Air Station in Beaufort.⁷

Through its grantmaking authority, the SCCB plays a key role in implementing these land protections. For example, in 2025, the Open Land Trust worked with the Rhodes family and the United States Navy to protect 898 acres in Dale, South Carolina (known as Essex Farms) through a voluntary conservation easement.⁸ The REPI program provided funding for the project. The Bank and the Beaufort County Green Space Program⁹ provided additional funding, with the Bank contributing 14% and the Beaufort County Green Space Program contributing 7% of the total project cost.¹⁰ This easement “ensures the land will remain primarily undeveloped and dedicated to agriculture and forestry for future generations.”¹¹

Through funding voluntary land easements in REPI-designated areas, the SCCB has helped safeguard an

additional 6,000 acres across South Carolina in just the past two years thanks to its partnership with the REPI program.¹² This partnership is crucial for ensuring long-term economic benefits. Protecting land under flight corridors “improves training, helps create a dark night sky that mimics military combat situations, and protects irreplaceable natural resources.”¹³ And, as noted in REPI program analysis, “[t]his spending by DOD personnel, contractors, and their families creates significant economic activity, attracts related industries and investments, and generates important state and local government tax revenues.”¹⁴

In sum, by conserving forest lands, farmlands, wetlands, historical properties, archaeological sites, and urban parks through voluntary, partnership-driven transactions, the SCCB improves the quality of life and strengthens South Carolina’s economy. The SCCB “contribute[s] to South Carolina’s economy by encouraging conservation investments and the local spending they generate.”¹⁵ In doing so, the SCCB helps sustain rural agricultural communities and support military readiness, both of which reinforce the state’s long-term economic vitality.

2

FINDING TWO

The Conservation Bank utilizes conservation easements and fee simple acquisitions as its primary tools to protect land, with average costs of \$437 per acre for easements and \$1,804 per acre for fee simple acquisitions.

The SCCB does not own land, take title to land, or own conservation easements itself.¹⁶ Instead, its primary role is “to make financial awards to eligible entities to buy land or buy conservation easements . . . on important lands . . . to facilitate real estate transactions that result in conservation.”¹⁷

Eligible trust fund recipients such as land trusts or state agencies must use SCCB funds to purchase either fee simple interests or conservation easements on designated properties. A fee simple interest “represents the most complete form of property ownership, granting full and irrevocable ownership of the land and any structures on it.”¹⁸ By contrast, a conservation easement “is a legal agreement used to permanently protect property from residential and commercial development.”¹⁹ “Every fee simple purchase must have 100% public access, and access easements must have at least partial public access.”²⁰

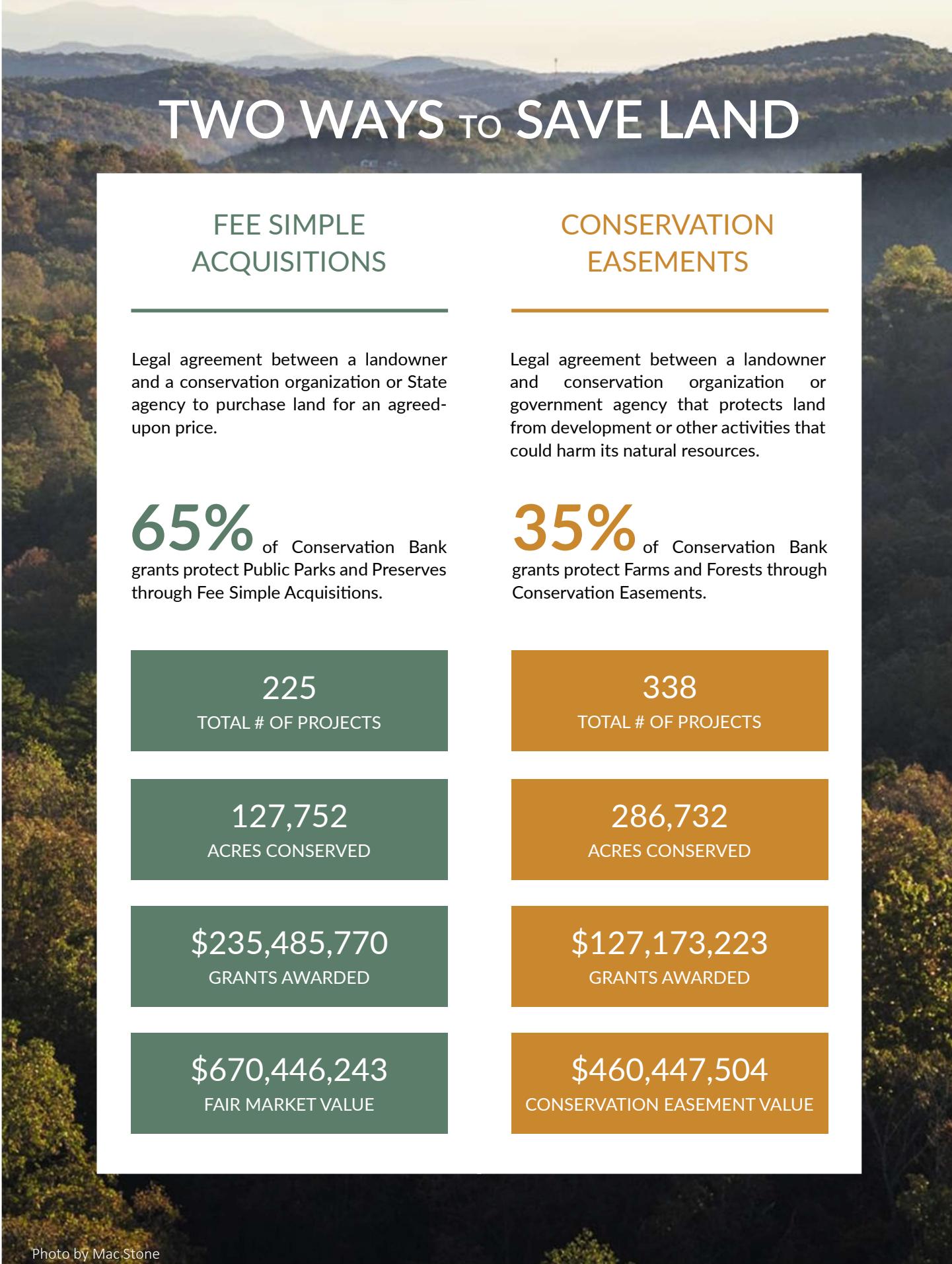
According to the SCCB, of the 208 projects it funded in the last six years, 114 awards were directed to public access projects and 94 awards were directed to private lands.²¹ The SCCB awarded almost \$125 million (85% of funds awarded) to public lands and 21.5 million (15% of funds awarded) to easements. However, those 15% of funds protected roughly twice as many acres, with conservation easements saving 66,091 acres and fee simple acquisition saving 36,352 acres.²² This data highlights the cost efficiency of easements in securing large scale land protection.

Recent acquisitions illustrate both approaches. In May of 2025, the Open Space Institute acquired the 1,644-acre Beech Hill Tract in Dorchester County from Davis Land & Timber Limited Partnership of Greenwood for \$11.5 million. Nestled between the Edisto River Wildlife Management Area and Givhans Ferry State Park, permanent protection of this property “will prevent fragmentation of natural areas, link previously protected lands, expand public recreational

opportunities, and catalyze further conservation in the Lowcountry, some 30 miles northwest of Charleston.”²³ The property “will soon become a state forest managed by the South Carolina Forestry Commission (SCFC), with the entire tract expected to be enrolled in the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Management Area Program.”²⁴ The funding for this fee simple acquisition came from a \$3.1 million SCCB grant, \$4.125 million from Dorchester County’s Greenbelt Program,²⁵ and support from the SCFC.²⁶

In December of 2023, the Nature Conservancy (TNC) worked with the Elliott family, a South Carolina family, to preserve 1,218 acres of family-owned property in Hampton County known as Lowlands.²⁷ Located in the Savannah River Basin of South Carolina, the Lowlands is in “an area that provides drinking water for more than 500,000 South Carolina and Georgia residents.”²⁸ The conservation easement on the property set aside “[a] permanent buffer of bottomland hardwoods along more than two miles of Long Branch Creek . . . [that] will never be harvested to ensure water quality on the Savannah River.”²⁹ As noted by TNC’s executive director, “Lowlands is a shining example of how South Carolina does conservation so well[.] . . . The family gets to keep ownership of their land, while our businesses and conservation communities and the state invest in protecting its natural resources. Those resources—including clean drinking water—benefit us all.”³⁰

To date, the Bank has awarded \$232,985,770 in grants for 127,359 acres protected in fee simple and \$126,622,223 for 286,386 acres conserved through conservation easements.³¹ These figures equate to approximately \$1,804 per acre for fee simple purchases compared to just \$437 per acre for conservation easements, indicating that voluntary easements provide land protection at significantly lower public expense.³²



TWO WAYS TO SAVE LAND

Fee Simple Acquisitions

Legal agreement between a landowner and a conservation organization or State agency to purchase land for an agreed-upon price.

65% of Conservation Bank grants protect Public Parks and Preserves through Fee Simple Acquisitions.

225
TOTAL # OF PROJECTS

127,752
ACRES CONSERVED

\$235,485,770
GRANTS AWARDED

\$670,446,243
FAIR MARKET VALUE

Conservation Easements

Legal agreement between a landowner and conservation organization or government agency that protects land from development or other activities that could harm its natural resources.

35% of Conservation Bank grants protect Farms and Forests through Conservation Easements.

338
TOTAL # OF PROJECTS

286,732
ACRES CONSERVED

\$127,173,223
GRANTS AWARDED

\$460,447,504
CONSERVATION EASEMENT VALUE

3

FINDING THREE

Landowners who conserve property through the Conservation Bank may be eligible for a South Carolina state income tax credit equal to 25% of the appraised value of the conservation easement, capped at \$250 per acre and \$52,500 per year, as well as federal income and estate tax deductions.

Enacted in 2002, the South Carolina Conservation Incentives Act³³ provides tax benefits to landowners in the state who voluntarily conserve land through donations or conservation easements.³⁴ Like the Bank's grant program, these incentives are designed to encourage private landowners to participate in land conservation efforts.

Specifically, the Act "allows a taxpayer, who is entitled to and claims a federal charitable deduction for a gift of land for conservation or for a qualified conservation contribution on a qualified real property interest located in South Carolina, to claim a South Carolina income tax credit equal to 25% of the total amount of the deduction attributable to the gift of land for conservation or to the qualified real property interest associated with the qualified conservation contribution."³⁵ The credit—which has remained unchanged for nearly 25 years—is capped at \$250 per acre of property, with a maximum of \$52,500 per taxpayer per year.³⁶ Any unused credit may be carried forward until used.³⁷ This unused credit "may

be transferred, devised or distributed, with or without consideration, to another taxpayer upon written notification to, and approval, the Department [of Revenue] of the transfer."³⁸

While the state income tax credit is certainly a meaningful financial incentive, many landowners ultimately choose to place their property under a conservation easement because "they love the land . . . [and] are so passionate about their land, so sentimentally attached to it."³⁹ The tax credit serves as a benefit that reinforces that decision. The credit's transferability adds an additional benefit since because the tax credits do not terminate, landowners who cannot use the full credit may sell them to others.⁴⁰ "And there's a market for them right now," with one market returning approximately 85 cents on the dollar.⁴¹ Taken together, these features of the Act support the SCCB's mission by incentivizing private participation in preserving the state's natural resources.

4

FINDING FOUR

The Conservation Bank is governed by a 17-member board and operates with only four full-time employees, making it one of the smallest state agencies by staff size.

The SCCB's 17-member board of directors is composed of ex officio state officials⁴² and appointed members from both the legislative and executive branches.⁴³ Each member "must possess experience in the areas of natural resources, land development, forestry, farming, finance, land conservation, real estate, or law."⁴⁴ Members serve staggered four year terms without compensation,⁴⁵ and the board elects a chairman and other officers "as necessary from its membership."⁴⁶ The board's primary responsibility is to set policy and approve financial awards⁴⁷ to eligible entities for the purchase of land or conservation easements.⁴⁸ Presently, the board has four vacancies, and one member serves in holdover status.⁴⁹

With the advice and consent of the Senate, the board appoints an executive director to manage the Bank's

daily operations and oversee the state's conservation initiatives.⁵⁰ Like the board members, the executive director must have experience in relevant land use, legal, or financial fields.⁵¹ The executive director is tasked with administering grants, hiring staff, and managing the operational aspects of the SCCB.⁵² The executive director and staff "make[] recommendations for funding to [the] board."⁵³ They also are responsible for managing the application review process, performing due diligence, ensuring compliance with statutory and grant requirements, and coordinating with land trusts and state agencies.⁵⁴ Currently, the SCCB operates with only four full time employees, making it one of the smallest agencies in the state by staff size.⁵⁵ Despite this fact, the SCCB manages millions of dollars in grants and hundreds of conservation projects statewide.

5

FINDING FIVE

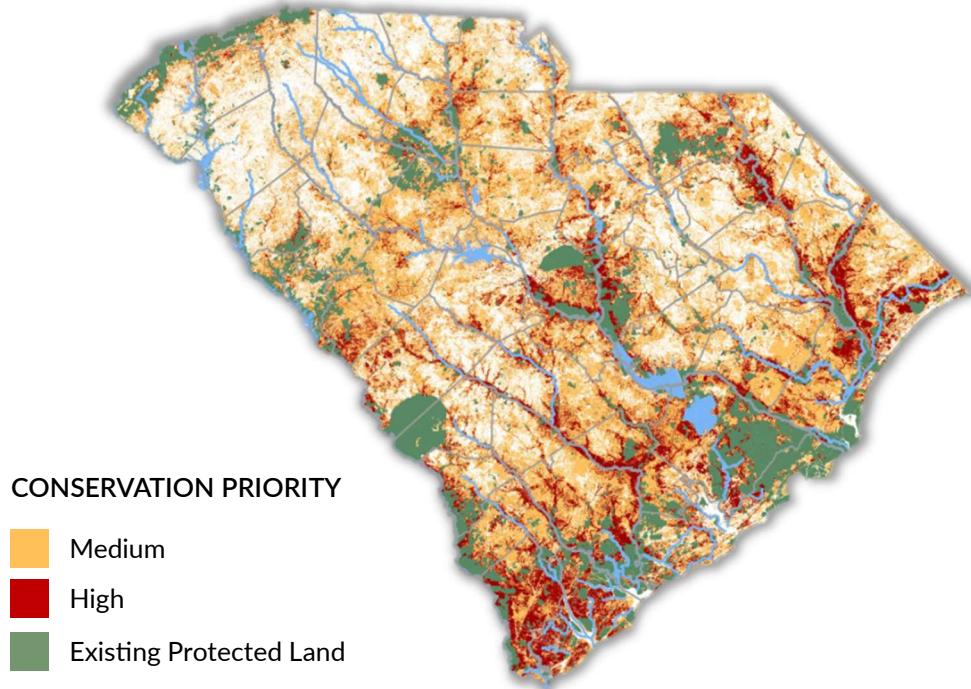
The Conservation Bank targets land protection projects that align with state priorities as well as objective, subjective, and financial criteria.

The SCCB's objective criteria are rooted in its statutory mandate. Section 48-59-50(B)(5) of the Code requires the Bank to "develop conservation criteria to be used, in addition to the criteria set forth in Section 48-59-70(D), that advance and support federal, state, and local conservation goals, plans, objectives, and initiatives."⁵⁶ To assist in the development of the conservation criteria, "the bank must coordinate with the appropriate groups to integrate the goals, plans, objectives, and initiatives . . . into a statewide conservation map" by July 1, 2019.⁵⁷ The criteria and the map "must be submitted to the General Assembly annually" and "must be reviewed no less than every ten years thereafter[.]"⁵⁸ In accordance with section 48-59-50(B)(5), the Bank partnered with the Department of Natural Resources in 2019 to create the first statewide conservation map.⁵⁹ The mapping effort analyzed six priorities set forth in the Bank's enabling legislation, which include conservation corridors; ecological conservation priorities; sustainable forestry; sustainable agriculture; water resources; and public trails and vistas.⁶⁰ Last updated in 2024, the map has identified 10.9 million acres of South Carolina's landscape as medium priority (8.1 million acres) and high priority (2.8 million acres) for conservation.⁶¹

The Bank's subjective criteria rely on staff site visits and staff professional judgment.⁶² These include factors such as partnerships and public access to the property.⁶³ Finally, financial criteria are designed to ensure "the best bang for the buck."⁶⁴ The financial criteria includes the extent to which a proposal presents a unique value opportunity by protecting land at a reasonable cost; the extent to which a proposal leverages trust funds through other governmental sources; the extent to which a proposal incorporates contributions of funds, assets, or services from private, nonprofit, or charitable sources; the extent to which a proposal acquires conservation easements or fee simple title at a cost well below market value; and the extent to which a proposal utilizes other available conservation incentives or programs before seeking bank funding.⁶⁵ The grant request is compared to appraised fair market value, giving higher scores to projects where the public cost is a smaller proportion of value. Thus, "if you're asking [the Bank] for \$0.10 on the dollar you're going to get a very high score[,] but "[i]f you're asking [the Bank] to pay 100% of the value, you're going to get a very low score."⁶⁶

The Bank compiles scores across all three categories into a ranking score sheet, with the highest ranked projects receiving funding first and continuing down the list until resources are exhausted.⁶⁷

CONSERVATION PRIORITY MODEL



The mapping effort analyzed six priorities set forth in our enabling legislation, which include:



Conservation Corridors



Sustainable Agriculture



Ecological Conservation Priorities



Water Resources



Sustainable Forestry



Public Trails and Vistas

6

FINDING SIX

The Conservation Bank operates as a standalone state agency with a narrow, specialized focus on land conservation, which enables it to act quickly and secure high priority properties before opportunities are lost.

Unlike other state agencies tasked with managing natural resources that have broad operational mandates, the SCCB was designed with a “very narrow scope of expertise” focused exclusively on real estate transactions.⁶⁸ According to the Bank’s executive director, “the mechanism that was designed in the architecture of the Conservation Bank Act when it was first formed, it allows [the Bank] to deploy money . . . as effectively as and as timely and transparently [in the real estate market] as any governmental mechanism in the country.”⁶⁹

“Conservation is ultimately a real estate game. . . . And real estate . . . is a matter of money.”⁷⁰ Because the SCCB is not encumbered by multiple bureaucratic barriers, it is able to operate with speed and flexibility. The board has the responsibility to make decisions on real estate grants, which allows the SCCB to operate “in a very timely way.”⁷¹ With most conservation funding programs, “their funding from the time they look at a property to when they can close a deal is probably two to four years.”⁷² In contrast, quarterly board meetings and a structured review process enables the SCCB to make awards every ninety days, which allows the Bank to be “very responsive to a fast-moving real estate market.”⁷³

Notably, the speed at which the SCCB can close a deal is not achieved at the expense of credibility or transparency. As noted in Finding 4, the Bank’s board is comprised of members in relevant land use, legal, or financial fields from whom the Bank’s executive director and staff seek input from “very regularly . . . daily, if not weekly,” ensuring that conservation decisions reflect statewide priorities.⁷⁴

7

FINDING SEVEN

The Conservation Bank does not negotiate real estate transactions directly; instead, it relies on land trusts and other partners to structure deals and ensure compliance with conservation easements terms.

The SCCB only works with voluntary landowners who are interested in conservation.⁷⁵ The Bank, however, does not negotiate directly with these landowners. Instead, the Bank relies on a network of eligible trust fund recipients to manage land,⁷⁶ which include certain state agencies,⁷⁷ municipalities and counties of the state,⁷⁸ or “a not for profit charitable corporation or trust authorized to do business in this State whose principal activity is the acquisition and management of interests in land for conservation or historic preservation purposes . . .”⁷⁹ These entities are the Bank’s “boots on the ground” that “generate the projects . . . and who know properties” throughout the state “like the back of their hand.”⁸⁰

According to the SCCB, “there’s a whole network of non-profits . . . who operate on their own dime” that “have their own administrative costs they fundraise for in their own communities.”⁸¹ The SCCB works with roughly 25 different land trust organizations that are geographically spread throughout the state.⁸² Importantly for the Bank, these land trust non-profits “are of their communities, and they have relationships with landowners,” which provides the Bank with “a network to effectively put the real estate deals together.”⁸³ Importantly for the state, the land trust network allows the SCCB “to minimize . . . the costs of staff to do the deals and also the [cost of] staff to monitor and steward the properties after they’re acquired.”⁸⁴ In all, the land trust network “really reflects a tremendous cost savings to us and allows us to stay laser focused on the real estate.”⁸⁵

LAND TRUSTS IN SOUTH CAROLINA



8

FINDING EIGHT

Recent increases to the Conservation Bank's budget reflect a legislative focus on transparency and fiscal accountability.

In FY2025, the SCCB received a significant increase in its appropriations from the General Assembly by proviso.⁸⁶ As explained by the Bank's executive director, the General Assembly "saw the work we're doing and decided that perhaps the Bank . . . could serve as a clearinghouse for all conservation land transactions, including money that may have gone to other sister agencies."⁸⁸ The increase was seen not as a doubling of the budget for conservation initiatives, but rather as a repurposing of funds toward the agency deemed best equipped to handle real estate transactions efficiently and transparently.⁸⁹ The SCCB attributes this confidence to its narrow statutory focus that "allows it to be very responsive to the real estate market . . . in a transparent way."⁹⁰ The proviso "has been the most effective tool to create the coordination between those agencies that acquire conservation lands: Forestry, DNR, and Parks."⁹¹

9

FINDING NINE

The Conservation Bank leverages reimbursable grants to enable land trust partners to act quickly in competitive real estate markets, while also providing time to pursue and secure matching federal funds.

The SCCB's reimbursable grant funding program is a unique tool that allows the Bank to make grant awards to its nonprofit land trust partners, which then enables those nonprofits to purchase property quickly under the seller's timeline.⁹² This structure enables the SCCB to maintain fiscal accountability while giving its land trust partners the means needed to compete with private buyers for high priority properties.⁹³

This funding model also allows the Bank and its partners to pursue federal matching opportunities, which often operate on longer timelines than private real estate transactions permit. For example, in 2023, the 1,809 acre "Andrews Tract" came on the market. The property was part of the Black River Initiative, described as "a community-inspired vision to establish a new recreational water trail connecting a growing network of public lands along 70 miles of river through Williamsburg and Georgetown counties."⁹⁴ The South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism (SCPRT) desired to purchase the tract as the next strategic addition to the network of properties already under the SCPRT ownership and management along the Black River. However, the closing deadline would not accommodate the federal grant timeline and the state's complex acquisition approval process. One of SCCB's partners, the Open Space Institute Land Trust (OSILT), was able to engage in a fee simple real estate deal and purchase the Andrews Tract quickly using a \$5.8 million grant from the Bank. Thus, the Bank was in a position to make an award to OSILT that allowed OSILT to buy the property under the seller's timeline, which then gave SCPRT time to repurchase the property and seek federal matching funds to reimburse SCCB.⁹⁵

FINDING TEN

As part of the state's annual budget process, each agency must identify a 3% reduction in general fund appropriations in case strategic cuts are required. For the Conservation Bank, a 3% reduction in FY 2025-26 amounts to \$487,809. Examples of projects the Bank would not be able to fund with a 3% general fund reduction include:⁹⁶

- Dalzell Bay, a fee simple acquisition by Naturaland Trust in 2022 that captured 61.10 acres of the bays and surrounding uplands in Sumter County with an \$80,000 grant award. The protected land is valued at approximately \$145,000.00⁹⁷ Of the thousands of bays that once existed across South Carolina's Atlantic Coastal Plain, fewer than 10% still function today.⁹⁸ According to the Naturaland Trust, “[t]he bay itself is protected by a Wetland Reserve Program easement, but the bay is at risk without an informed conservation entity being at least a part owner to protect and restore it.”⁹⁹
- Hiott Station, a 561.80-acre tract of land in Colleton County protected by a conservation easement secured by Lowcountry Land Trust in 2024 in an effort to conserve the ACE Basin's cultural history and natural resources.¹⁰⁰ The net award was \$175,000.00. The protected land is valued at approximately \$817,500.00.¹⁰¹
- Pearl Bottoms, a 60.30-acre tract of land in Greenville County under a conservation easement secured by the Greenville County Historic and Natural Resources Trust to preserve “a working cattle farm in a rapidly developing area near North Greenville University.”¹⁰² The net award was \$143,000.00. The protected land is valued at approximately \$595,000.00.¹⁰³
- Cedarleaf Farm, a 64.96-acre tract of land in Chester County protected by a conservation easement secured by the South Carolina Farm Bureau Land Trust.¹⁰⁴ “In 2015, the property was designated as a state archeological site due to the prevalence and quality of arrowheads found there, some dating to 7,000 B.C.”¹⁰⁵ The net award was \$90,000. The protected land value is approximately \$235,000.00.¹⁰⁶

Without sufficient funding, opportunities to secure similar high-value properties will inevitably be lost, leaving the state further behind in meeting the long-term conservation goal identified in Recommendation 1.



Dalzell Bay

Photo provided by Naturaland Trust



RECOMMENDATIONS

During the study of the South Carolina Conservation Bank, the Economic Development, Transportation, and Natural Resources Subcommittee (“Subcommittee”) of the House Legislative Oversight Committee (“Committee”) adopts **10** recommendations.

With any study, the Committee recognizes these recommendations (e.g., continue, curtail, improve areas potentially, and/or eliminate agency programs, etc.) will not satisfy everyone nor address every issue or potential area of improvement at the agency. Recommendations are based on the agency’s self-analysis requested by the Committee, discussions with agency personnel during multiple meetings, and analysis of the information obtained by the Committee. This information, including, but not limited to, the Initial Request for Information, Accountability Report, Restructuring Report, and videos of meetings with agency personnel, is available on the Committee’s website.

RECOMMENDATION ONE

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider enacting legislation that establishes a statewide conservation goal such as conserving 30% of the state's land by 2030 as proposed in H.5125 (2020).

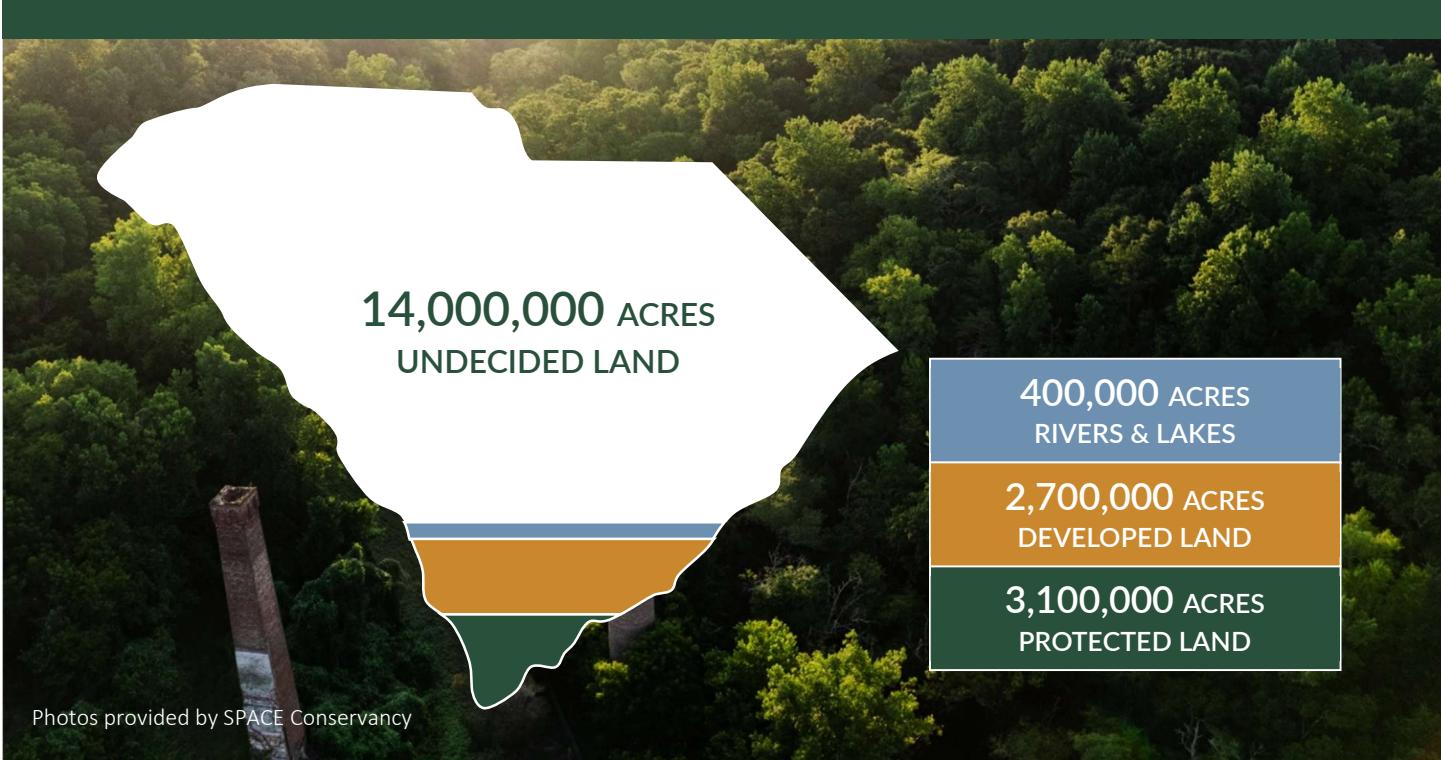
South Carolina's rapid population growth highlights the urgency of establishing a statewide conservation goal. As the Bank observed during subcommittee testimony, last year the state "welcomed 90,000 new people into the state, which, to put it in perspective, is 20,000 more people than the entire city of Greenville."¹¹⁰ For every one person leaving the state, more than two new residents arrive, making South Carolina one of the fastest growing states per capita in the nation.¹¹¹

In 2020, a bipartisan group of House members introduced the South Carolina Thirty-By-Thirty Conservation Act, which sought to set a clear and measurable benchmark for land conservation in South Carolina—namely, to conserve 30% of the state's lands by 2030.¹¹² While the bill did not advance, it reflected a bipartisan effort to give the state a defined long term target.

According to the Bank, in 2025, the state has about 5.5 million residents, and conservative projections anticipate reaching 10 million by 2070.¹¹³ "And all those people are going to live on the same 20 million acres in South Carolina, which is going to require new homes, new roads, new schools"¹¹⁴ **Currently, of the 20-million acres in South Carolina, the Bank estimates that 3.1 million acres are protected, 2.7 million acres are developed, and roughly 400,000 acres consists of lakes and rivers, which leaves 14 million acres undecided.**¹¹⁵ This anticipated influx of residents will undoubtedly intensify pressure on landscapes, water resources, wildlife habitats and the very qualities residents value most: "our hunting and fishing opportunities, clean water, local produce on local farms" and the like.¹¹⁶

Establishing a statewide goal would provide a needed long-term vision for conservation planning and serve as a counterbalance to ongoing industrial expansion in the state.

BREAKDOWN OF 20 MILLION ACRES IN SOUTH CAROLINA



14,000,000 ACRES
UNDECIDED LAND

400,000 ACRES
RIVERS & LAKES

2,700,000 ACRES
DEVELOPED LAND

3,100,000 ACRES
PROTECTED LAND

RECOMMENDATION TWO

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider enacting legislation to designate the Conservation Bank as the central clearinghouse for state funds used by agencies for strategic land acquisitions.

As observed in Finding 8, in FY 2025, the General Assembly substantially increased the Bank's appropriation. This was not intended as an expansion of funding, but rather as a redirection of resources to the agency viewed as best positioned to manage complex land transactions in a timely and transparent manner. While the South Carolina Forestry Commission, the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, and the South Carolina Office of Resilience are essential partners in advancing conservation priorities, the General Assembly has already demonstrated a preference for channeling land acquisition resources through the Bank. Statutorily designating the SCCB as the clearinghouse for all strategic land acquisition funding would allow for better coordination, transparency, fiscal oversight, and prioritization of land acquisitions.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-30(d) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to establish a \$100,000 minimum financial threshold for non-profit entities to qualify as eligible trust fund recipients.

As noted in Finding 7, in securing conservation easements with voluntary landowners, the Bank does not negotiate with landowners directly but instead relies on a network of "eligible entities" to manage land, which include certain state agencies, municipalities and counties of the state, or "a not for profit charitable corporation or trust authorized to do business in this State whose principal activity is the acquisition and management of interests in land for conservation or historic preservation purposes and which has tax exempt status as a public charity under the Internal revenue Code of 1986."¹¹⁷ According to the SCCB, the requirements for a not-for-profit charitable corporation is subjective and leaves the door open to organizations with vastly different levels of capacity.

To help ensure accountability, the SCCB recommends that nonprofit organizations possess at least \$100,000 in liquid assets or be accredited by the Land Trust Alliance. If neither condition is met, the organization needs to be formally sponsored by an established agency that does meet those criteria.¹¹⁸ As explained by the SCCB, these proposed changes are "simply an attempt to try to put a baseline expectation on what the organization must have available" in order to manage the financial and legal responsibilities associated with land conservation.¹¹⁹



Photos provided by Holcombe, Fair & Lane

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-40 (A) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to expand the Bank's board from 17 to 18 members by adding the Chief Resilience Officer of the South Carolina Office of Resilience as an ex officio member.

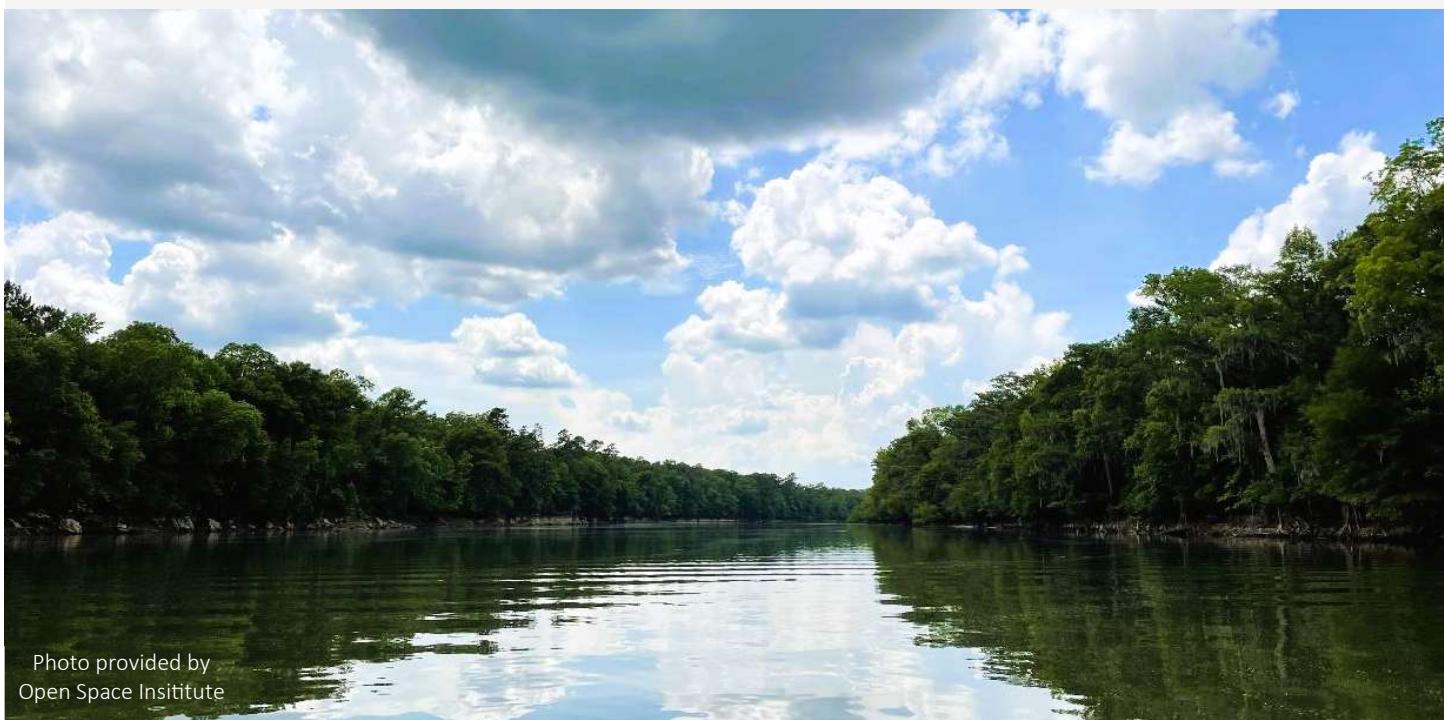
The SCCB works closely with the South Carolina Office of Resilience on multiple large-scale land conservation projects.¹²⁰ While the Chief Resilience Officer regularly attends the Bank's board meetings and is an "integral part" of the Bank's team, the Chief Resilience Officer is not currently a statutory member of the board.¹²¹ However, in recent years, the Office of Resilience contributed substantial funding to priority acquisitions. In FY 2023 alone, the Bank completed 64 projects totaling approximately \$8.3 million, with much of that funding coming from the Office of Resilience for "several big projects."¹²² This amendment, which is supported by the current Chief Resilience Officer,¹²³ would codify and strengthen an already productive working relationship.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-50(B) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to better reflect how information is shared and disseminated to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and General Assembly.

Section 48-59-50(B)(3) of the Code requires the SCCB to submit an annual report containing certain information, including "a list and description of all grants and loans approved, and all acquisitions of land or interests in land obtained with trust funds since the bank's inception."¹²⁴ This has resulted in a requirement to include historical data in each year's report, rather than focusing on the most recent grant activity.

As noted by the Bank, this historical data could instead be provided through other means, such as on the Bank's website, while the annual report itself could be tailored to reflect only the grants awarded in the current reporting year.¹²⁵ Amending the statute as proposed by the Bank would align the statute with best practices for information sharing and streamline the annual reporting process while also increase efficiency and maintain transparency in the reporting process.



RECOMMENDATION SIX

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-70(F)(2) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to provide for staggered two-year terms for members of the grant review committee.

Section 48-59-70(F)(2) provides that the SCCB Board chairman “shall establish a grant review committee to review, comment, and make recommendations on proposals received by the bank. The chairman shall appoint five members of the board to serve on the committee for a term of no more than one year, and no member may serve consecutive terms.” According to the SCCB, one-year terms for committee members limits continuity and disrupts the flow of deliberations on complex grant applications.¹²⁶ This amendment resolves those issues.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-80(D) (2008) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to remove the requirement that the Bank must be named as an insured on a title insurance policy approved to the board.

Section 48-59-80(D) provides, in part, that SCCB “must be named as an insured on a title insurance policy acceptable to the board and obtained by the loan recipient for loans it makes to eligible trust fund recipients.” As noted by the Bank, the current statutory requirement that the Bank be named as an insured on title insurance has created legal complications. Because the Bank is statutorily prohibited from taking a possessory interest in real estate,¹²⁷ some insurance companies have refused to name the Bank as an actual insured,¹²⁸ a position supported by the South Carolina Attorney General’s Office.¹²⁹ SCCB has attempted to address the intent behind Section 48-59-80(D) in its grant agreements by requiring grant recipients to maintain title insurance and allowing the Bank to recover its grant funds if a title defect arises. But the language is buried in the grant agreement, not the insurance policy itself.¹³⁰ Amending section 48-59-80(D) to remove the insured requirement would achieve the statute’s objective of ensuring protection of public investment through an executed grant agreement without the difficulties caused by requiring the Bank to be named on the policy itself.

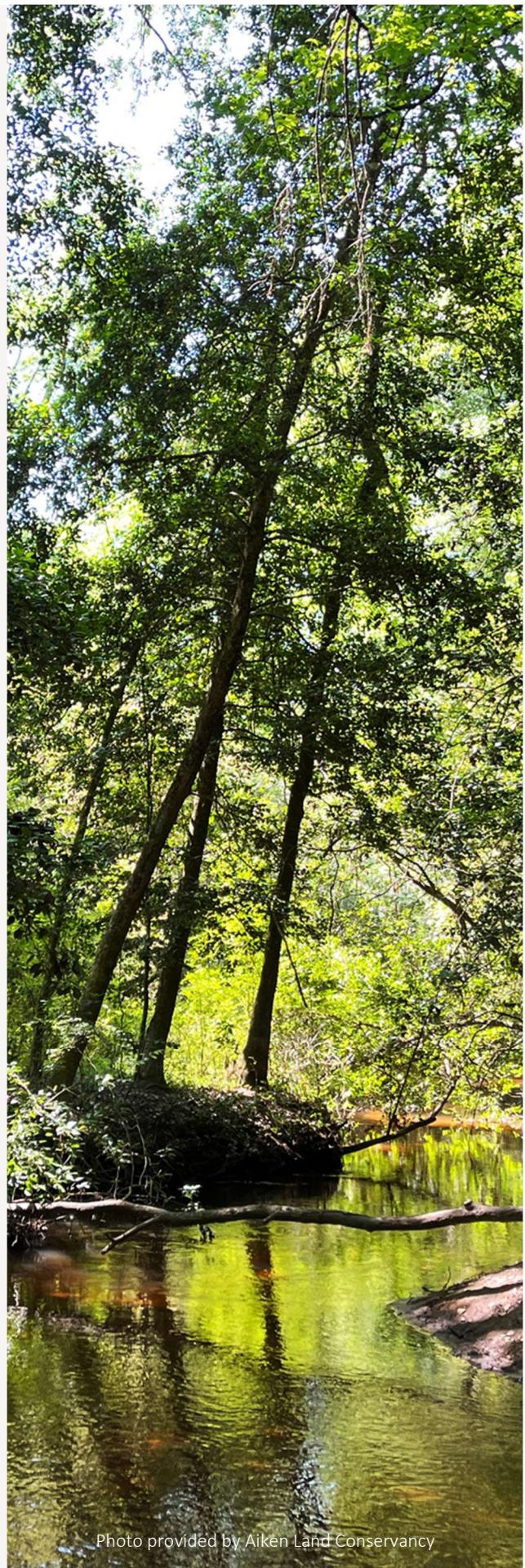


Photo provided by Aiken Land Conservancy

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-80(G)(1) (2008) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to align the language with federal and state tax laws so that the language marries with the perpetuity requirement underpinning tax laws associated with conservation conveyances, and to specify judicial extinguishment as the sole method for removing conservation restrictions.

Section 48-59-80(G)(1) currently authorizes easement extinguishment by the SCCB Board if the Board finds that the property no longer meets the criteria for trust fund acquisition, with an appeal to the Administrative Law Court.¹³¹ However, federal tax law governing conservation easement donation requires that such easements be granted in perpetuity to qualify for a charitable deduction.¹³² Federal rules further limit extinguishment to circumstances in which a court determines, through a judicial proceeding, that unforeseen changes make it impossible or impractical to continue using the property for conservation purposes.¹³³ Administrative or board-level terminations do not meet this standard, and easements subject to board termination risk disqualifying the donor from federal tax benefits.

As noted by the SCCB, “once we give a grant, we want it to be permanent. If the court says circumstances have changed and there’s a judicial order, so be it. But [we’d] like the courts to make that decision and to prevent . . . inconsistencies with federal law.”¹³⁴ Aligning state law with the federal perpetuity and judicial extinguishment requirements will protect donors’ tax benefits and bolster the integrity of conservation agreements.

RECOMMENDATION NINE

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-100 (2008) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to clarify that public access is required only when grant funds are used to acquire land in fee simple.

Section 48-59-100 of the Code provides that “an easement acquired in whole or in part with trust funds must provide for public access consistent with the uses permitted by the terms of the easement.”¹³⁵ The General Assembly should amend section 48-59-100 to clarify that public access is required only when grant funds are used to acquire land in fee simple. According to the SCCB, the current statute is vague and could be interpreted to require public access for conservation easements on privately owned land.¹³⁶ The proposed clarification would make explicit the intent that the public access requirement applies solely to fee simple acquisitions and not to conservation easements.

RECOMMENDATION TEN

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider amending Section 48-59-110(A) (Supp. 2024) of the Code, as proposed by the Conservation Bank, to clarify that grant funds may be disbursed at or after a closing.

Section 48-59-110 provides, in part, that “[t]rust finds only may be dispersed *at the closing* of transactions in which an interest in land is acquired.”¹³⁷ In some cases, however, timing constraints involving the coordination of funds make this impractical, forcing the Bank to occasionally disburse grants to recipients after closing.¹³⁸ This amendment would clarify that grant disbursement may occur at or after closing.



Photo by Mac Stone

APPENDIX A

SOUTH  CAROLINA
CONSERVATION
— B A N K —

South Carolina Conservation Bank

Conservation Priority Mapping

July 1, 2024

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Introduction

The South Carolina Conservation Bank (SCCB) has been tasked with developing statewide conservation priority maps that will be submitted to the South Carolina General Assembly as identified in South Carolina House Bill 4727 Section 48-59-50, B(5):

“(5) develop conservation criteria to be used, in addition to the criteria set forth in Section 48-59-70(D), that advance and support federal, state, and local conservation goals, plans, objectives, and initiatives. In order to assist in the development of conservation criteria, the bank must coordinate with the appropriate groups to integrate the goals, plans, objectives, and initiatives, as well as land use patterns, into a statewide conservation map. The map must be created by July 1, 2019, and the criteria and map must be reviewed no less than every ten years thereafter. The criteria list and map must be submitted to the General Assembly annually.”

In June of 2019, the first statewide conservation priority maps were produced by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources for the South Carolina Conservation Bank. They consisted of five sub-maps (public access, ecological conservation priorities, cultural resources, private working lands, and water resources), and a final conservation priority model. Each of these sub-maps included one or more data layer(s) representative of the conservation category.

The priority maps were updated again in May of 2022 to consist of six sub-maps (conservation corridors, ecological conservation priorities, sustainable forestry and agriculture, water resources, proximity to urban interface, and public benefit), and a final conservation priority model map. From May of 2022, the South Carolina Conservation Bank planned to update the maps annually. Reports documenting the June 2019, May 2022, and July 2023 maps are available by request to the South Carolina Conservation Bank.

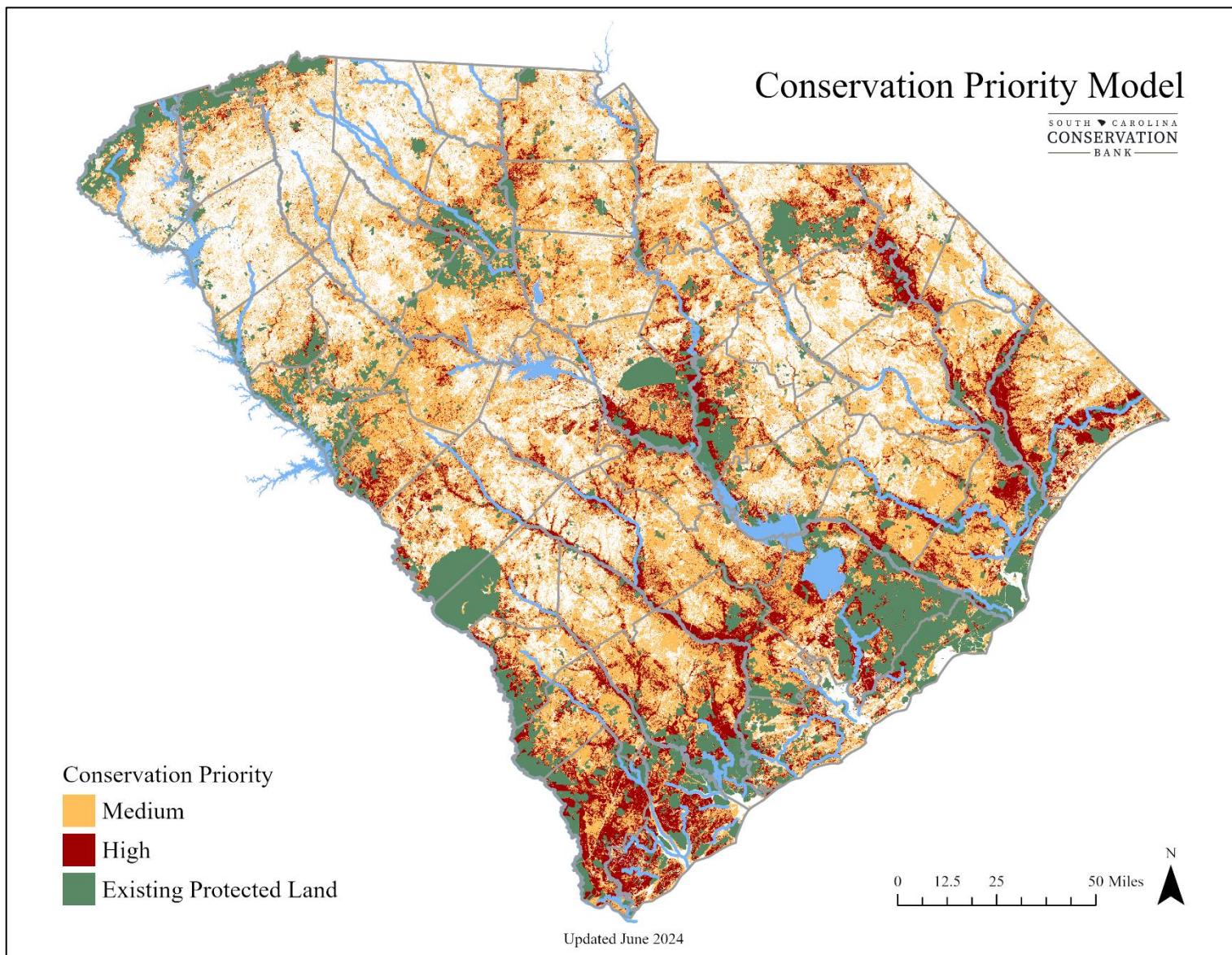
This document outlines the development of the July 2024 statewide conservation priority map. Included in this document are maps and statistics for current conservation conditions in South Carolina, the final statewide conservation priority map, and each of the 6 sub-maps. Finally, each data layer used is documented with how it was ranked for the sub-map.

Statewide Conservation Priority Model

South Carolina's land area is about 20 million acres. Currently, approximately 3 million acres of South Carolina's land area is under some form of protection (over 143,700 more acres than recorded in the July 2023 report). Approximately 2.3 million acres are developed. Both of these numbers increase annually.

This project has identified 10.9 million acres of South Carolina's landscape as medium priority (8.1 million acres) and high priority (2.8 million acres) for conservation (Map 1, Statewide Conservation Priority Model), which will help guide the South Carolina Conservation Bank's conservation funding activities. (The 2023 project had previously identified 8.6 million acres as medium and high priority.) A county-by-county breakdown of conservation priority acreage is found in Appendix A.

Map 1. Statewide Conservation Priority Model.



Current Conservation Conditions

The current status of conservation and land protection in the state provides context for conservation priority mapping and a baseline against which future conservation efforts can be measured.

There are approximately 20 million acres of land in South Carolina. Approximately 3 million acres are under some form of protection, representing more than 16% of the total land area.

Land Protection Over Time

Land protection has increased in the last three decades (Figure 1 and Map 2), with the largest increase in private land protection. Significant increases are also seen in state protected land. The South Carolina Conservation Bank was established in 2002 and began grants for conservation in 2004, bolstering the upward trend of increased conservation acreage.

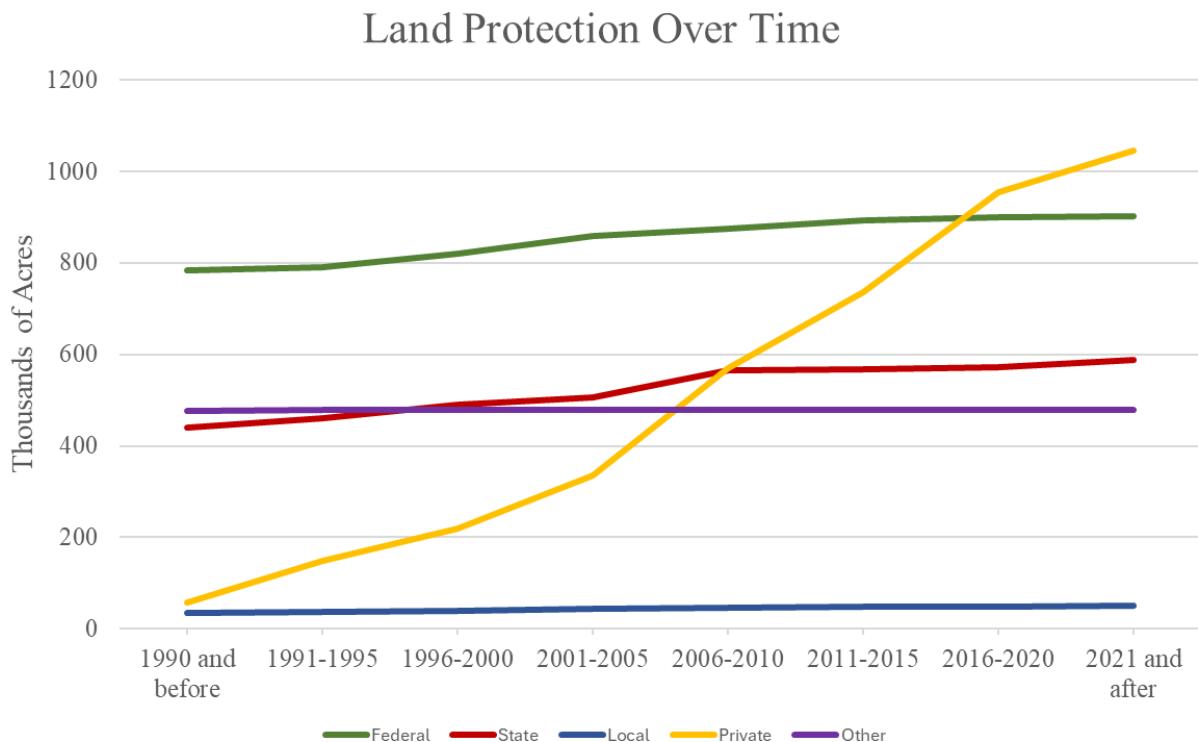
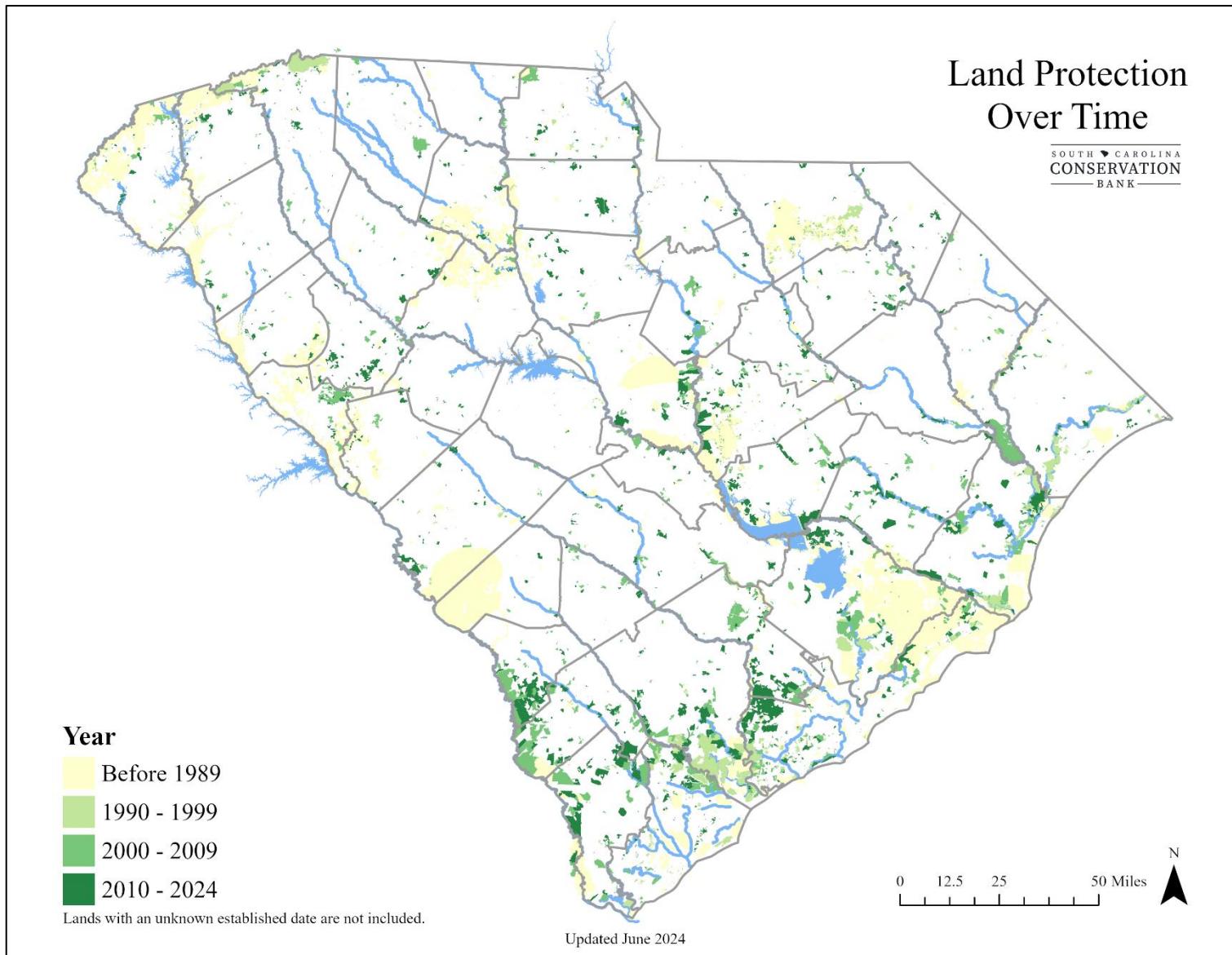


Figure 1. Land Protection Over Time*.^[1]

*The data are from the January 2024 release of The Nature Conservancy's Protected Lands dataset (exported May 14, 2024). 'Other' protected lands include those owned by the US Department of Energy and US Department of Defense, as well as some lands owned by Clemson University, the US Army Corps of Engineers, and Santee Cooper.

Map 2. Land Protection Over Time.



Current Land Protection by Entity

Protected lands in South Carolina are managed by different entities. Private and state protected lands together contribute to more than half of total protection (Figure 2, Table 1, and Map 3).

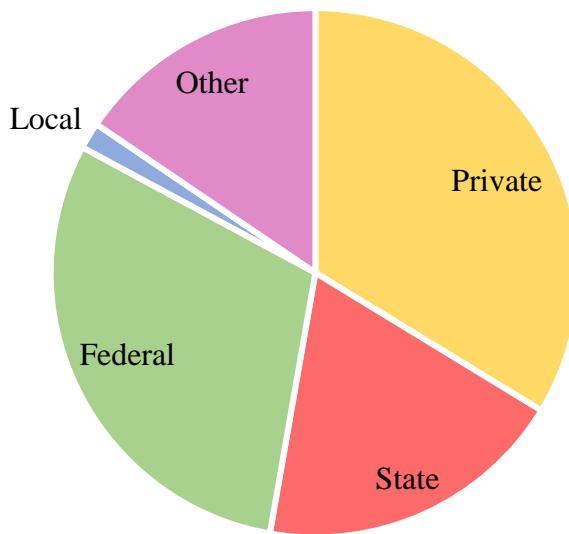


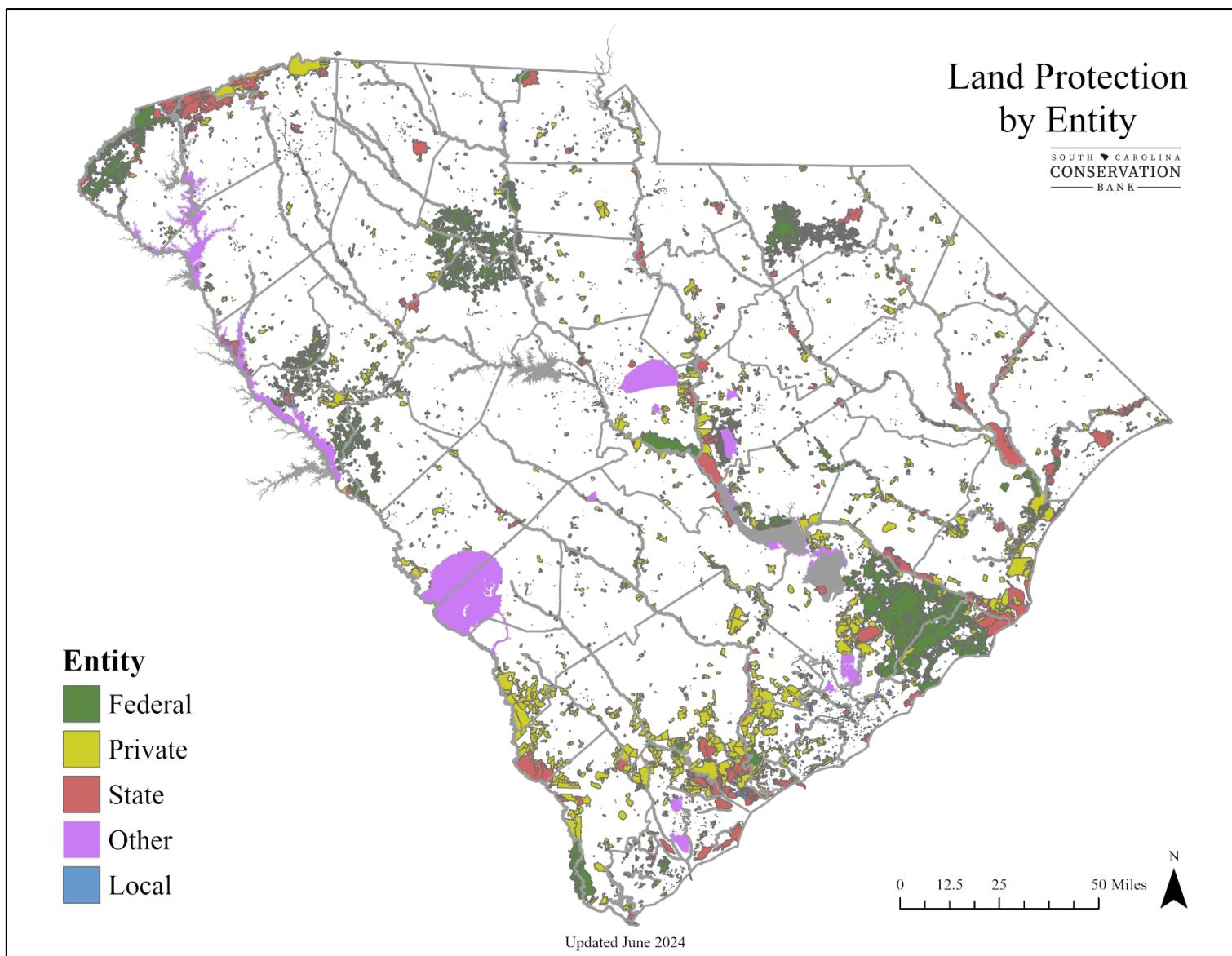
Figure 2. Land Protection by Entity.^[1]

Entity	Acres	% of Protected Acres	% of State Land Area
Federal	926,621	30.1	4.6
Private	1,037,543	33.7	5.2
State	585,929	19.1	2.9
Other	477,184	15.5	2.4
Local	50,160	1.6	0.3
Total	3,077,437	100	15.4

SC Total Land Area 19,971,591 acres

Table 1. Land Protection by Entity, with percentages of protected acres and total state land area.^[1] Total protected acreage increased by 143,724 acres since the July 2023 report, a 1.05% increase of total state land area.

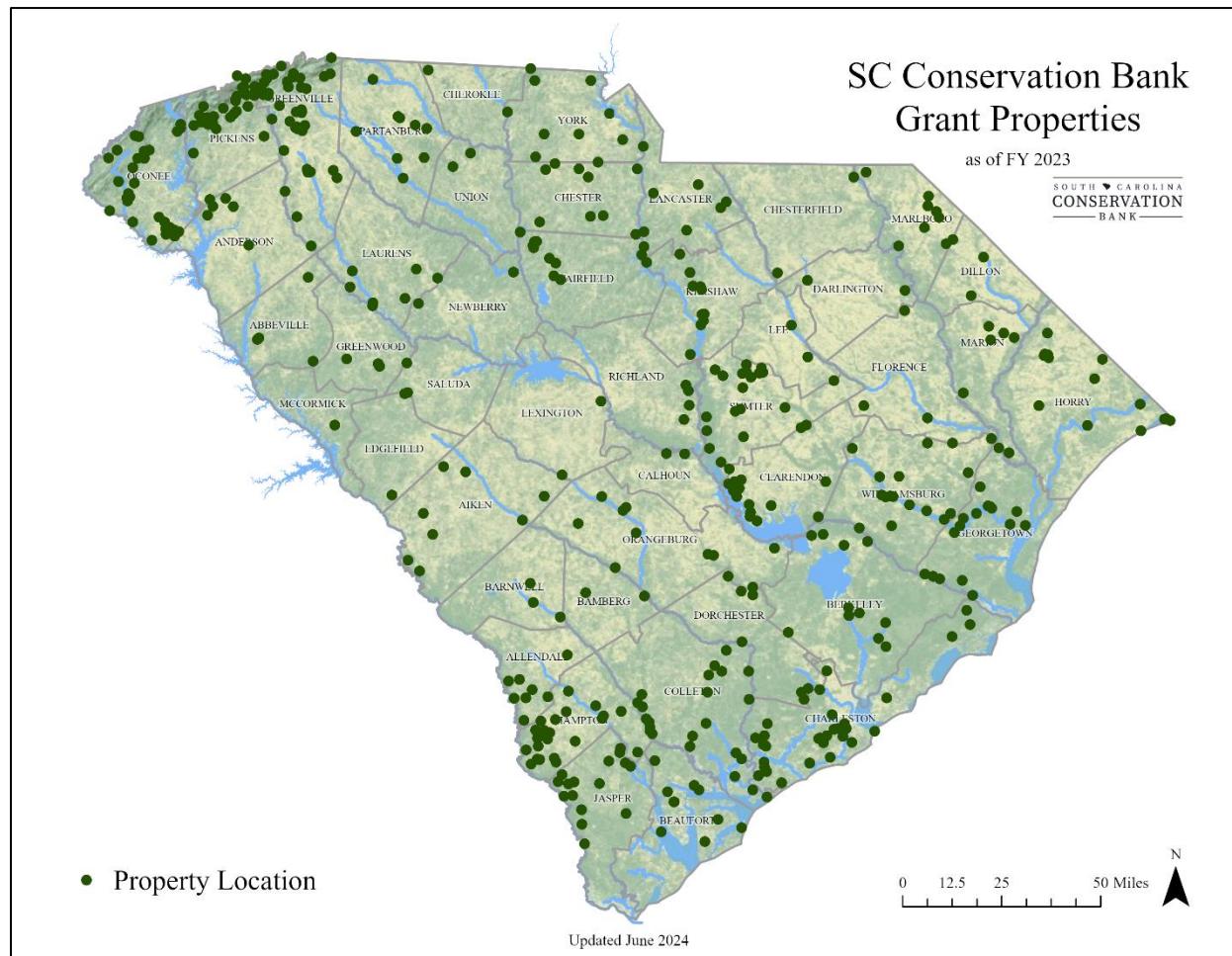
Map 3. Land Protection by Entity.



South Carolina Conservation Bank Projects

As of fiscal year 2023, the South Carolina Conservation Bank has helped conserve 375,282 acres in the State (21,266 additional acres since fiscal year 2022).

Map 4. Current South Carolina Conservation Bank Grant Properties.



Land Cover Conditions

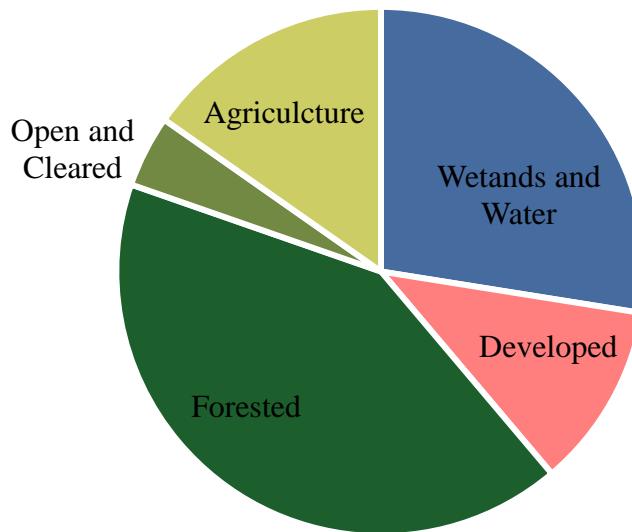


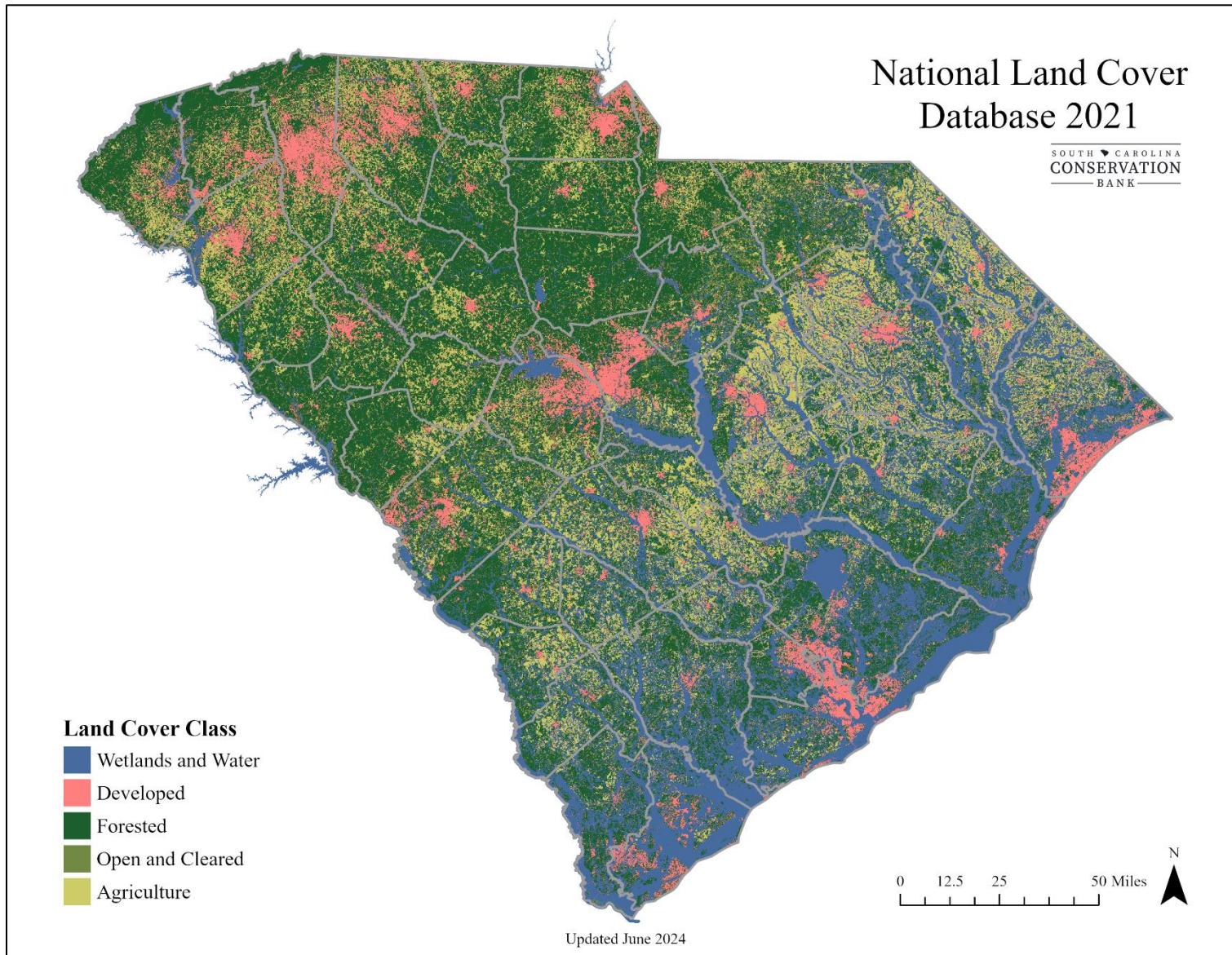
Figure 3: South Carolina Land Cover, grouped into four basic categories*. [2]

In reviewing the land cover changes between 2019 and 2021, there are three key trends:

- 1) **Low, medium, and high intensity developed land has increased by 14,000 acres.**
- 2) **Forested land has decreased by 10,000 acres.** However, the deciduous, mixed, and shrub/scrub classifications had a combined 61,000 acre increase. The evergreen forest classification had a 51,000 acre decrease which equates to the loss in overall forest.
- 3) **Protected lands increased by 140,700 acres in the same period,** based on the protected lands dataset.

*The data are from the 2021 release of the National Land Cover Database (NLCD), the latest available data (released 2024). This data release can be compared to the prior release (2019), and a land cover change index dataset can be reviewed to see where land cover change has occurred over multiple NLCD datasets.

Map 5. National Land Cover Database.



Current Conservation Conditions References

1. The Nature Conservancy SC Protected Lands. Accessed May 2024.
2. Multi-Resolution Land Characteristics Consortium - National Land Cover Database 2021. Accessed May 2024.

Priority Mapping Data and Methodology

General Methodology

The statewide conservation priority map was developed using an occurrence modeling method. Best-available datasets representing each sub-map's category were obtained. With guidance from the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), it was determined how the attributes of each dataset would be ranked. These ranks are outlined in this section of this document. The datasets were processed into raster datasets with values according to their attribute ranking. To generate each sub-map model, the data layers were 'stacked', or summed on a per-pixel basis. The resulting sub-map raster was divided into low, medium, and high priority categories based on Jenks Natural Breaks classification and feedback from the Technical Advisory Committee.

The final summed priority model is a combination of all six sub-maps. Each sub-map model was given a normalized value for their low, medium, and high-ranking pixels. A normalized value was used so that each sub-map model had equal weight in the summed priority model. The normalized sub-map models were summed on a per-pixel basis to produce the summed priority model.

All data were re-projected to NAD83 UTM Zone 17, clipped to the extent of South Carolina, rasterized to 30 meters spatial resolution, snapped to the cell alignment of and masked by the National Land Cover Dataset. The areas that were already under protection were merged with each dataset and assigned a value of 99. Finally, all areas that had no data or were not determined to be priority were assigned a value of 0.

Sub-Map 1: Conservation Corridors

Habitat fragmentation is a major threat to biodiversity. Connectivity facilitates animal movement, seed dispersal, and other ecological processes. Creating corridors of protected land is critical to conservation.

Data Layers

Adjacency to Protected Lands

- High: parcels touching existing protected lands, and parcels adjacent to parcels that touch existing protected land that are equal to or greater than 112 acres (upstate) or 143 acres (coastal plain)
- Medium: parcels adjacent to parcels that touch existing protected land that are less than 112 acres (upstate) or 143 acres (coastal plain), and parcels within two miles of existing protected land that are equal to or greater than 66 acres (upstate) or 85 acres (coastal plain)
- Low: parcels within two miles of existing protected land that are less than 66 acres (upstate) or 85 acres (coastal plain)

Important Lands for the Military

- High: parcels within South Carolina REPI Partnership Opportunity Areas and/or the South Carolina Lowcountry Sentinel Landscape
- Medium: n/a
- Low: n/a

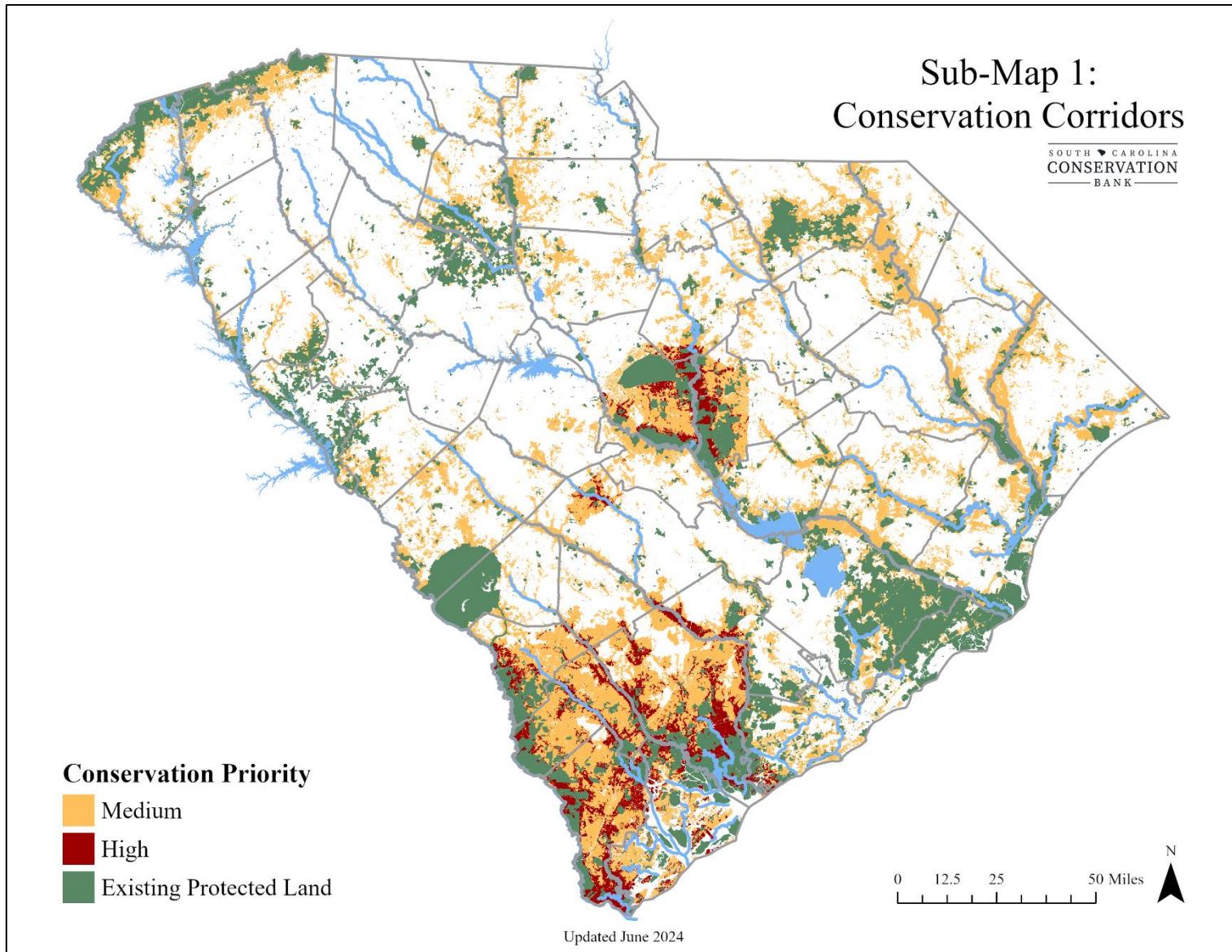
Priority Corridors

- High: areas categorized as sea level rise area, priority coastal marsh migration space, vulnerable tidal complex, resilient tidal complex, resilient diffuse flow (climate informed), resilient recognized biodiversity, resilient concentrated flow (climate informed)/recognized biodiversity, resilient diffuse flow (climate informed)/recognized biodiversity value, resilient concentrated flow (climate informed), resilient diffuse flow/recognized biodiversity, resilient diffuse flow, and most resilient/far above average terrestrial resilience in TNC's Resilient Coastal Sites and Resilient and Connected Landscapes models that overlap with areas categorized as hubs and corridors in the Southeast Conservation Blueprint
- Medium: areas categorized as sea level rise area, priority coastal marsh migration space, vulnerable tidal complex, resilient tidal complex, resilient diffuse flow (climate informed), resilient recognized biodiversity, resilient concentrated flow (climate informed)/recognized biodiversity, resilient diffuse flow (climate informed)/recognized biodiversity value, resilient concentrated flow (climate informed), resilient diffuse flow/recognized biodiversity, resilient diffuse flow, most resilient/far above average terrestrial resilience, mostly resilient/concentrated flow/recognized biodiversity, mostly resilient/concentrated flow, slightly more resilient/slightly above average terrestrial

resilience, and more resilient/above average terrestrial resilience in TNC's Resilient Coastal Sites and Resilient and Connected Landscapes models that overlap with areas categorized as blueprint priority in the Southeast Conservation Blueprint

- Low: n/a

Map 6. Sub-Map 1: Conservation Corridors Priority Model.



Sub-Map 2: Ecological Conservation Priorities

South Carolina faces various ecological challenges. Many species are being driven out from their natural habit due to invasive species, deforestation, or urbanization. By identifying lands that can support wildlife populations, South Carolina can conserve these lands for natural wildlife. Areas that have existing endangered species also have priority for conservation.

Data Layers

Ecological Resiliency

- High: areas categorized as sea level rise area, priority coastal marsh migration space, vulnerable tidal complex, resilient tidal complex, resilient diffuse flow (climate informed), resilient recognized biodiversity, resilient concentrated flow (climate informed)/recognized biodiversity, resilient diffuse flow (climate informed)/recognized biodiversity value, resilient concentrated flow (climate informed), resilient diffuse flow/recognized biodiversity, resilient diffuse flow, and most resilient/far above average terrestrial resilience in TNC's Resilient Coastal Sites and Resilient and Connected Landscapes models
- Medium: areas categorized as mostly resilient/concentrated flow/recognized biodiversity, mostly resilient/concentrated flow, slightly more resilient/above average terrestrial resilience, and more resilient/above average terrestrial resilience in TNC's Resilient Coastal Sites and Resilient and Connected Landscapes models
- Low: areas categorized as medium, high, and highest in the SECAS Conservation model that do not overlap with TNC's models

State Species of Concern*

- High: green infrastructure cores that have a core score greater than 2.7 and contain federal at-risk species, federal/state threatened and endangered species, G1-G3 species, and/or S1-S3 species, and green infrastructure cores that have a core score between 1.9 and 2.7 and contain federal/state threatened and endangered species, G1-G2 species, and/or S1-S2 species
- Medium: green infrastructure cores that have a core score greater than 2.7 and do not contain federal at-risk species, federal/state threatened and endangered species, G1-G3 species, and/or S1-S3 species, green infrastructure cores that have a core score between 1.9 and 2.7 and contain federal at-risk species, G3 species, and/or S3 species, and green infrastructure cores that have a core score less than 1.9 and contain federal/state threatened and endangered species, G1-G2 species and/or S1-S2 species
- Low: green infrastructure cores that have a core score less than 2.8 and do not contain federal at-risk species, federal/state threatened and endangered species, G1-G3 species, and/or S1-S3 species, and green infrastructure cores that have a core score less than 1.9 and contain federal at-risk species, G3 species, and/or S3 species

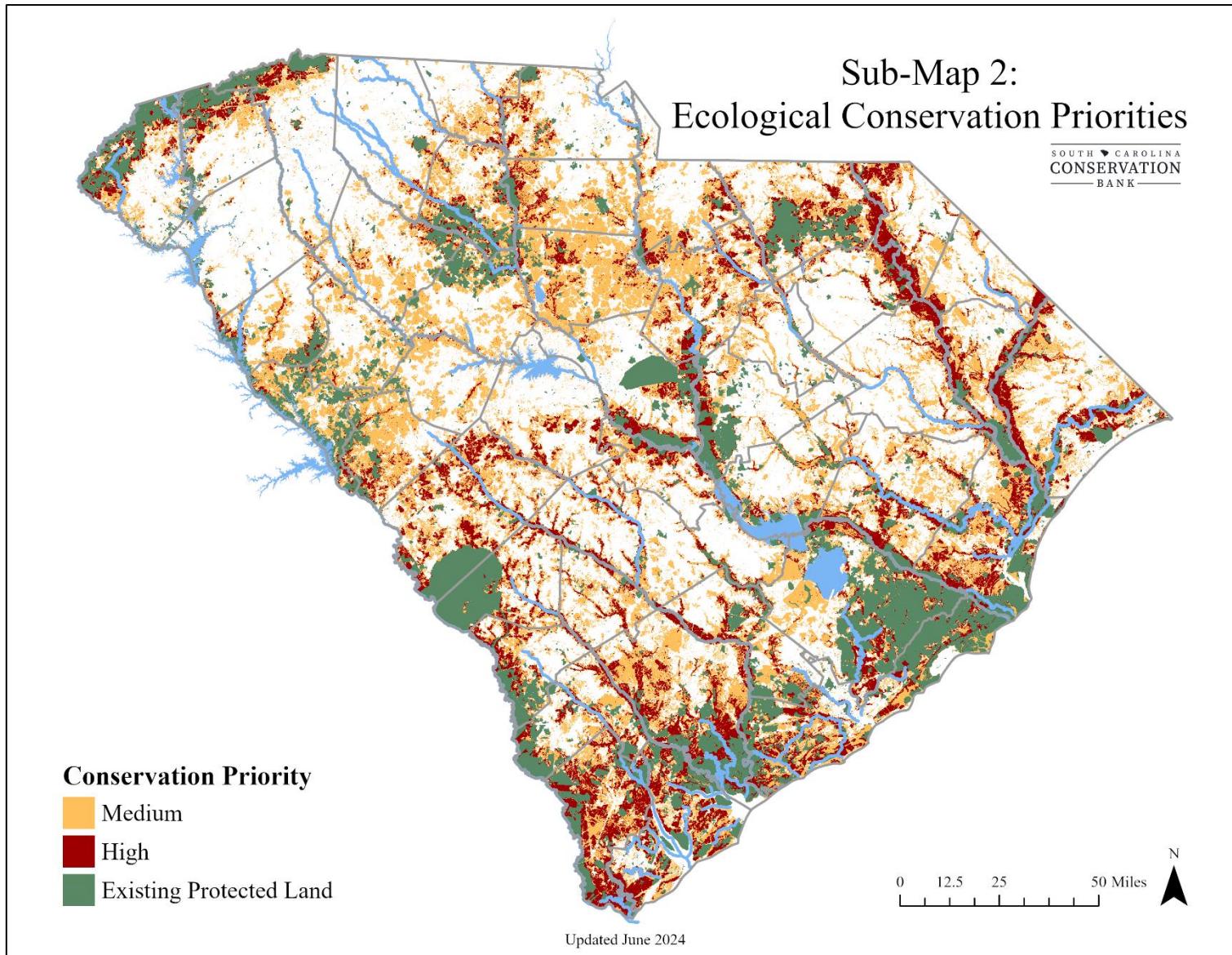
*G1-G3 ranks refer to Global Conservation Status Ranks assigned by NatureServe. S1-S3 ranks refer to State Conservation Status Ranks assigned by state wildlife biologists. Historic and extirpated records were removed from analysis

Species of Interest Suitable Habitat*

- High: areas where ‘seven’ priority species share suitable habitat
- Medium: areas where ‘three to six’ priority species share suitable habitat
- Low: areas where ‘one to two’ priority species share suitable habitat

*Five summary rasters were created to document species distribution for Black-throated Blue Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, Blue-winged Warbler, Carolina Gopher Frog, Chuck-will’s-widow, Common Ground Dove, Dickcissel, Eastern Diamond-backed Rattlesnake, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Field Sparrow, Golden-winged Warbler, Gopher Tortoise, Grasshopper Sparrow, Gray Kingbird, Loggerhead Shrike, Painted Bunting, Piedmont Prairie Species, Pine Barrens Treefrog, Pinesnake (Northern and Florida), Prairie Warbler, Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Southern Hog-nosed Snake, Spotted Turtle, Venus Flytrap, and Webster’s Salamander. The five were a random forest classification model, a logistic regression model using the maximum entropy approach, a logistic generalized additive model using seven splines, a gradient boosted classifier model, and a generalized linear model. Black-throated Green Warbler, Blue-winged Warbler, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Golden-winged Warbler, and Pine Barrens Treefrog were ultimately removed from the final combination model because their Cohen’s kappa coefficients were below the 0.4 threshold which generally indicates a poor level of agreement. Developed areas (NLCD 2019) were also removed to mitigate sampling bias towards urban areas for some bird species where public observations were used as input data into the models. Suitable habitat is defined as areas where four or five summary rasters agree. For more information on project site-specific priority species, please visit the South Carolina Natural Heritage Program’s website.

Map 7. Sub-Map 2: Ecological Conservation Priorities Priority Model.



Sub-Map 3: Sustainable Forestry

With the population of South Carolina growing, the demand for forest products also continues to grow. The conservation of forest resources needs to be identified to meet future demands.

Data Layers

Distance to Mills

- High: areas that have a value 100 score of 68 or greater
- Medium: areas that have a value 100 score between 47 and 67
- Low: areas that have a value 100 score between 25 and 46

Mill Closure Impact

- High: areas that were categorized as high in 2023's Distance to Mills layer that are now categorized as medium or low
- Medium: areas that were categorized as medium in 2023's Distance to Mills layer that are now categorized as low
- Low: n/a

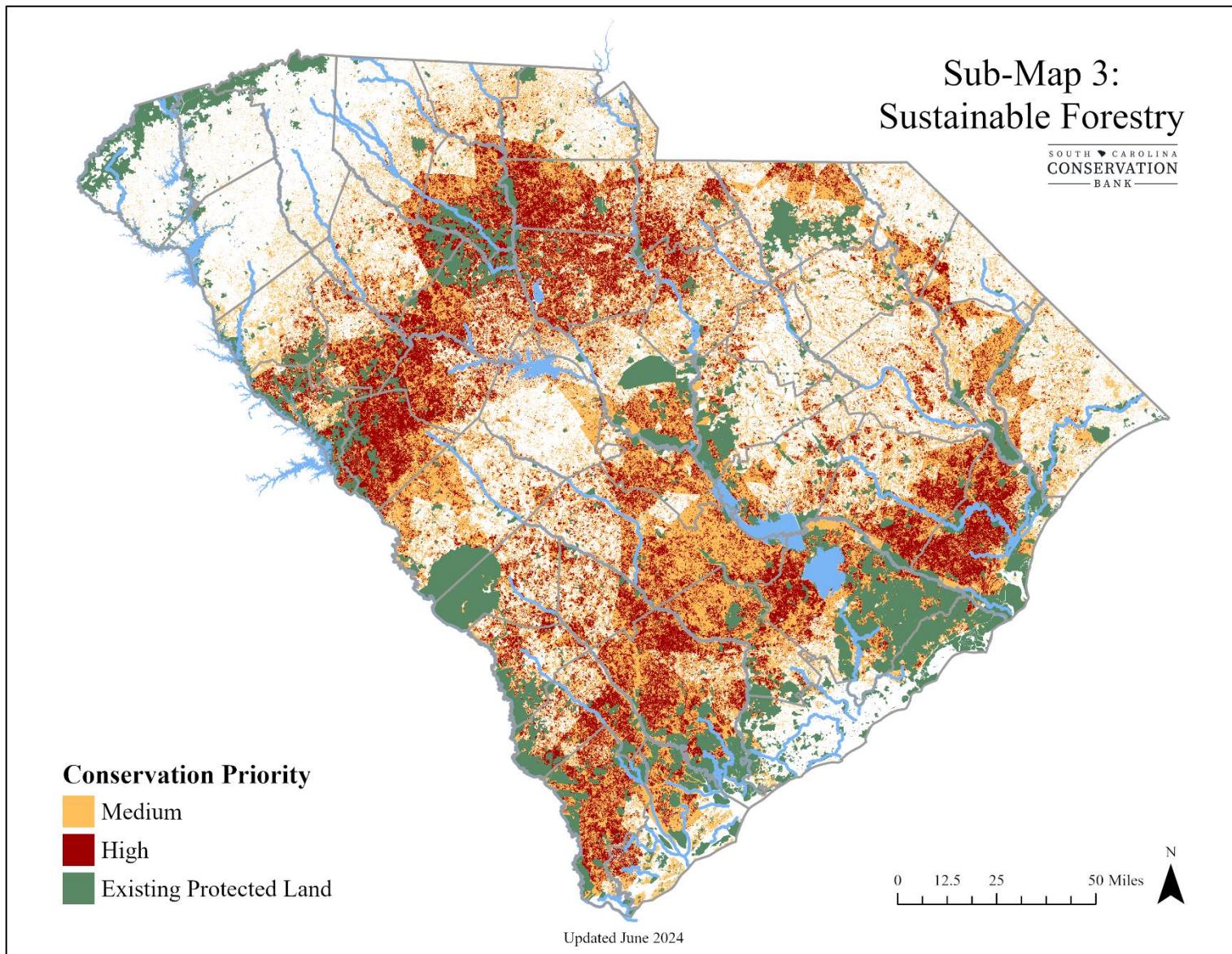
Managed Timber

- High: all areas categorized as evergreen plantation or managed pine, harvest forest – grass/forb regeneration, and/or harvest forest – shrub regeneration
- Medium: NA
- Low: NA

Carbon Estimates

- High: areas that have greater than 126 metric tons of carbon sequestration predicted for 2050
- Medium: areas that have between 110 and 126 metric tons of carbon sequestration predicted for 2050
- Low: areas that have between 93 and 110 metric tons of carbon sequestration predicted for 2050

Map 8. Sub-Map 3: Sustainable Forestry Model.



Sub-Map 4: Sustainable Agriculture

With the population of South Carolina growing, the demand for food also continues to grow. The conservation of agricultural resources needs to be identified to meet future demands.

Data Layers

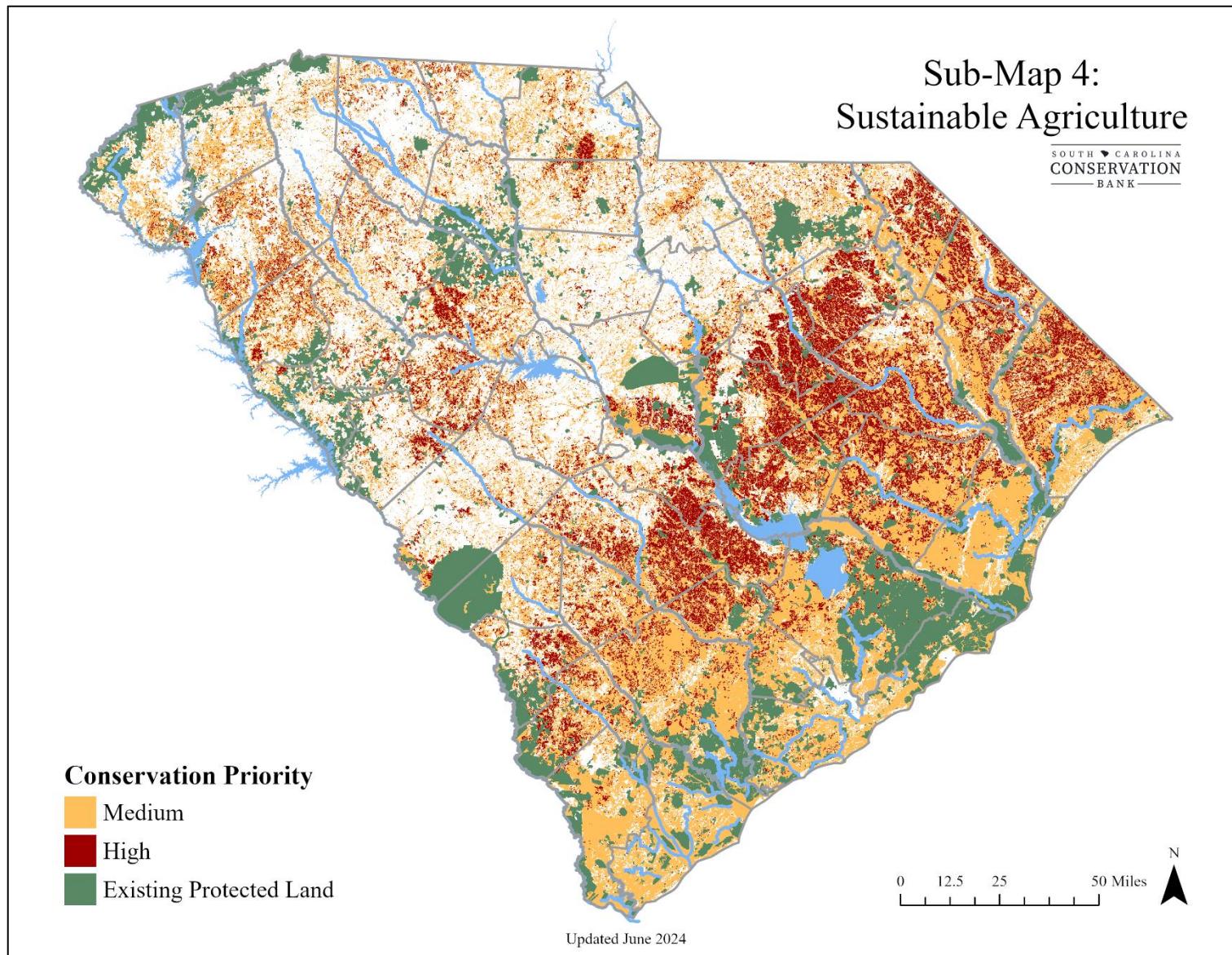
Soil Drainage

- High: areas in the coastal plain that have a DI value between 75 to 99 and areas in the blue ridge that have a DI value between 71 to 99
- Medium: areas in the coastal plain that have a DI value between 52 to 74 and areas in the blue ridge that have a DI value between 50 to 70
- Low: areas in the coastal plain that have a DI value between 30 to 51 and areas in the blue ridge that have a DI value between 22 to 49

Productivity, Versatility, and Resiliency of Agricultural Lands

- High: productivity, versatility, and resiliency of agricultural land areas that overlap with prime farmland soil areas and are categorized as greater than 0.6
- Medium: productivity, versatility, and resiliency of agricultural land areas that overlap with prime farmland soil areas and are categorized as greater than 0.3
- Low: all other productivity, versatility, and resiliency of agricultural land areas and prime farmland soil areas

Map 9. Sub-Map 4: Sustainable Agriculture Priority Model.



Sub-Map 5: Water Resources

As the population of South Carolina continues to grow, the state needs to plan for future water needs. Water is a critical resource, both for the ecosystem and the developed landscape. By identifying areas of the state that have water resources impact, South Carolina conservation efforts can contribute to protection of and smart use of water resources.

Data Layers

Forests to Faucets

- High: areas that have IMP_R values between 83 and 100, and/or APCW_R values between 80 and 100
- Medium: areas that have IMP_R values between 66 and 82, and/or APCW_R values between 58 and 79
- Low: areas that have IMP_R values between 40 and 65, and/or APCW_R values between 48 and 57

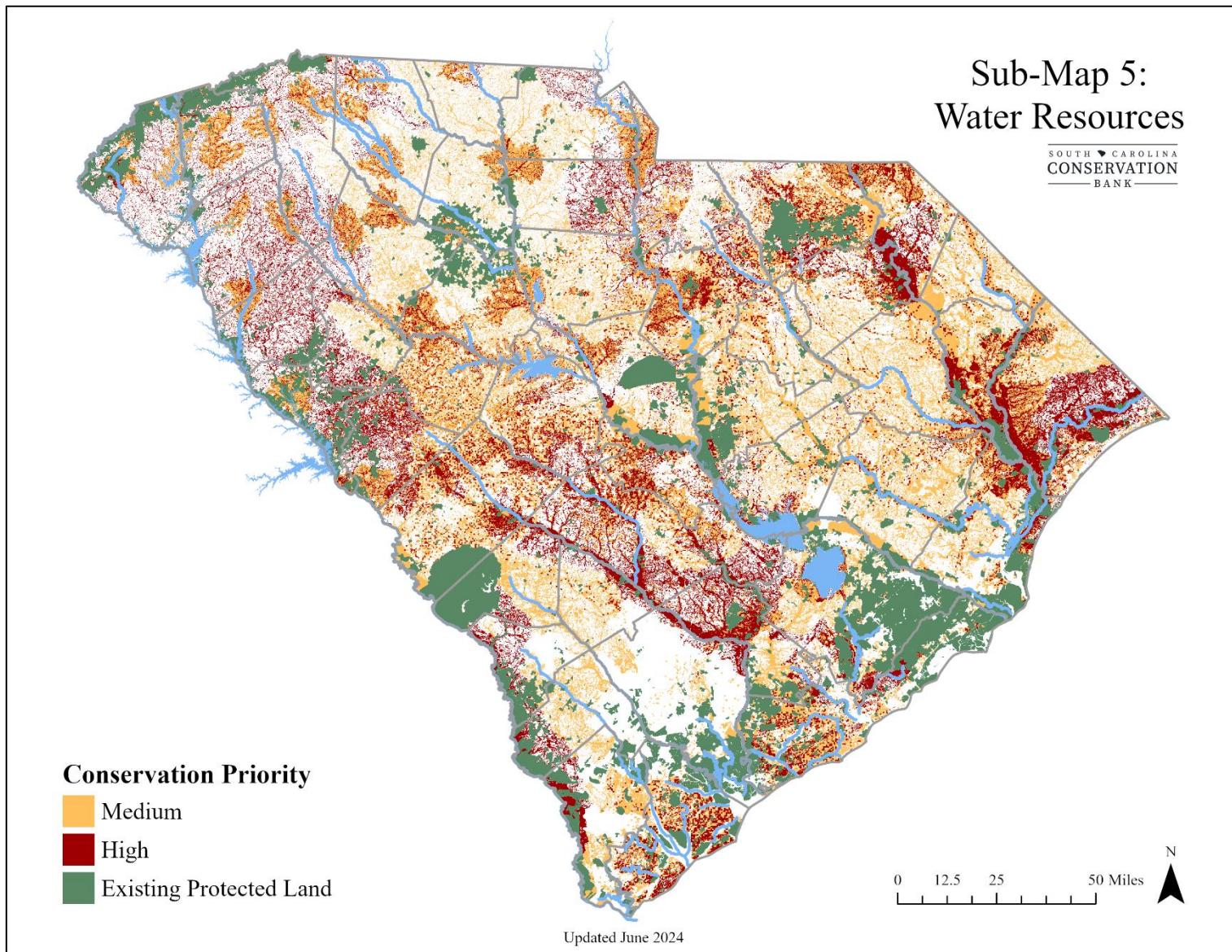
Flood-focused Priority Conservation Model

- High: all flood focused priority conservation areas
- Medium: n/a
- Low: n/a

Water Quality Protection

- High: two or three of the following are true for a 30x30 raster cell area- has higher than one standard deviation above the mean recharge (greater than 10.158), is within a parcel that intersects with a source water protection area and/or a groundwater protection zone, and/or is within a parcel that intersects with an outstanding resource water
- Medium: one of the following is true for a 30x30 raster cell area- has higher than one standard deviation above the mean recharge (greater than 10.158), is within a parcel that intersects with a source water protection area and/or a groundwater protection zone, or is within a parcel that intersects with an outstanding resource water

Map 10. Sub-Map 5: Water Resources Priority Model.



Sub-Map 6: Public Trails and Vistas

The public can benefit from conservation through public access opportunities. Likewise, areas within the viewshed of main roads, waterways, and public trails provide scenic viewing opportunities.

Data Layers

Scenic Vistas – Roads and Trails

- High: areas within the viewshed of scenic byways and public trails
- Medium: n/a
- Low: n/a

Scenic Vistas - Waterways

- High: areas within the viewshed of paddle-able rivers, including scenic rivers
- Medium: n/a
- Low: n/a

Proximity to People

- High: block groups that have a population greater than 2.109 million people
- Medium: block groups that have a population between 1.644 million people and 2.109 million people
- Low: block groups that have a population between 1.324 million people and 1.643 million people

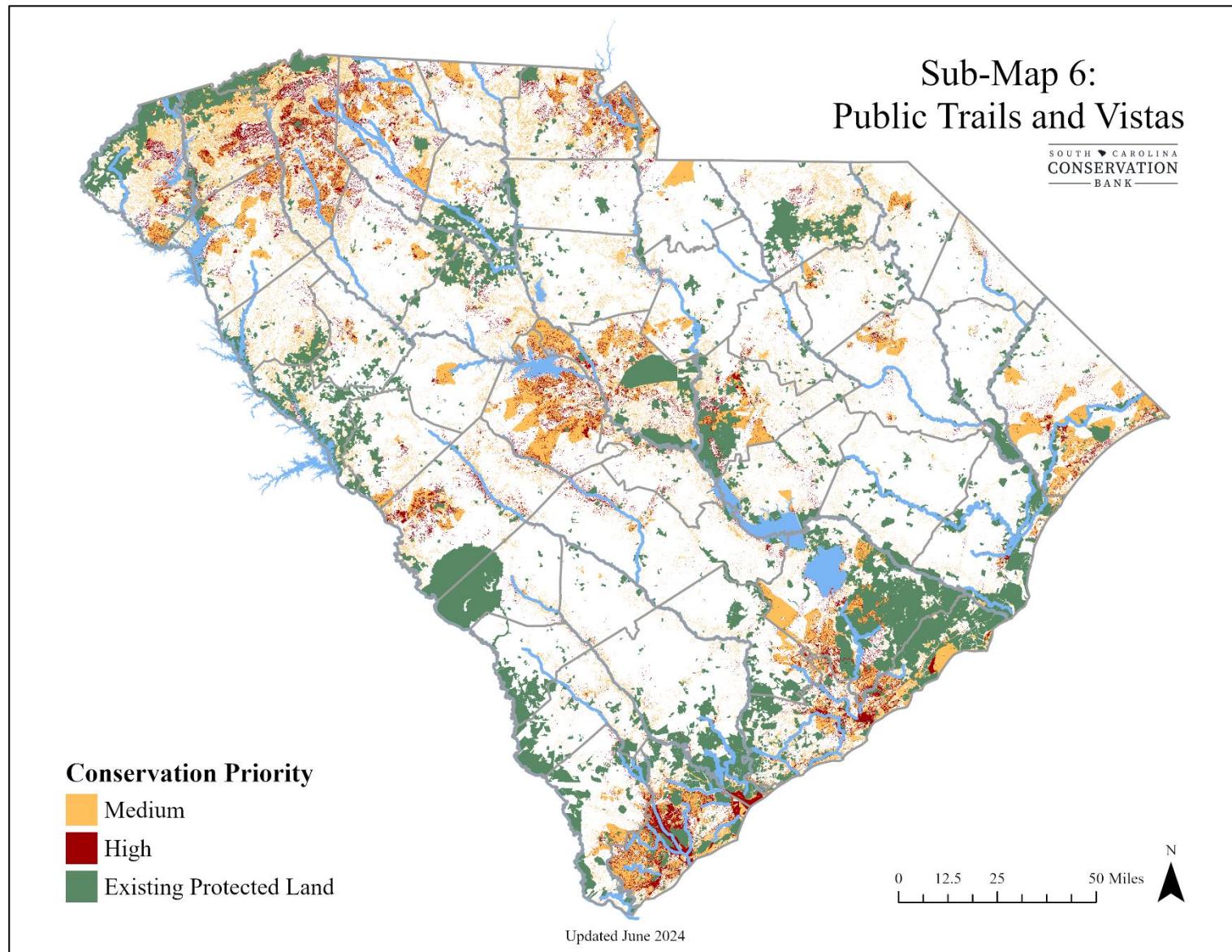
Potential of Urbanization

- High: areas with at least a 30% chance of urbanization by 2040
- Medium: areas with at least a 30% chance of urbanization by 2060
- Low: areas with at least a 30% chance of urbanization by 2080

Equitable Access to Potential Parks

- High: areas categorized as very high priority for a new park that would create nearby equitable access
- Medium: areas categorized as high priority for a new park that would create nearby equitable access
- Low: areas categorized as moderate priority for a new park that would create nearby equitable access

Map 11. Sub-Map 6: Public Trails and Vistas Priority Model.



Priority Mapping Data and Methodology References

Sub-Map 1: Conservation Corridors

Adjacency to Protected Lands

- The Nature Conservancy's SC Protected Lands
- Parcel Data - Accessed via individual county
- DHEC's Ecoregions

Important Lands for the Military

- United States Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Partnership Opportunity Areas & Sentinel Landscapes
- Parcel Data - Accessed via individual county

Priority Corridors

- The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Coastal Sites
- The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Landscapes
- Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS)'s Southeast Conservation Blueprint – Blueprint Priority
- Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS)'s Southeast Conservation Blueprint – Hubs and Corridors

Sub-Map 2: Ecological Conservation Priorities

Ecological Resiliency

- The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Coastal Sites
- The Nature Conservancy's Resilient and Connected Landscapes
- Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS)'s Southeast Conservation Blueprint – Blueprint Priority

State Species of Concern

- South Carolina Natural Heritage Program's Element Occurrence Data
- Green Infrastructure Center Inc.'s Habitat Cores

Species of Interest Suitable Habitat

- South Carolina Natural Heritage Program's Species Suitability Models

Sub-Map 3: Sustainable Forestry

Distance to Mills

- South Carolina Forestry Commission's Proximity to Mills (2024 Update)

Mill Closure Impact

- South Carolina Forestry Commission's Proximity to Mills (2023 and 2024 Updates)

Managed Timber

- United States Geological Surveys – GAP/LANDFIRE National Terrestrial Ecosystems' Managed Timber

Carbon Estimates

- Williams et al.'s Forest Carbon Stocks and Fluxes from the NFCMS, Conterminous USA, 1990-2010 (2021b) – accessed via The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Land Mapping Tool

Sub-Map 4: Sustainable Agriculture

Soil Drainage

- United States Department of Agriculture - Forest Service's Soil Drainage

Productivity, Versatility, and Resiliency of Agricultural Lands

- American Farmland Trust's Productivity, Versatility, and Resiliency of Agricultural Lands
- National Resources Conservation Service's Prime Farmland Soils

Sub-Map 5: Water Resources

Forests to Faucets

- United States Department of Agriculture - Forest Service's National Forests to Faucets

Flood-focused Priority Conservation Model

- South Carolina Office of Resilience's Flood-focused Priority Conservation Model

Water Quality Protection

- South Carolina Department of Natural Resources - Hydrography Section's Recharge Estimation using the Soil Water Balance Model
- South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control's Source Water Protection Areas
- South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control's Groundwater Protection Zones
- South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control's Outstanding Resource Waters
- Parcel Data - Accessed via individual county

Sub-Map 6: Public Trails and Vistas

Scenic Vistas – Roads and Trails

- South Carolina Department of Transportation’s Scenic Byways
- East Coast Greenway Alliance’s East Coast Greenway
- Rails-to-Trails Conservancy’s Rails to Trails
- Palmetto Conservation Foundation’s Palmetto Trail
- South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism’s SC Trails
- United States Geological Survey’s Elevation Data
- U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service and U.S. Department of the Interior’s Landscape Fire and Resource Management Planning Tools Existing Vegetation Height

Scenic Vistas – Waterways

- South Carolina Department of Natural Resource’s Scenic Rivers
- Paddle SC’s Waterways
- United States Geological Survey’s Elevation Data
- U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service and U.S. Department of the Interior’s Landscape Fire and Resource Management Planning Tools Existing Vegetation Height

Proximity to People

- United States Census Bureau’s 2020 Census Block Boundaries

Potential of Urbanization

- North Carolina State University – Center for Geospatial Analysis’s FUTure Urban-Regional Environment Simulation (FUTURES) v2 Model

Equitable Access to Potential Parks

- Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy (SECAS)’s Equitable Access to Potential Parks

Appendix A - Table of Conservation Priority Area by County

County	County Total Acres	Medium and High Priority Conservation Acres	% County Area	Current Protected Acres	% County Area	All Developed Land Cover Acres	% County Area
Abbeville	314,254	134,749	43	56,673	18	22,928	7
Aiken	685,405	372,675	54	105,012	15	82,669	12
Allendale	262,145	146,697	56	61,313	23	12,475	5
Anderson	458,022	114,676	25	46,515	10	97,563	21
Bamberg	252,371	152,258	60	9,205	4	15,593	6
Barnwell	352,286	134,968	38	121,937	35	21,889	6
Beaufort	356,476	319,442	90	104,845	29	63,045	18
Berkeley	707,622	364,719	52	316,728	45	78,012	11
Calhoun	244,873	189,057	77	22,041	9	17,167	7
Charleston	585,063	273,535	47	284,261	49	101,971	17
Cherokee	251,369	98,175	39	4,237	2	34,240	14
Chester	370,698	239,709	65	26,836	7	24,473	7
Chesterfield	510,089	257,760	51	105,261	21	40,507	8
Clarendon	392,962	210,637	54	56,077	14	27,727	7
Colleton	669,153	485,844	73	135,795	20	34,361	5
Darlington	358,765	185,621	52	19,903	6	38,313	11
Dillon	259,070	129,224	50	4,583	2	21,080	8
Dorchester	361,874	258,102	71	67,337	19	43,801	12
Edgefield	320,027	242,530	76	40,132	13	22,353	7
Fairfield	437,680	275,387	63	24,389	6	23,158	5
Florence	510,584	298,916	59	9,026	2	61,711	12
Georgetown	520,744	362,128	70	144,413	28	44,595	9
Greenville	504,179	195,521	39	65,719	13	156,885	31
Greenwood	290,107	157,855	54	32,021	11	36,927	13
Hampton	358,476	247,240	69	80,501	22	18,505	5
Horry	723,668	500,328	69	64,954	9	128,994	18
Jasper	414,967	315,775	76	93,024	22	22,270	5
Kershaw	464,457	307,978	66	24,131	5	43,848	9
Lancaster	349,475	230,808	66	14,619	4	39,966	11
Laurens	454,983	216,326	48	34,619	8	46,578	10
Lee	262,280	102,846	39	13,717	5	16,413	6
Lexington	445,920	256,114	57	3,996	1	112,519	25
Marion	312,538	215,787	69	43,666	14	24,173	8
Marlboro	306,942	185,914	61	9,915	3	21,291	7
McCormick	231,029	101,026	44	142,507	62	14,875	6
Newberry	402,892	260,109	65	68,726	17	30,052	7
Oconee	402,320	123,419	31	131,375	33	57,096	14

Orangeburg	707,314	483,382	68	33,519	5	64,483	9
Pickens	318,080	129,669	41	62,108	20	56,241	18
Richland	483,431	283,995	59	119,000	25	113,993	24
Saluda	289,625	210,766	73	8,412	3	19,841	7
Spartanburg	517,405	191,226	37	13,616	3	133,493	26
Sumter	432,291	225,969	52	100,615	23	50,738	12
Union	328,320	180,564	55	73,975	23	20,625	6
Williamsburg	597,227	399,834	67	47,540	8	32,727	5
York	435,719	229,106	53	28,643	7	86,530	20
TOTALS*	19,215,176	10,998,366		3,077,437		2,278,694	

*These totals do not include acreage from open water, so the numbers may be slightly less than the total area given elsewhere.

APPENDIX B

South Carolina General Assembly
123rd Session, 2019-2020

H. 5125

STATUS INFORMATION

General Bill

Sponsors: Reps. Cogswell, Sottile, Clary, McCoy, Hyde, Davis, B. Newton, W. Newton, Moore, Stavrinakis, Brown, Willis, Ott, Anderson, Elliott, Wheeler, Cobb-Hunter, Bennett, B. Cox and Henegan

Document Path: l:\council\bills\df\13014cz20.docx

Companion/Similar bill(s): 1024

Introduced in the House on February 11, 2020

Currently residing in the House Committee on **Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs**

Summary: SC Thirty-by-Thirty Conservation Act

HISTORY OF LEGISLATIVE ACTIONS

Date	Body	Action Description with journal page number
2/11/2020	House	Introduced and read first time (House Journal-page 8)
2/11/2020	House	Referred to Committee on Agriculture, Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs (House Journal-page 8)
2/12/2020	House	Member(s) request name added as sponsor: Cobb-Hunter, Bennett
2/13/2020	House	Member(s) request name added as sponsor: B.Cox
3/4/2020	House	Member(s) request name added as sponsor: Henegan

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VERSIONS OF THIS BILL

[2/11/2020](#)

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8

9 **A BILL**

10

11 TO AMEND THE CODE OF LAWS OF SOUTH CAROLINA,
12 1976, BY ADDING CHAPTER 61 TO TITLE 48 SO AS TO
13 ENACT THE "SOUTH CAROLINA THIRTY-BY-THIRTY
14 CONSERVATION ACT", TO ESTABLISH THE GOAL OF
15 PROTECTING THIRTY PERCENT OF THE STATE BY 2030,
16 TO DEFINE NECESSARY TERMS, TO ESTABLISH THE
17 THIRTY-BY-THIRTY INTERAGENCY TASKFORCE AND TO
18 PROVIDE FOR THE MEMBERSHIP OF THE TASKFORCE, TO
19 REQUIRE THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION
20 OF PLANS TO PROTECT THE LAND AND WATERS OF THIS
21 STATE AND TO REQUIRE THE SUBMISSION OF A
22 PROPOSED PLAN WITHIN A CERTAIN TIME PERIOD.

23

24 Whereas, rapid land development in South Carolina has led to the
25 loss of forests, farmlands, wildlife habitats, biodiversity,
26 outstanding natural areas, beaches, and public areas for outdoor
27 recreation and has impacted the health of the state's streams, rivers,
28 wetlands, estuaries, and bays, all of which impacts the quality of life
29 of the State's current and future citizens and may jeopardize the
30 well-being of the State's environment and economy if not addressed
31 appropriately; and

32

33 Whereas, this same rapid land development has also led to the loss
34 of historical and archaeological sites that embody the heritage of the
35 State; and

36

37 Whereas, this same rapid land development is occurring across the
38 United States and across the world; and

39

40 Whereas, scientists have documented this rapid loss of natural area
41 and wildlife, including the loss of 1,500,000 acres of natural area in
42 the United States per year; the loss of 2,900,000,000, or twenty-nine

1 percent, of North American birds since 1970; threats to approximately 12,000 plant and animal species in the United States, all of which are in need of proactive conservation efforts; and the loss of one-half of freshwater and saltwater wetlands in the contiguous forty-eight states; and

7 Whereas, scientists have recommended conserving and protecting
8 thirty percent of the land and thirty percent of the ocean in each
9 country by 2030 in order to address the deterioration of natural
10 systems, loss of biodiversity, and rapid land development; and

11

12 Whereas, national leaders have introduced measures to commit the
13 United States to protecting thirty percent of its lands and oceans by
14 2030; and

15

16 Whereas, in order to support national efforts and provide state
17 leadership to address the deterioration of natural systems, loss of
18 biodiversity, and rapid land development, South Carolina must
19 establish a bold goal for the amount of land to be protected by 2030.

20 Now, therefore,

21

22 Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of South
23 Carolina:

24

25 SECTION 1. This act is known and may be cited as the "South
26 Carolina Thirty-By-Thirty Conservation Act".

27

28 SECTION 2. Title 48 of the 1976 Code is amended by adding:

29

“CHAPTER 61

31

South Carolina Thirty-By-Thirty Conservation Act

33

34 Section 48-61-100. For the purposes of this chapter:

35

36 protecting thirty percent of the land and water of this State.
37 (2) 'Protect' or 'protection' means the establishment of

38

such that their natural character, resources, and functions are preserved for current and future generations.

41

42 Taskforce established by this chapter.

[5125]

2

1 (4) ‘Thirty percent of the State’ means thirty percent of the
2 real property, including highlands and wetlands of any description,
3 within the State of South Carolina.

4
5 Section 48-61-200. It is the goal of the State of South Carolina
6 to protect thirty percent of the State by no later than 2030.

7
8 Section 48-61-300. (A) There is established the
9 Thirty-By-Thirty Interagency Taskforce, consisting of the Director
10 of the Department of Natural Resources, the Director of the South
11 Carolina Conservation Bank, and the Director of the Department of
12 Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

13 (B) The taskforce shall coordinate with state agencies to identify
14 and implement measures to achieve the conservation goal.

15 (C) The taskforce shall track progress toward achieving the
16 conservation goal and report the progress to the General Assembly
17 by July first of each year.

18

19 Section 48-61-400. (A) The head of each state agency shall
20 develop and implement a plan for actions to be taken by the state
21 agency, consistent with the state agency’s mission, to achieve the
22 conservation goal in combination with other state agencies. Each
23 state agency’s plan shall include actions that will make significant
24 and rapid progress toward meeting the conservation goal and shall
25 include the consideration of:

26 (1) support for private land protection. In recognition of the
27 longstanding conservation traditions shared by the state’s farmers
28 and private landowners, state agency plans must fully support
29 private property rights and develop recommendations that help the
30 state’s private landowners conserve wildlife, waters, and natural
31 areas on their lands; and

32 (2) a diversity of policies and programs. In recognition of the
33 wide-ranging racial, income, and cultural diversity of the State, state
34 agency plans must take all reasonable steps to ensure that state
35 agency plans and the policies and programs resulting from state
36 agency plans provide meaningful and lasting benefits to
37 communities that reflect the diversity of the State.

38 (B) The head of the state agency shall review and revise the plan
39 to ensure that it is sufficient to achieve the conservation in
40 combination with the plans of the other state agencies no less than
41 every twenty-four months. The head of each state agency shall
42 include the conclusion of each review and any revised plan resulting
43 from the review in the next annual public report.

1 (C) No later than July first of each year, each state agency shall
2 issue a public report from the preceding calendar year of its plan
3 including any revisions to the plan, actions taken by the state agency
4 pursuant to the plan, and the effects of such actions.”

5

6 SECTION 3. (A) No later than nine months after the date of
7 enactment of this act, the head of each state agency shall submit his
8 proposed plan pursuant to Section 48-61-400, as added by this act,
9 to the Thirty-By-Thirty Interagency Taskforce for review and
10 comment. The Thirty-By-Thirty Interagency Taskforce shall:

11 (1) evaluate the sufficiency of each proposed plan
12 individually, and in combination with the proposed plans of other
13 state agencies to achieve the conservation goal and to address the
14 considerations identified pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 61,
15 Title 48; and

16 (2) provide, no later than ninety days after receiving the
17 proposed plan of a state agency, written recommendations to the
18 state agency regarding whether the plan is individually and in
19 combination with the proposed plans of other state agencies
20 sufficient to achieve the conservation goal and address the
21 considerations identified pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 61,
22 Title 48.

23 (B) Upon the request of a state agency, the Thirty-By-Thirty
24 Interagency Taskforce shall provide technical assistance in
25 developing or revising a plan.

26 (C) After the head of each state agency considers comments and,
27 as appropriate, revises a proposed plan, and no later than twelve
28 months after the date of enactment of this act, the head of each state
29 agency shall submit to the General Assembly:

30 (1) a plan developed pursuant to Chapter 61, Title 48 that, as
31 appropriate, incorporates revisions to the proposed plan to address
32 the recommendations provided by the Thirty-By-Thirty Interagency
33 Taskforce;

34 (2) the recommendations provided by the Thirty-By-Thirty
35 Interagency Taskforce; and

36 (3) the recommendations of the state agency on any additional
37 authority or funding, if any, that would be helpful for the state
38 agency, in combination with the other state agencies, to achieve the
39 conservation goal.

40 (D) Beginning no later than eighteen months after the date of
41 enactment of this act, the head of each state agency shall implement
42 the plan of the state agency.

43

1 SECTION 4. If any section, subsection, paragraph, subparagraph,
2 sentence, clause, phrase, or word of this act is for any reason held to
3 be unconstitutional or invalid, then such holding shall not affect the
4 constitutionality or validity of the remaining portions of this act, the
5 General Assembly hereby declaring that it would have passed this
6 act and each and every section, subsection, paragraph,
7 subparagraph, sentence, clause, phrase, and word thereof,
8 irrespective of the fact that any one or more other sections,
9 subsections, paragraphs, subparagraphs, sentences, clauses, phrases,
10 or words hereof may be declared to be unconstitutional, invalid, or
11 otherwise ineffective.

12

13 SECTION 5. This act takes effect upon approval by the Governor.

14 -----XX-----

15

APPENDIX C

From: Duncan, Ben <ben.duncan@scor.sc.gov>
Sent on: Friday, June 27, 2025 6:39:38 PM
To: Roland Franklin <RolandFranklin@schouse.gov>
Subject: RE: [External] South Carolina Conservation Bank Oversight Study

Roland, this recommendation would work well with the ongoing collaboration between the two agencies.

Ben



Benjamin I. Duncan II
Chief Resilience Officer
South Carolina Office of Resilience
632 Rosewood Drive, Columbia, SC 29201
(803) 608-9079
scor.sc.gov

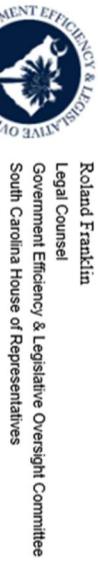
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From: Roland Franklin <RolandFranklin@schouse.gov>
Sent: Friday, June 27, 2025 2:24 PM
To: Duncan, Ben <ben.duncan@scor.sc.gov>
Cc: Lewis Carter <LewisCarter@schouse.gov>
Subject: [External] South Carolina Conservation Bank Oversight Study

Ben,

The Economic Development, Transportation and Natural Resources Subcommittee of the House Government Efficiency and Legislative Oversight Committee is currently conducting an oversight review of the South Carolina Conservation Bank. One of the potential study report recommendations is to increase the Bank's board from 17 to 18 members by adding the Chief Resilience Officer of the South Carolina Office of Resilience as an ex officio member. Please let me know if you have any concerns or objections to this possible recommendation.

Roland



Roland Franklin
Legal Counsel
Government Efficiency & Legislative Oversight Committee
South Carolina House of Representatives
803-212-6810 | RolandFranklin@schouse.gov

ENDNOTES

¹ S.C. Conservation Bank FY 2024 Accountability Report at 1; June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:03:56-00:04:41.

² S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/facts> (last visited Sept. 4, 2025).

³ Mar. 19, 2025 video presentation at 00:31:56-00:32:41; S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/facts> (last visited Aug. 5, 2025).

⁴ S.C. Dep’t of Agric., *available at* <https://agriculture.sc.gov/about/> (last visited Aug. 5, 2025).

⁵ In an attempt to reduce the amount of agricultural acreage lost to development, on March 11, 2024, South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster signed into law the Working Agricultural Lands Preservation Act which, among other things, established the Working Farmland Protection Fund within the SCCB to help landowners preserve working agricultural land through voluntary conservation easements. See <https://governor.sc.gov/news/2024-04/gov-henry-mcmaster-signs-working-agriculture-lands-preservation-act-law> (last visited Sept. 12, 2025). Under the Act, the fund “must be used by the bank only for the purpose of awarding grants to eligible trust fund recipients for the purpose of interests in farmland in which a landowner derives at least fifty percent of his income.” S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-150(B) (Supp. 2024).

⁶ U.S. Dep’t of Def., *available at* https://www.repi.mil/Portals/44/Documents/StatePackages/SouthCarolina_ALLFacts.pdf (last visited Aug. 5, 2025).

⁷ Mar. 19, 2025 video presentation 01:18:03—01:19:27.

⁸ See www.beaufortcountysc.gov/news/2025/05/conservation-easement-protects-essex-farms-in-perpetuity.html (last visited Aug. 13, 2025).

⁹ The purpose of the Beaufort County Green Space Program “is to preserve open space, to protect critical and natural resources, and/or to provide land for recreation. It allows for the purchase of development rights and fee simple interest in lands that are threatened by development, which, if it occurs, will have detrimental effects on land use patterns, traffic, public safety, stormwater runoff, water quality or other conservation objectives.” See <https://www.beaufortcountysc.gov/topics/green-space-program/index.html> (last visited Aug. 20, 2025).

¹⁰ June 6, 2025 slide presentation, p. 68 *available at* <https://www.scstatehouse.gov/CommitteeInfo/HouseLegislativeOversightCommittee/AgencyWebpages/ConservationBank/meetings/Meeting%20Packet%202006.05.25.pdf> (last visited November 21, 2025).

¹¹ See www.beaufortcountysc.gov/news/2025/05/conservation-easement-protects-essex-farms-in-perpetuity.html (last visited Aug. 13, 2025).

¹² Mar. 19, 2025 video presentation 01:18:03—01:19:27.

¹³ U.S. Dep’t of Def., *available at* https://www.repi.mil/Portals/44/Documents/StatePackages/SouthCarolina_ALLFacts.pdf (last visited Aug. 5, 2025).

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/> (last visited Aug. 5, 2025).

¹⁶ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:24:47—00:26:07. Indeed, by law the SCCB “may not hold or possess any interest in land or other interest in real property, except for mortgage interests as security for loans made from the trust fund . . . and leasehold interests in office space secured for bank operations and staff.” S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-80(B) (2008).

¹⁷ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:23:10—00:24:29; S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-50(A) (Supp. 2024).

¹⁸ See <https://legalclarity.org/what-is-a-fee-simple-title-in-real-estate/> (last visited Aug. 6, 2025). “Fee simple ownership is described as holding a ‘bundle of rights’ . . . which includes several distinct rights” including the right of possession, the right of control, the right of exclusion, the right of enjoyment, and the right of disposition. *Id.*

¹⁹ S.C. Farm Bureau, *available at* <https://www.scfb.org/conservation-easements-101> (last visited Aug. 13, 2025). “In legal terms, it is the granting of the conservation values of a property to a land trust so that they may protect and steward those values along with the landowner. Activities that impair those values, such as development, become permanently restricted while most private uses are still allowed.” *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.* at 87 (citing S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-80(K); § 48-59-100).

²¹ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 01:17:48-01:19:44.

²² *Id.*

²³ Open Space Inst., *available at* <https://www.openspaceinstitute.org/news/beech-hill> (last visited Aug. 13, 2025).

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ The Dorchester County Greenbelt Program is an initiative “aimed at preserving natural areas, protecting wildlife habitats, promoting sustainable land use, and enhancing quality of life for residents. The program funds the acquisition and preservation of greenspaces and supports projects that align with these goals.” See <https://www.dorchestercountysc.gov/home/showpublisheddocument/24831/638622572590670000> (last visited Aug. 13, 2025). “The Greenbelt Program is funded by \$35,000,000 allocated by the 2022 Dorchester County One-Cent Sales and Use Tax Referendum.” *Id.*

²⁶ The Summerville Journal Scene, *available at* https://www.postandcourier.com/journal-scene/community-news/1-644-acres-preserved-through-public-private-effort/article_9d8910c8-5698-4ac4-97fd-f65077068549.html (last visited Aug. 13, 2025).

²⁷ The Nature Conservancy, *available at* <https://www.nature.org/en-us/newsroom/lowlands-conservation-easement/> (last visited Aug. 13, 2025).

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/facts> (last visited Sept. 4, 2025).

³² June 6, 2025 video presentation at 01:17:48-01:19:44 (“[B]uying land outright is a lot more expensive than buying easements.”).

³³ S.C. Code Ann. § 12-6-3515 (2014).

³⁴ “Donations of land for conservation and conservation easements are typically made to nonprofit conservation organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited (Wetlands America Trust) and the Lowcountry Open Land Trust.” Scott Barnes and Chip Campsen, South Carolina Conservation Incentives Act: An Innovative Approach to Conservation, *available at* <https://des.sc.gov/sites/des/files/docs/HomeAndEnvironment/Docs/ModelOrdinances/SCExamples/SCConservationIncentivesAct.pdf> (last visited Aug. 7, 2025).

³⁵ S.C. Dep’t of Revenue, *available at* <https://dor.sc.gov/resources-site/lawandpolicy/Documents/SCTIED-2021-Chapter%202-PartF.pdf> (last visited Aug. 7, 2025).

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 01:13:44-01:14:34.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 01:51:21-01:52:20.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² The ex officio members, who serve without voting privileges, include the Chairman of the Board for the Department of Natural Resources, the Chairman of the South Carolina Forestry Commission, the Commissioner of Agriculture, the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Transportation, and the Director of the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, or their designees. S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-40(A)(1) (Supp. 2024).

⁴³ Three members are appointed by the Governor from the State at large; four members are appointed by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, “one each from the Third, Fourth, and Sixth Congressional Districts and one member from the State at large”; and four members are appointed by the President of the Senate, “one each from the First, Second, Fifth, and Seventh Congressional Districts.” S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-40(A)(2), (3), (4) (Supp. 2024). “In making their respective appointments to the board, the Governor, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and President of the Senate shall take all reasonable steps to ensure that the members of the board reflect the state’s racial and gender diversity.” S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-40(B)(1) (Supp. 2024).

⁴⁴ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-40(B)(2) (Supp. 2024).

⁴⁵ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-40(C) (Supp. 2024). Members may, however, “receive the mileage, subsistence, and per diem allowed by law for members of state boards, committees and commissions.” *Id.*

⁴⁶ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-40(C) (Supp. 2024).

⁴⁷ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:43:57—00:45:01.

⁴⁸ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:23:10—00:24:29.

⁴⁹ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:43:57-00:45:44. Two of the Governor’s at-large seats are vacant, along with the Senate’s 5th Congressional District seat and the House’s 3rd Congressional District seat. In addition, the Senate’s 1st Congressional District seat expired on July 1, 2024, and that member continues to serve in holdover status.

⁵⁰ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-50(C)(1) (Supp. 2024).

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-50(B), (C)(1) (Supp. 2024).

⁵³ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:43:57—00:45:01.

⁵⁴ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-50(B), (C)(1) (Supp. 2024).

⁵⁵ See https://admin.sc.gov/sites/admin/files/Documents/OED/State_Employees_by_Agency.pdf (last visited Aug. 6, 2025).

⁵⁶ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-50(B)(5) (Supp. 2024).

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/sccb-statewide-priorities> (last visited Aug. 13, 2025).

⁶⁰ *Id.* See also **Appendix A**.

⁶¹ See S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* https://irp.cdn-website.com/4adb4cdb/files/uploaded/SCCB_Priority_Mapping_Report_July2024.pdf at 4 (last visited Aug. 14, 2025).

⁶² See June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:11:25—00:12:54.

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 00:12:54—00:13:31.

⁶⁵ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-70(E)(1)-(5) (Supp. 2024).

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ Amanda B. Turner, *The South Carolina Conservation Bank: A Commitment to Conservation*, 18 Se. Envtl. L.J. 81, 88-89 (2009).

⁶⁸ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:18:12—00:18:20. (“[W]e do real estate. . . . And we’re really good at real estate.”).

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *Id.* at 00:16:55—00:18:12.

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² June 6, 2025 video presentation at 01:59:24—02:00:13.

⁷³ *Id.* at 00:16:55—00:18:12.

⁷⁴ *Id.* at 00:19:08—00:19:49.

⁷⁵ *Id.* at 00:24:47—00:26:07. (“I think it is very important we do not work with landowners who do not want to work with us. We only work with voluntary landowners who want that outcome.”).

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ These include the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, the South Carolina Forestry Commission, and the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism. S.C. Code Ann. § 48-49-30(4)(a) (Supp. 2024).

⁷⁸ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-49-30(4)(b), (c) (Supp. 2024).

⁷⁹ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-49-30(4)(d) (Supp. 2024).

⁸⁰ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 02:19:49-02:21:04.

⁸¹ *Id.* at 00:27:47-00:28:20.

⁸² *Id.* at 02:19:49-02:21:04.

⁸³ *Id.*

⁸⁴ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:28:20-00:29:03; 01:14:45-01:15:45.

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ See FY 2024 Proviso 117.182.

⁸⁸ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 02:12:15-02:13:21.

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 02:13:22-02:14:28.

⁹⁰ *Id.*

⁹¹ Mar. 19, 2025 video presentation at 01:02:02—01:02:46.

⁹² June 6, 2025 video presentation at 02:51:22-02:53:18.

⁹³ S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/grant-application-instructions> (last visited Aug. 7, 2025).

⁹⁴ See <https://wpde.com/news/local/1800-acres-protected-black-river-initiative-andrews-georgetown-county-recreational-water-trail-revitalization-efforts-south-carolina-conservation-bank-open-space-institute-boeing-november-20-2023> (last visited Sept. 9, 2025).

⁹⁵ See <https://www.openspaceinstitute.org/news/south-carolina-governor-henry-mcmaster-lauds-growing-public-private-partnerships-acquisition-of-future-black-river-state-park-site-in-andrews-sc> (last visited Sept. 9, 2025).

⁹⁶ See June 6, 2025 video presentation at 02:47:21-02:47:41.

⁹⁷ S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/> (last visited Aug. 20, 2025).

⁹⁸ *Id.*

⁹⁹ Naturaland Trust, *available at* <https://www.naturalandtrust.org/dalzell-bay> (last visited Aug. 25, 2025).

¹⁰⁰ Lowcountry Land Trust, *available at* <https://lowcountrylandtrust.org/land-conservation/cooler-family-strengthens-ace-basin-with-561-acre-easement/> (last visited Aug. 20, 2025).

¹⁰¹ S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/> (last visited Aug. 20, 2025).

¹⁰² Greenville Cnty. Historic & Natural Res. Trust, *available at* <https://www.gchnrt.org/projects/pearl-bottoms> (last visited Aug. 20, 2025).

¹⁰³ S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/> (last visited Aug. 20, 2025).

¹⁰⁴ S.C. Farm Bureau Land Trust, *available at* <https://www.scfb.org/articles/south-carolina-farm-bureau-land-trust-celebrated-its-first-birthday-eight-easements> (last visited Aug. 20, 2025).

¹⁰⁵ *Id.*

¹⁰⁶ S.C. Conservation Bank, *available at* <https://www.sccbank.sc.gov/> (last visited Aug. 20, 2025).

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ *Id.*

¹⁰⁹ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:00:31-03:01:01.

¹¹⁰ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:06:27-00:06:44.

¹¹¹ *Id.*

¹¹² See **Appendix B**.

¹¹³ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 00:07:20-00:08:19.

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

¹¹⁵ *Id.* at 00:38:47-00:39:55.

¹¹⁶ *Id.* at 00:07:20-00:08:19.

¹¹⁷ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-30(d) (Supp. 2024).

¹¹⁸ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:33:18-03:34:24.

¹¹⁹ *Id.*

¹²⁰ March 19, 2025 video presentation at 01:02:02-01:02:46.

¹²¹ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:34:26-03:34:40.

¹²² *Id.* at 02:07:07-02:08:13.

¹²³ See **Appendix C**.

¹²⁴ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-50(B)(3)(d) (Supp. 2024).

¹²⁵ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:34:51-03:35:30.

¹²⁶ *Id.* at 03:35:31-03:35:58.

¹²⁷ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-80(B) (2008) (“The bank may not hold or possess any interest in land or other interest in real property, except for mortgage interests as security for loans made from the trust fund as provided for in subsection (J), and leasehold interests in office space secured for bank operations and staff.”).

¹²⁸ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:35:59-03:36:10.

¹²⁹ See S.C. Attorney Gen. Office, available at <https://www.scag.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/WestR-OS-10392-FINAL-Opinion-9-11-2019-02089154xD2C78-02091492xD2C78.pdf> (last visited Aug. 8, 2025) (finding that “a court likely would find that the South Carolina Conservation Bank . . . is not required to be named as an insured on a title insurance policy when it awards grant funds”).

¹³⁰ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:35:59-03:36:10.

¹³¹ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-80(G)(1) (2008).

¹³² See 26 U.S.C. § 170(h)(2)(C) (providing that “[f]or purposes of this subsection, the term ‘qualified real property interest’ means . . . (C) a restriction (granted in perpetuity) on the use which may be made of the real property”).

¹³³ See 26 CFR § 1.170A-14(g)(6)(i) (“If a subsequent unexpected change in the conditions surrounding the property that is the subject of a donation under this paragraph can make impossible or impractical the continued use of the property for conservation purposes, the conservation purpose can nonetheless be treated as protected in perpetuity if the restrictions are extinguished by judicial proceeding and all of the donee’s proceeds (determined under paragraph (g)(6)(ii) of this section) from a subsequent sale or exchange of the property are used by the donee organization in a manner consistent with the conservation purposes of the original contribution.”).

¹³⁴ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:36:49-03:37:52.

¹³⁵ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-100 (2008).

¹³⁶ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:38:53-03:39:30.

¹³⁷ S.C. Code Ann. § 48-59-110 (Supp. 2024) (emphasis added).

¹³⁸ June 6, 2025 video presentation at 03:39:30-03:39:40.



SC TUITION GRANTS COMMISSION OVERVIEW

MISSION



The mission of the South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission is to administer a state-funded, need-based tuition grants program for the State of South Carolina designed to assist eligible South Carolina residents with demonstrated financial need the opportunity to attend certain in-state, accredited independent colleges on a full-time enrollment basis.

This mission serves:

- To help offset the higher education costs of attending SC independent colleges for South Carolina students just as the state offsets the higher education costs of our state residents attending SC public colleges; and,
- To gain maximum usage of the available independent college facilities located in our state by assisting eligible students to afford the cost of independent colleges and thereby help in the education of our state citizenry; and,
- To preserve the dual system of public and private higher education in our state which provides healthy competition between the two sectors; and,
- To save the state tax dollars that would have to be appropriated via the automatic state per student subsidy that would go, regardless of financial need, to all independent college students if they migrated into the SC public college system; and,
- To give eligible South Carolina students a choice of attending the college that best meets their academic needs.

Information taken from SCHETGC Annual Report 2021

GRANT AWARD

For students who qualified by demonstrating financial need and by meeting the academic standards, the maximum South Carolina Tuition Grant (SCTG) for 2023-2024 is \$4,700.

The actual amount of each student's grant is determined by the following factors:

1

Family income

2

Family assets

3

Cost of the
college selected

4

Number of family
members in the
household

5

Number of
household
members attending
college

SOUTH CAROLINA HIGHER EDUCATION TUITION GRANTS COMMISSION OVERVIEW

FTEs/BUDGET FY 2022-23

Total FTEs

5



Administration

\$536,996

Total Funds



Tuition Grants

\$33,808,624

Total Funds



Information taken from Budget for FY 2022-23

STATISTICS

- Students at 21 independent colleges in South Carolina were eligible to participate in the Tuition Grants Program.
- These colleges enrolled a total of 26,922 fulltime undergraduate students.
- South Carolina residents represented nearly 65% of those full-time undergraduate students. Just over 70% of full-time undergraduate South Carolinians were eligible to receive a South Carolina Tuition Grant.

Participating Locations



17.61%

of the total award dollars went to South Carolina residents attending the five historically black colleges that participate in the program.

42.05%

of SCTG recipients, whose racial status could be determined, were minority students.

89.19%

of SCTG recipients were dependent upon their parents/guardians for financial support.

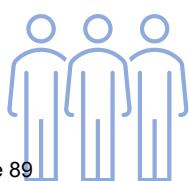


62.98%

of SCTG recipients reporting gender were female

37.02%

of SCTG recipients reporting gender were male



Information taken from SCHETGC Annual Report 2021

SOUTH CAROLINA HIGHER EDUCATION TUITION GRANTS COMMISSION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2025



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
of the
**SC HIGHER EDUCATION
TUITION GRANTS COMMISSION STUDY**

FINDINGS

During the study of the South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission (Commission), the Education and Cultural Affairs Subcommittee (Subcommittee) of the House Legislative Oversight Committee (Committee) adopts 15 findings.

Findings note information a member of the public or General Assembly may seek to know or on which they may desire to act.

FINDING 1

The South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission's purpose is to help offset the cost of attending a state independent college or university.¹

FINDING 2

The Commission currently has four FTE's but has an authorization total of five FTE's. Since the early 2000s the agency has maintained four FTE's, with a fifth authorized FTE position vacant since 2001.²

FINDING 3

The Commission is governed by eight representatives of the 21 qualifying independent colleges and universities. These representatives serve terms of three years, with membership of the commission rotating among the participating institutions. In addition, one ex officio member serves on the Commission: the chief executive officer of the State Commission on Higher Education or his designee.³

FINDING 4

Since its founding in 1970, the Commission has had four agency directors. With the exception of the second director, each director has been promoted from within the agency.⁴

FINDING 5

The Commission currently has 21 participating independent colleges and universities. To qualify, a college must be a non-profit, independent institution with its main campus and headquarters in South Carolina, and be either SACS-accredited or a bachelor's-level school chartered before 1962.⁵

FINDING 6

The value of the tuition grant has declined as the average tuition and fees of the independent colleges and universities have increased. In the 1973-1974 academic year, the grant covered approximately 81% of tuition and fees.⁶ By the 2023-2024 academic year, that percentage dropped to 16.06%.⁷

FINDING 7

The Commission has three primary funding sources: General Fund appropriations; South Carolina State Education Lottery allocations; and Children's Endowment Fund allocations.⁹ Funding from these sources totaled \$62.2 million in FY 2024.¹⁰

FINDING 8

The Commission adopted a strategic plan in 2020, which aims to maintain program integrity, expand its impact, advocate for recipients, modernize processes, and ensure top-level data security.¹¹

FINDING 9

The Commission has key partnerships with federal and state entities, which ensures students in South Carolina have adequate access to grants. Counterparts include, the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid Office, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, the South Carolina Department of Education, and high schools across the state.¹²

FINDING 10

The award amounts for the state's merit-based scholarship programs (i.e., Palmetto Fellows Scholarship¹³; LIFE Scholarship; and HOPE Scholarship), are established by statute and have not been changed in approximately 20 years. Although not administered by the Commission, stagnant scholarship awards directly affect Tuition Grant recipients at independent colleges.

FINDING 11

Since the 1994-1995 academic year, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) has been used as the official application for students applying for grants through the South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission. Any South Carolina resident that completes a FAFSA form, and lists at least one of the participating colleges and universities, is automatically reviewed for eligibility for Tuition Grants.¹⁴

FINDING 12

Grant award recipients represent all forty-six counties within the State.¹⁵

FINDING 13

Agency staff spend over 40 hours annually assisting with or hosting financial aid sessions.¹⁶

FINDING 14

The Commission markets its grant program through the following methods: (1) sharing digital flyers with high schools and supporting events organized by the Commission on Higher Education; and (2) by providing program information at the South Carolina Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (SCASFAA¹⁷) Annual Conference¹⁸, program updates to high school counselors by participating in workshops hosted by Carolinas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (CACRAO¹⁹) and South Carolina Independent School Association (SCISA²⁰).

FINDING 15

As part of the state's annual budget process, each agency must identify a 3% General Fund reduction in case strategic budget cuts are required. For the Commission, a 3% reduction in FY25-26 amounts to \$847,570.

Recommendations

During the study of the South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission (Commission), the Education and Cultural Affairs Subcommittee (Subcommittee) of the House Legislative Oversight Committee (Committee) adopts 8 recommendations.

With any study, the Committee recognizes these recommendations (e.g., continue, curtail, improve areas potentially, and/or eliminate agency programs, etc.) will not satisfy everyone nor address every issue or potential area of improvement at the agency. Recommendations are based on the agency's self-analysis requested by the Committee, discussions with agency personnel during multiple meetings, and analysis of the information obtained by the Committee. This information, including, but not limited to, the Initial Request for Information, Accountability Report, Restructuring Report, and videos of meetings with agency personnel, is available on the Committee's website.

RECOMMENDATION 1

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider establishing a study committee to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of developing a comprehensive longitudinal data system to collect, store, and track information on South Carolina students during and after their progression through the K-12 system.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Committee recommends the General Assembly consider implementing a legislative mandate requiring all South Carolina high school seniors to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Committee recommends the General Assembly consider increasing the state's merit-based scholarship award amounts to account for historical increases in tuition and include an indexing metric to adjust for future inflation (e.g., Higher Education Price Index (HEPI), etc.).

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Committee recommends the agency develop a strategic marketing plan to inform non-traditional students (e.g., adult learners, GED recipients, working professionals, and re-entry students) of the Tuition Grants program.²¹

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Committee recommends the agency review and update the agency strategic plan initiatives every 3-5 years, or as agency leadership deems necessary within that time frame.

Modernization of Laws

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly amend S.C. Code Sections 59-143-10 and 59-143-30 to clarify the allocation of Higher Education Scholarship Grant funds to the Commission on Higher Education and the South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Committee recommends the General Assembly consider amending the S.C. Code Section 59-113-20²², by deleting Subsection (f) and to permit students in good standing with a participating institution, and meeting all other requirements, to qualify for a tuition grant award.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Committee recommends the General Assembly consider amending S.C. Code Section 59-113-50, to update the definition of an independent institution of higher learning, specific to the independent institution being defined as must having been chartered before 1962.²³

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://sctuitiongrants.org/about-us/>

² Feb 27, 2025 Video Presentation (00:13:47- 00:13:58).

³ [Section 59-113-10. Higher Education Tuition Grant Commission](#)

⁴ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 36)

⁵ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 42)

⁶ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 53)

⁷ [SCETGC_ANNUAL_REPORT_2324.pdf](#) (Pg, 7)

⁹ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 61)

¹⁰ [SCETGC ANNUAL REPORT 2324.pdf](#) (Pg, 6)

¹¹ [South Carolina](#)

¹² [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 40)

¹³ [Code of Laws - Title 59 - Chapter 104 - Initiatives For Research And Academic Excellence](#)

SC Code Section 59-104-20

¹⁴ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 91)

¹⁵ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 48)

¹⁶ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 105)

¹⁷ [South Carolina Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators - SCASFAA Detailed History](#)

¹⁸ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf](#) (Pg, 107)

¹⁹ [South Carolina](#)

²⁰ [Home - South Carolina Independent School Association \(SCISA\)](#)

²¹ [FY23 Accountability Report Final.pdf](#) (Pg, 4)

²² [Code of Laws - Title 59 - Chapter 113 - Tuition Grants](#)

²³ Feb 27, 2025 Video Presentation at (00:39:15- 00:40:29)

SOUTH CAROLINA HIGHER EDUCATION TUITION GRANTS COMMISSION STUDY REPORT

2025



**STUDY of the
SC HIGHER EDUCATION
TUITION GRANTS COMMISSION**

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South Carolina House of Representatives GOVERNMENT EFFICIENCY & LEGISLATIVE OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

Chairman Jeffrey E. "Jeff" Johnson

Vice-Chair Chris Wooten

AUTHORITY

The Legislative Oversight Committee, created in December 2014, is a vehicle for oversight used by the House of Representatives. The Committee's specific task is to conduct legislative oversight studies and investigations of state agencies at least once every seven years. The Committee has the authority to conduct studies at any time of state agencies within the Committee's jurisdiction, even outside of the seven-year cycle.

VISION

For South Carolina agencies to become, and continuously remain, the most effective state agencies in the country through processes which eliminate waste and efficiently deploy resources thereby creating greater confidence in state government.

MISSION

Determine if agency laws and programs are being implemented and carried out in accordance with the intent of the General Assembly and whether they should be continued, curtailed, or eliminated. Inform the public about state agencies.



Economic Development, Transportation, & Natural Resources Subcommittee

Chairman
Travis A. Moore

Gary S. Brewer Jr.
Wendell K. Jones
Scott Montgomery
Richard B. "Blake" Sanders



Education & Cultural Affairs Subcommittee

Chairman
Timothy A. "Tim" McGinnis

Phillip Bowers
Michael Rivers
Paul B. Wickensimer
Robert Williams



Healthcare & Regulatory Subcommittee

Chairman
John R. McCravy III

Lucas Atkinson
Kathy Landing
Annie E. McDaniel
Marvin "Mark" Smith



Law Enforcement & Criminal and Civil Justice Subcommittee

Chairman
Chris Wooten

William H. Bailey
Kambrell H. Garvin
Leon Douglas "Doug" Gilliam
Jeffrey E. "Jeff" Johnson

Lewis Carter
DIRECTOR

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LEGAL COUNCIL

Cathy Greer
EXECUTIVE COORDINATOR

Charlie LaRosa
RESEARCH ANALYST
STUDY LEAD

Riley McCullough
RESEARCH ANALYST



South Carolina Higher Education TUITION GRANTS COMMISSION

HISTORY ¹

In 1970, the General Assembly passed a bill that created the Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission, an agency that was charged with the responsibility of administering the Tuition Grants Program for state residents attending in-state independent college. Governor Robert E. McNair signed the bill on May 1, 1970.

The original appropriation was \$5,000 and no awards were made the first year. In 1971-72, the first awards were made as the program aided 43 students. In its second year of awards, 1972-73, a total of 134 students received grants. Now, after over 50 years in operation, the South Carolina Tuition Grants Program is awarding in excess of \$50 million to just over 12,000 students annually. Since its inception in 1970, over 500,000 Tuition Grant awards totaling over \$1.2 billion have been made to South Carolinians attending the college of their choice.

STATUTORY AUTHORITY ²

The General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, during the 1970 session, passed Act 1191 creating the Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission. This Commission was created as a State agency charged with the responsibility for overseeing the operation of the South Carolina Tuition Grants Program.

MISSION ³

The mission of the SC Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission is to provide access and opportunity for more South Carolinians to pursue a postsecondary education by providing need-based tuition grants to students who choose an independent higher education.

PROGRAM GOALS ⁴

The primary goals associated with the agency's mission are:

To provide eligible South Carolinians with the choice to attend the college that best meets their individual academic needs.

To preserve the dual system of public and private higher education in our state, which provides healthy competition and innovation among all sectors.

To help offset the cost of attending an independent college or university, just as the state offsets the tuition costs of residents attending its public colleges.

To support optimal use of college facilities available at independent colleges and universities throughout the state.

To save the state tax dollars that would otherwise be appropriated at a higher cost, via state subsidies to public colleges, if students choosing to receive an independent higher education migrated into the public college system.

MAXIMUM GRANT AWARD ⁵

The maximum South Carolina Tuition Grant amount for all eligible full-time students will be \$5,000 for the 2025-2026 Award Year. Eligibility is based on financial need, which is calculated by taking the total Cost of Attendance (COA) of the institution the student attends and subtracting the Student Aid Index (SAI) determined by the FAFSA.

COA - SAI = NEED

ELIGIBILITY REQUIREMENTS ⁶

In order to qualify for a South Carolina Tuition Grant, students must:

01

Submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) annually by the August 1st Tuition Grants application deadline

02

Have Financial Need as demonstrated by the information provided on the FAFSA. Financial Need is determined by taking the total Cost of Attendance (COA) of your institution and subtracting the Student Aid Index (SAI) which is calculated based on the information provided on the FAFSA: (COA-SAI=Need)

03

Meet South Carolina residency requirements in accordance with the South Carolina Residency Regulations

04

Independent students or the parent(s) of dependent students, must be a legal South Carolina resident domiciled in the State for a period of not less than 12-months prior to the start of the Fall Semester

05

Enroll full-time (at least 12 eligible credit-hours per semester) at one of the 21, eligible by law, independent colleges and universities in the State, as a degree-seeking, undergraduate student who has not yet received a bachelor's degree

06

Meet all eligibility requirements for federal (Title IV) financial aid programs, including completing the Verification process, if selected. Please contact your financial aid office for information concerning your Title IV eligibility

07

Complete the required State Felony, Drug and Alcohol Affidavit annually, via your college's State Affidavit collection process

08

Meet the Tuition Grants Program's academic requirements: **First time Freshman** must have obtained a high school diploma or its equivalent (GED or Adult Education Diploma) and be fully admitted as a degree-seeking student based on the college's academic requirements for admission; **Returning students** must be meeting the college's Satisfactory Academic Progress requirements.

FINDINGS

During the study of the South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission (Commission), the Education and Cultural Affairs Subcommittee (Subcommittee) of the House Legislative Oversight Committee (Committee) adopts 15 findings.

Findings note information a member of the public or General Assembly may seek to know or on which they may desire to act.

FINDING 1

The South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission's purpose is to help offset the cost of attending a state independent college or university.⁷

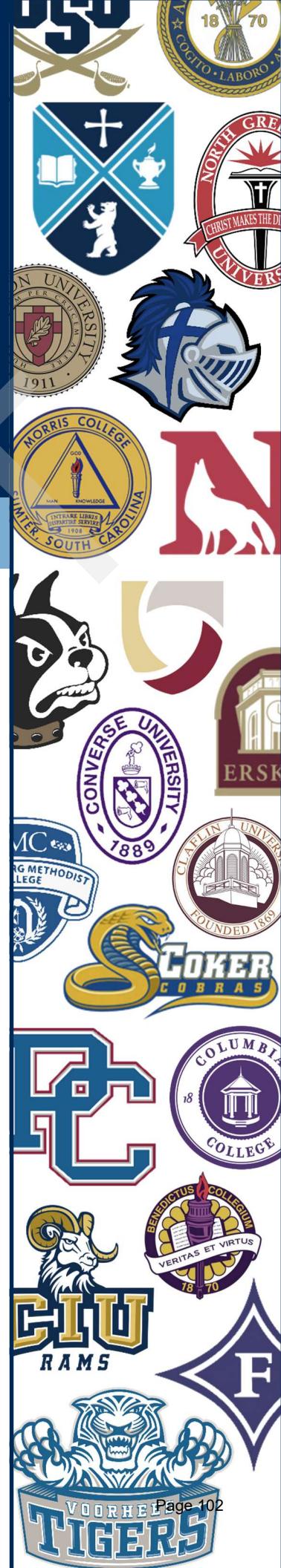
In 1970, the South Carolina General Assembly established the Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission through Act 1191,⁸ signed into law by Governor Robert E. McNair. Recognizing the importance of ensuring broad access to postsecondary education, the state created the Commission to administer a need-based tuition grant program specifically for South Carolina residents attending in-state, independent colleges and universities. The Commission's core purpose is to help offset the cost of attendance, ensuring that financial limitations do not prevent students from choosing the institution that best meets their academic goals.⁹

FINDING 2

The Commission currently has four FTEs but has an authorization total of five FTEs. Since the early 2000s the agency has maintained four FTEs, with a fifth authorized FTE position vacant since 2001.¹¹

Since the early 2000s, the agency has consistently maintained only four active staff members, with a fifth authorized full-time equivalent (FTE) position remaining vacant since 2001.¹² While the Commission has managed to sustain its operations and uphold its mission with this lean workforce, the long-term vacancy raises important questions about organizational capacity, future planning, and the ability to adapt to growing administrative and compliance demands.

The Commission's responsibilities extend beyond processing grant applications. Staff are tasked with coordinating closely with independent colleges across the state,¹³ completing statutorily required reporting,¹⁴ responding to legislative and audit inquiries,¹⁵ maintaining financial accountability, and keeping pace with changes in state and federal financial aid policy. The agency's ability to operate efficiently with only four staff members reflects a high level of commitment and resourcefulness. While a lean administrative staff can streamline operations, it may also limit the agency's capacity to achieve certain goals, such as enhancing the customer experience¹⁶



FINDING 3

The Commission is governed by eight representatives of the 21 qualifying independent colleges and universities.¹⁷ These representatives serve terms of three years, with membership of the commission rotating among the participating institutions. In addition, one ex officio member serves on the Commission: the chief executive officer of the State Commission on Higher Education or his designee.¹⁸

By incorporating rotating membership from a diverse group of institutions, the Commission draws on a wide range of perspectives, expertise, and experiences, maintaining a clear line of communication between independent colleges, state government, and the public. Through this structure, the Commission promotes collaborative leadership that supports access, affordability, and sustainability in South Carolina's private college sector.

This governance framework also balances representation from independent colleges with oversight that links to the state's higher education goals and compliance with statute.¹⁹ This structure helps the Commission remain responsive to the needs of students and stakeholders alike by supporting the Commission's ability to anticipate and respond to future challenges, implement innovative solutions, and modernize eligibility criteria to ensure that programs remain equitable and sustainable.²⁰

FINDING 4

Since its founding in 1970, the Commission has had four agency directors. With the exception of the second director, each director has been promoted from within the agency.²²

The Commission has demonstrated a pattern of leadership continuity and internal advancement throughout its history. Since 1976, the Commission has had only four executive directors over its 55 years of history. Notably, three of the four directors were promoted from within the agency, reflecting an organizational culture that values institutional knowledge and long-term commitment.

Mr. R. Laine Ligon served as the Commission's first agency head, assuming the title of Director effective July 1, 1975,²³ after previously serving as Program Coordinator. He led the agency for more than five years. Upon his retirement, Edward M. Shannon III was appointed Executive Director on September 1, 1980.²⁴ Mr. Shannon was the only director hired externally, although he came with relevant experience, having previously worked in the financial aid office of one of the state's independent colleges and universities. He went on to serve in the role for 28 years.

In October 2008, Earl L. Mayo, Jr. was promoted from Deputy Director to Executive Director following Shannon's retirement. Mr. Mayo had a total of 25 years of service with the agency and held the agency head position for over eight years.²⁵

Most recently, Katherine H. Stevens was promoted from Deputy Director to Executive Director on June 30, 2017, upon Mayo's retirement. Director Stevens has more than 15 years of service with the agency and has served as Executive Director for over seven years.²⁶

TUITION GRANTS COMMISSION MEMBERS²¹

Dr. Boone Hopkins, Chair

Converse University
Spartanburg, SC

Dr. Dwaun Warmack, Vice Chair

Claflin University
Orangeburg, SC

Dr. John Dozier, Secretary

Columbia College
Columbia, SC

Dr. Earnest McNealy

Allen University
Columbia, SC

Dr. Bruce McAllister

Bob Jones University
Greenville, SC

Dr. Pamela Richardson-Wilks

Clinton College
Rock Hill, SC

Dr. Natalie Harder

Coker University
Hartsville, SC

Dr. Elizabeth Davis

Furman University
Greenville, SC

Dr. L. Jeffrey Perez, Ex-Officio

SC Commission on Higher
Education
Columbia, SC

FINDING 5

The Commission currently has 21 participating independent colleges and universities. To qualify, a college must be a non-profit, independent institution with its main campus and headquarters in South Carolina, and be either SACS-accredited or a bachelor's-level school chartered before 1962.²⁷

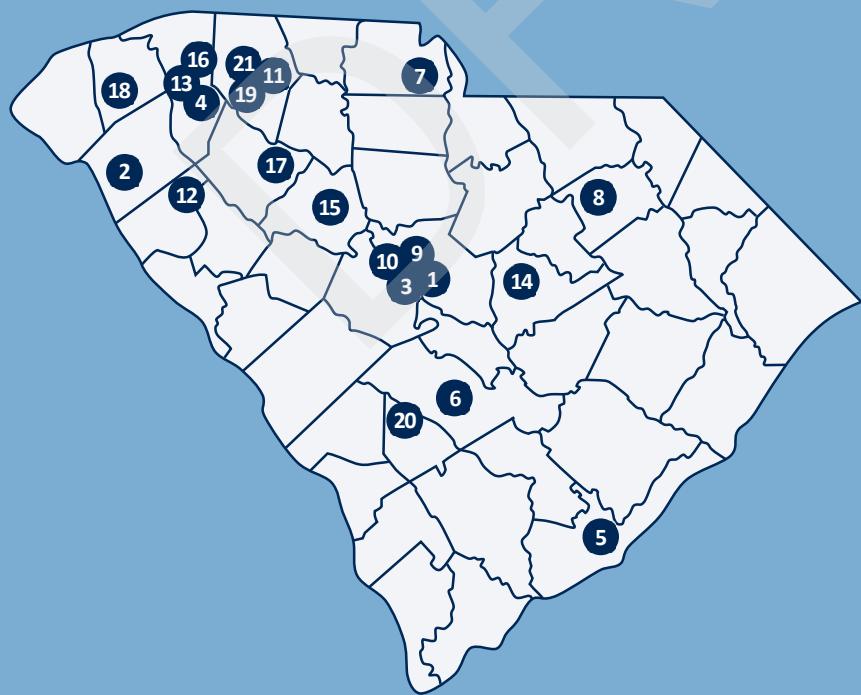
Currently, the Commission has 21 participating independent colleges and universities throughout the state.²⁸ The institutions include; Allen University, Anderson University, Benedict College, Bob Jones University, Charleston Southern University, Claflin University, Coker University, Columbia College, Columbia International University, Converse University, Erskine College, Furman University, Morris College, Newberry College, North Greenville University, Presbyterian College, Southern Wesleyan University, Spartanburg Methodist College, Voorhees University, and Wofford College.

An institution must meet certain requirements to participate in the Tuition Grants program. These criteria include: "(1) independent eleemosynary junior or senior college in South Carolina whose major campus and headquarters are located within South Carolina and which

is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools; or (2) independent bachelor's level institution chartered before 1962 whose major campus and headquarters are located within South Carolina."²⁹ These qualifications ensure that participating institutions maintain academic rigor and a commitment to serving South Carolina's higher education needs.

These criteria have allowed the Commission to build partnerships with a diverse set of colleges and universities that reflect the cultural, geographic, and academic variety of South Carolina. From longstanding liberal arts institutions to faith-based colleges and comprehensive universities, these schools provide a broad range of programs and pathways for students seeking a private college experience in the state.

INDEPENDENT COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES PARTICIPATING IN TUITION GRANTS PROGRAM³⁰



1. Allen University
2. Anderson University
3. Benedict College
4. Bob Jones University
5. Charleston Southern University
6. Claflin University
7. Clinton College
8. Coker University
9. Columbia College
10. Columbia International University
11. Converse University
12. Erskine College
13. Furman University
14. Morris College
15. Newberry College
16. North Greenville University
17. Presbyterian College
18. Southern Wesleyan University
19. Spartanburg Methodist College
20. Voorhees University
21. Wofford College

FINDING 6

The value of the tuition grant has declined as the average tuition and fees of the independent colleges and universities have increased. In the 1973-1974 academic year, the grant covered approximately 81% of tuition and fees.³¹ By the 2023-2024 academic year, that percentage dropped to 16.06%.³²

In the 1973–1974 academic year, the average Tuition Grant covered approximately 81%³³ of tuition and fees for eligible students attending private institutions. This level of coverage provided substantial financial support, making independent higher education broadly accessible to many South Carolina students. During this early period, tuition and fees were relatively low compared to current levels, and the number of students receiving grants was modest, with 3,173 awardees in 1973.³⁴ As the program progressed through the 1980s and 1990s, tuition and fees began increasing at a sharper pace.³⁵

Although Tuition Grants also increased, their growth lagged behind the rising costs of education. This imbalance caused the percentage of tuition and fees covered by the grants to decline steadily. By the 2000–2001 academic year, Tuition Grants covered just 21.25% of average tuition and fees,³⁶ representing a steep drop from earlier levels. This downward trend continued into the 21st century. From 2001 onward, Tuition Grants have covered between

11% to 17% of tuition and fees,³⁷ fluctuating annually but never approaching the coverage seen in the program's early years.

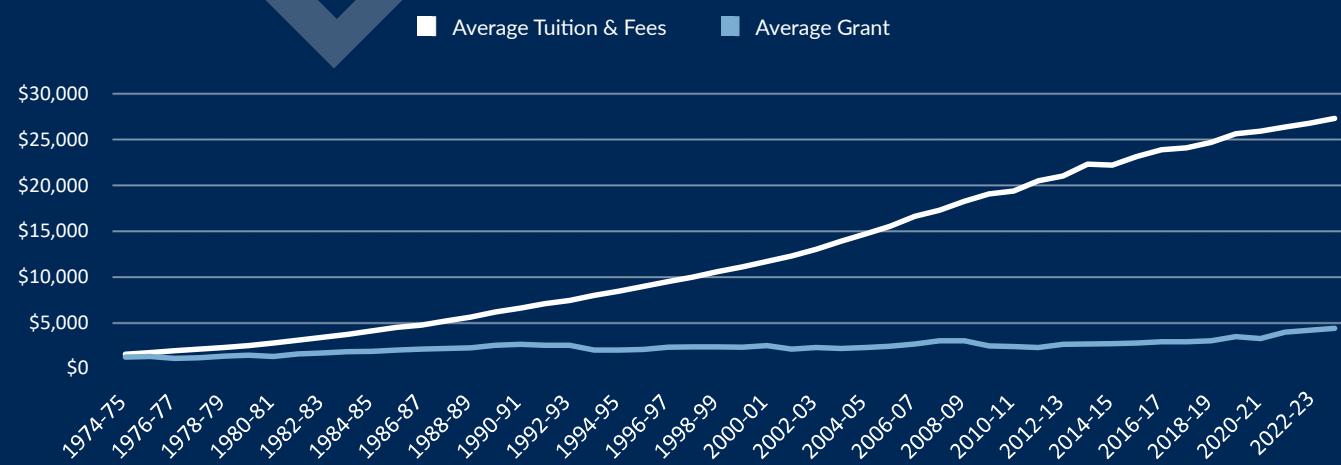
Notably, the number of students receiving Tuition Grants also increased dramatically, peaking at around 14,451 recipients in 2010 and remaining above 12,000 in recent years.³⁸ This increase in awardees underscores a growing demand for financial aid even as the grants relative value declined.³⁹ However, by the 2023–2024 academic year, the percentage of tuition and fees covered by the average Tuition Grant had declined sharply to just 16.06%.⁴⁰

Despite the rising tuition costs, Tuition Grant award amounts have remained relatively stagnant because they are tied to annual state appropriations that have not kept pace with tuition inflation. The growing gap between aid and the cost of tuition has led to greater unmet financial need for students. In some instances, students may need loans, which may limit opportunities to attend a state independent college or university.

TUITION GRANTS AWARDED PER YEAR⁴¹

2023-24	12,473
2022-23	12,036
2021-22	11,262
2020-21	12,202
2019-20	12,817
2018-19	13,534
2017-18	13,588
2016-17	13,214
2015-16	13,340
2014-15	13,346
2013-14	13,498
2012-13	13,881
2011-12	14,192
2010-11	14,451
2009-10	14,200
2008-09	12,801
2007-08	12,461
2006-07	11,735
2005-06	11,869
2004-05	12,025
2003-04	12,004
2002-03	11,586
2001-02	10,852
2000-01	10,152
1999-00	9,908
1998-99	9,800
1997-98	9,412
1996-97	9,321
1995-96	8,950
1994-95	8,428
1993-94	8,371
1992-93	6,606
1991-92	6,694
1990-91	6,816

AVERAGE TUITION & FEES VS. AVERAGE GRANT⁴²



FINDING 7

The Commission has three primary funding sources: General Fund appropriations; South Carolina State Education Lottery allocations; and Children's Endowment Fund allocations.⁴³ Funding from these sources totaled \$62.2 million in FY 2024.⁴⁴

The Commission relies on three primary sources of funding: appropriations from the South Carolina General Fund, allocations from the South Carolina Education Lottery, and contributions from the Children's Endowment Fund.⁴⁵ In Fiscal Year 2024, the total funding available from these combined sources amounted to approximately \$62.2 million.⁴⁶ However, if these appropriations were to be reduced or diverted to non-aid related purposes, the Commission would be unable to sustain recent momentum. Without replacement funding, such a shift would have immediate and severe consequences for students. Specifically, the Commission projects that the average Tuition Grant would be reduced by more than 50% per recipient.⁴⁷ A cut of this nature would significantly erode the financial support available to low- and middle-income South Carolina students attending independent institutions.⁴⁸

PROGRAM FUNDING 2023-24⁴⁹

General Fund Appropriations.....	\$27,558,624
Education Lottery Allocations	\$19,930,000
Children's Education Endowment Fund	\$14,765,740
Interest Earned for Tuition Grants	\$406,672
Total Grants Program Funding	\$62,661,036

Total Administrative Costs \$905,064*

**Total administrative costs were just 1.5% of the total agency appropriation.*

FINDING 8

The Commission adopted a strategic plan in 2020, which aims to maintain program integrity, expand its impact, advocate for recipients, modernize processes, and ensure top-level data security.⁵⁰

In 2020, the South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission adopted strategic goals to improve program accessibility, efficiency, and impact.⁵¹ The Commission began modernizing its application process by moving key forms online, allowing students to submit documents from any device and reducing delays associated with mailed forms. To strengthen legislative support, the Commission provided each General Assembly member with annual, password-protected reports showing Tuition Grant recipients and total funding by district. This transparency highlighted the program's value while safeguarding personal data under strict security protocols.⁵²

The agency has advocated for regular increases in the maximum award to enhance affordability,⁵³ especially for the neediest students, and emphasized taxpayer savings from students attending eligible independent institutions rather than public colleges. Addressing equity in state aid remained a priority, as funding for need-based grants lagged behind merit-based scholarships. The Commission also prioritized protection of personally identifiable information (PII)⁵⁴ through regular system upgrades, coordination with the Office of Technology and Information Services (OTIS), and legislative requests for cybersecurity funding.

These strategies demonstrated the Commission's efforts to expand access, improve efficiency, support equity, and protect public trust, ensuring the Tuition Grants Program continued to function as a key component of South Carolina's educational and economic framework.⁵⁵

FINDING 9

The Commission has key partnerships with federal and state entities, which ensures students in South Carolina have adequate access to grants. Counterparts include the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid Office, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, the South Carolina Department of Education, and high schools across the state.⁵⁶

The Commission has built and sustained a network of partnerships with federal agencies, state entities, and local educational institutions that collectively enhance student access to higher education funding. These relationships are central to the Commission's mission of providing need-based financial assistance to South Carolina residents attending eligible independent colleges within the state.

At the federal level, the Commission partners with the U.S. Department of Education's Federal Student Aid Office.⁵⁷ The Commission relies on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)⁵⁸ as the official application for determining Tuition Grant eligibility. This integration ensures that financial need is assessed using a nationally recognized standard, enabling accurate and timely award determinations.⁵⁹ The federal relationship also facilitates secure data sharing, compliance with federal regulations, and alignment with national financial aid policies.

At the state level, the Commission works closely with the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education (CHE)⁶⁰ and the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE)⁶¹ to strengthen the delivery of student financial aid.

Collaboration with the CHE include, partnering on outreach and advocacy events for College Goal SC,⁶² Higher Education Day⁶³ at the State House, and College and Career Decision Day,⁶⁴ to expand awareness of funding opportunities and encourage college enrollment. Engagement with SCDE provides additional data and policy coordination to support high school outreach and readiness initiatives. Through this partnership, the Commission receives a list of all K-12 public high school seniors statewide and uses this information to maintain a FAFSA Completion Portal.⁶⁵

Local partnerships, particularly with high schools, are an equally important element of the Commission's operations. The Commission maintains relationships with school counselors across all 46 counties to ensure that information on Tuition Grant eligibility, FAFSA completion, and application deadlines reach students and families in time to secure funding.⁶⁶ Through presentations, counselor training, and direct communications,⁶⁷ the Commission strengthens college-ready pathways and removes barriers to application completion, particularly for students in underserved and rural areas.

FINDING 10

The award amounts for the state's merit-based scholarship programs (i.e., Palmetto Fellows Scholarship,⁶⁸ LIFE Scholarship;⁶⁹ and HOPE Scholarship⁷⁰), are established by statute and have not been changed in approximately 20 years. Although not administered by the Commission, stagnant scholarship awards directly affect Tuition Grant recipients at independent colleges.

The Commission does not administer the state's merit-based scholarship programs,⁷¹ but the awards significantly impact students attending South Carolina's independent colleges, many of whom depend on both merit aid and Tuition Grants to finance their education. The Commission on Higher Education administers three primary merit-based scholarships.⁷² These merit-based scholarship programs include: the Palmetto Fellows Scholarship, the LIFE (Legislative Incentive for Future Excellence) Scholarship, and the HOPE Scholarship. Each is established by statute⁷³ and designed to encourage academic achievement and keep high-performing students in-state for college.

The Palmetto Fellows Scholarship⁷⁴ is awarded to students who meet high academic standards, including GPA, class

rank, and SAT/ACT criteria. The LIFE Scholarship⁷⁵ is more broadly available to students who meet certain GPA and test score criteria, or a higher GPA alone. The HOPE Scholarship⁷⁶ is a one-time award available to first-year students who do not qualify for the other two programs but still demonstrate academic promise. While these scholarships provide meaningful support, their award amounts have not been increased in nearly two decades, despite consistent growth in tuition costs. This has led to a steady decline in their relative value.

For students attending independent institutions, who often combine these scholarships with Tuition Grants to manage costs, the lack of adjustment has widened the gap between financial aid and actual college expenses.

FINDING 11

Since the 1994-1995 academic year, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)⁷⁷ has been used as the official application for students applying for grants through the South Carolina Higher Education Tuition Grants Commission. Any South Carolina resident that completes a FAFSA form, and lists at least one of the participating colleges and universities, is automatically reviewed for eligibility for Tuition Grants.⁷⁸

FAFSA is a standardized federal form used to assess a student's financial need by collecting information about the student's and their family's financial circumstances. By completing the FAFSA,⁷⁹ students are automatically considered for various forms of financial aid, including federal grants, loans, and work-study opportunities. In South Carolina, the FAFSA serves as the sole application for Tuition Grants. Any resident who completes the FAFSA and lists at least one participating South Carolina institution is automatically reviewed for eligibility.⁸⁰ This process eliminates the need for a separate state-specific application, reducing administrative burdens for both applicants and the Commission.

For the 2023–2024 academic year, the Commission awarded approximately \$55 million in Tuition Grants to over 12,000⁸¹ eligible students. The maximum grant amount for that year was set at \$4,800 per student,⁸² the highest in the program's history. These grants are available to students attending eligible independent nonprofit colleges and universities in South Carolina on a full-time basis.⁸³ By leveraging a standardized federal application, the Commission ensures consistent eligibility determinations and provides timely support to students pursuing higher education within the state.

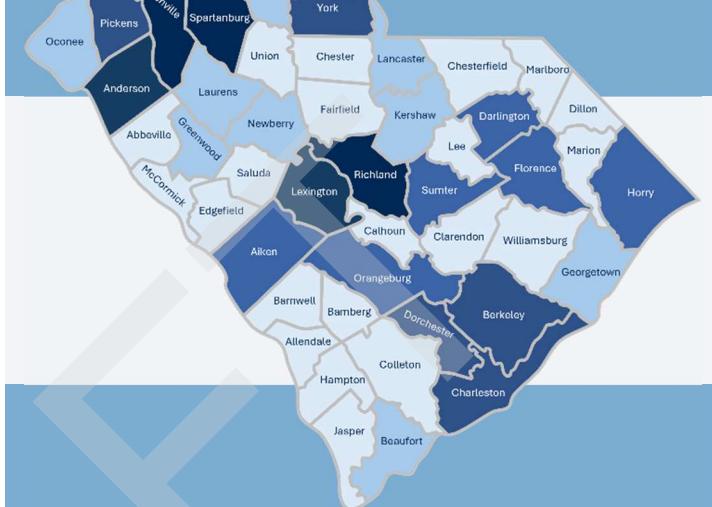
FINDING 12

Grant award recipients represent all forty-six counties within the State.⁸⁴

The statewide distribution of Tuition Grant recipients demonstrates the program's extensive reach and its role in supporting access to higher education for students across South Carolina. The Commission awarded grants to students representing all forty-six counties, including urban centers, suburban communities, and rural areas. This distribution reflects not only the geographic reach of the program but also the demographic diversity of the students served, encompassing a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, family income levels, and educational pathways.⁸⁵

By providing funding to students across the entire state, the program helps reduce financial barriers to postsecondary education, supports enrollment in independent nonprofit colleges and universities, and contributes to the development of a well-prepared and diverse workforce. The program's reach into every county also showcases its capacity to support students in areas that may have historically had limited access to higher education resources.

TUITION GRANT RECIPIENTS PER COUNTY 2023-2024⁸⁶



Abbeville	64	Greenwood	153
Aiken	222	Hampton	68
Allendale	23	Horry	301
Anderson	687	Jasper	34
Bamberg	50	Kershaw	189
Barnwell	40	Lancaster	103
Beaufort	157	Laurens	181
Berkeley	499	Lee	40
Calhoun	39	Lexington	750
Charleston	519	Marion	56
Cherokee	191	Marlboro	30
Chester	60	McCormick	13
Chesterfield	94	Newberry	168
Clarendon	88	Oconee	178
Colleton	71	Orangeburg	270
Darlington	213	Pickens	453
Dillon	76	Richland	1,034
Dorchester	547	Saluda	47
Edgefield	44	Spartanburg	1,469
Fairfield	60	Sumter	229
Florence	340	Union	66
Georgetown	123	Williamsburg	97
Greenville	1,791	York	546

FINDING 13

Agency staff spend over 40 hours annually assisting with or hosting financial aid sessions.⁸⁷

Each year, Commission staff dedicate more than 40 hours to assisting with or hosting financial aid sessions for students, parents, and school personnel.⁸⁸ These sessions, often conducted in collaboration with high schools, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, and community organizations, are designed to guide prospective college students through the complex process of applying for need-based aid.

While 40 hours may represent a modest portion of the agency's annual workload, the impact of this outreach is significant. Given the agency's small size, this level of outreach reflects a deliberate commitment to going beyond standard administrative duties. Staff members travel to schools across all 46 counties and in FY 2023-2024, the Commission engaged over 800 total stakeholders.⁸⁹ The Commission reaches many students in rural and underserved communities, offering virtual question-and-answer sessions for families unable to attend in person and delivering personalized guidance that can mean the difference between a completed application and a missed opportunity.⁹⁰ These efforts also strengthen relationships with high school counselors⁹¹ who use the agency's FAFSA Completion Portal to monitor student progress and provide targeted support when needed.

FINDING 14

The Commission markets its grant program through the following methods: (1) sharing digital flyers with high schools and supporting events organized by the Commission on Higher Education; and (2) providing program information at the South Carolina Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (SCASFAA⁹²) Annual Conference⁹³ delivering program updates to high school counselors at workshops hosted by Carolinas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (CACRAO⁹⁴) and the South Carolina Independent School Association (SCISA⁹⁵).

One of the primary methods the Commission uses to communicate information about the program is the distribution of digital flyers directly to high schools across the state.⁹⁶ These materials are designed to provide timely and accessible information about application processes, eligibility criteria, and funding availability. In addition to these digital communications, the Commission supports events organized by the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education by participating in activities intended to reach students, families, and educational stakeholders in multiple regions of the state.⁹⁷

The Commission's outreach efforts extend beyond direct communication with students. The agency actively engages with professional associations and organizations that serve educators and administrators involved in postsecondary planning.⁹⁸ For example, the Commission participates annually in the South Carolina Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (SCASFAA⁹⁹) Annual Conference, a key forum for sharing program updates, addressing questions, and providing guidance on best practices for assisting students with financial aid. Furthermore, the Commission offers program updates and guidance to high school counselors through workshops and events hosted by the Carolinas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (CACRAO¹⁰⁰) and the South Carolina Independent School Association (SCISA¹⁰¹). These efforts help ensure that counselors are well-informed and equipped to guide students in navigating the application process and understanding grant eligibility.

FINDING 15

As part of the state's annual budget process, each agency must identify a 3% General Fund reduction in case strategic budget cuts are required. For the Commission, a 3% reduction in FY25-26 amounts to \$847,570.

During the annual state budget process, agencies are required to identify a potential 3% reduction in their General Fund appropriations. This requirement ensures that agencies are prepared to implement strategic budget cuts if necessary, while maintaining oversight of critical programs and services. For the South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission, a 3% reduction in fiscal year 2025–2026 would amount to \$847,570¹⁰², based on current General Fund allocations.

The Commission's form E portion of their FY26 *Budget Plan Cost Savings and General Fund Reduction Contingency* outlines the anticipated effects of such a reduction on the Tuition Grant program¹⁰³. If enacted, the 3% cut would be applied proportionally across all student awards¹⁰⁴, resulting in an estimated decrease of approximately \$70 per recipient¹⁰⁵. This reduction would impact over 12,400 students¹⁰⁶ across South Carolina who rely on Tuition Grants to help finance their postsecondary education at eligible independent colleges and universities. Even a modest reduction of this magnitude could have a meaningful effect on students' overall financial aid packages. For many recipients, a \$70 decrease in grant funding may require the use of additional personal funds, increased reliance on student loans, or other alternative financing mechanisms, potentially contributing to higher student debt burdens..



RECOMMENDATIONS

During the study of the South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission (Commission), the Education and Cultural Affairs Subcommittee (Subcommittee) of the House Legislative Oversight Committee (Committee) adopts 7 recommendations.

With any study, the Committee recognizes these recommendations (e.g., continue, curtail, improve areas potentially, and/or eliminate agency programs, etc.) will not satisfy everyone nor address every issue or potential area of improvement at the agency. Recommendations are based on the agency's self-analysis requested by the Committee, discussions with agency personnel during multiple meetings, and analysis of the information obtained by the Committee. This information, including, but not limited to, the Initial Request for Information, Accountability Report, Restructuring Report, and videos of meetings with agency personnel, is available on the Committee's website.



RECOMMENDATION 1

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly consider establishing a study committee to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of developing a comprehensive longitudinal data system to collect, store, and track information on South Carolina students during and after their progression through the K-12 system.

The purpose of this study committee is to evaluate the feasibility and effectiveness of establishing a longitudinal framework that links data across different stages of education. This includes evaluating the collection and integration of student-level data, ensuring secure storage and privacy protections, and developing mechanisms to track student outcomes over time. By examining best practices, potential challenges, and the overall impact of similar systems in other states, the study committee would provide the General Assembly with information that either supports or rejects implementation of this system.

The following states have successfully implemented statewide longitudinal data systems:

Virginia, Kentucky, and Mississippi each operate statewide longitudinal data systems that link education and workforce data to guide research and policy. Virginia's Longitudinal Data System (VLDS¹⁰⁷) uses a model that keeps data within each agency's

firewall while enabling secure analysis through cross-agency governance. Kentucky's Longitudinal Data System (KLDS¹⁰⁸) integrates preschool, K-12, postsecondary, and workforce data under a P-20 council, with agencies retaining control of their data while collaborating on statewide reporting and research. Mississippi's SLDS centralizes education, workforce, and human services data in a clearinghouse managed by Mississippi State University's NSPARC,¹⁰⁹ overseen by a board representing all contributing agencies.

Establishing a study committee may provide a structured approach to evaluating feasibility, learning from other states' experiences, and offering actionable recommendations to the General Assembly. Ultimately, such a system could enhance data-driven policymaking, improve student outcomes, and strengthen the ability of South Carolina education agencies to support students effectively throughout their academic and professional journeys.¹¹⁰

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Committee recommends the General Assembly consider implementing a legislative mandate requiring all South Carolina high school seniors to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA¹¹¹).

The recommended mandate would align South Carolina with other states.¹¹² FAFSA completion is the gateway to determining eligibility for federal, state, and institutional aid, including need-based grants, scholarships, and work-study programs, many of which do not require repayment.

Acknowledging that FAFSA can be complex, the recommendation underscores the importance of integrating structured FAFSA support into the school environment. This support should include

the allocation of dedicated class time to ensure students receive comprehensive, hands-on assistance in completing the application.

By integrating FAFSA assistance directly into the classroom, South Carolina could ensure that all students,¹¹³ not just those with strong support systems, are equipped to access available financial resources and pursue higher education with fewer financial constraints.

STATES THAT REQUIRE FAFSA COMPLETION¹¹³

As of July 2024, 13 states require high school seniors to complete the FAFSA.



FIRST YEAR
CLASS OF 2018

Louisiana



FIRST YEAR
CLASS OF 2021

Illinois



FIRST YEAR
CLASS OF 2022

Alabama
Colorado
Texas



FIRST YEAR
CLASS OF 2024

California
Connecticut
New Hampshire



FIRST YEAR
CLASS OF 2025

Indiana
Nebraska
New Jersey
Oklahoma



FIRST YEAR
CLASS OF 2028

Kansas

RECOMMENDATION 3

The Committee recommends the General Assembly consider increasing the state's merit-based scholarship award amounts to account for historical increases in tuition and include an indexing metric to adjust for future inflation (e.g., Higher Education Price Index (HEPI), etc.).

As noted in Finding 10, the value of South Carolina's merit-based scholarship programs has continued to diminish,¹¹⁵ as tuition and fees have steadily outpaced the annual needs-based award.¹¹⁶ Over time, this imbalance has weakened the intent of these programs, which is to make higher education more affordable and attainable for South Carolina residents. Without intervention, the gap between the cost of attendance and scholarship support will continue to widen, forcing students and families to assume a greater share of the financial burden. The Committee recommends tying

future award levels to a credible inflation index that reflects the true costs of higher education.

For example, the Higher Education Price Index (HEPI)¹¹⁷ developed and maintained by the Commonfund Institute,¹¹⁸ has been a widely recognized measure of inflation for colleges and universities. HEPI is specifically designed to capture the unique expenditure patterns of higher education institutions.¹¹⁹

SOUTH CAROLINA FINANCIAL AID PROGRAMS¹¹⁹

Aid Program	Administered By	Type of Aid	FAFSA	Annual Award Amount	Information
SC Tuition Grant	Tuition Grants Commission	Primarily Need-Based	Yes	Up to \$4,800	Awarded directly by state agency
SC Need-Based Grant	Commission on Higher Education	Primarily Need-Based	Yes	Up to \$3,500	Awarded by institutions (public)
HOPE Scholarship	Commission on Higher Education	Merit-Based	No	\$2,800	Available freshman year only at 4-year colleges
LIFE Scholarship	Commission on Higher Education	Merit-Based	No	Up to \$5,000 (base)	Qualify by combination of GPA, standardized test scores, and class rank
Palmetto Fellows Scholarship	Commission on Higher Education	Merit-Based	No	Up to \$7,500 (base)	Qualify by GPA, standardized test scores, and class rank
Lottery Tuition Assistance	Commission on Higher Education	Other	Yes (or waiver)	\$75 per credit hr.	Available only at technical colleges and 2-year colleges
Workforce & Industry Needs (WINS) Scholarship	SC Technical College System	Merit-Based	Yes (or waiver)	Up to \$5,000	Available only at technical colleges; good for one credential
National Guard Assistance Program	Commission on Higher Education	Primarily Need-Based	No	Up to \$11,000	Separate application process through CHE
Teaching Fellows Program	CERRA	Service-forgivable loan	No	Up to \$6,000	Loan is forgiven if teaching service requirement is met
SC Teacher Loan	SC Student Loan	Service-forgivable loan	No	Up to \$7,500	Loan is forgiven if teaching service requirement is met

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Committee recommends the agency develop a strategic marketing plan to inform non-traditional students (e.g., adult learners, GED recipients, working professionals, and re-entry students¹²¹) of the Tuition Grants program.¹²²

While the Commission has long supported access to higher education, awareness of the program among non-traditional populations remains limited. These students often face different barriers than traditional high school graduates, including competing family and work responsibilities, financial constraints, and apprehension about returning to school after time away. A deliberate marketing effort that speaks directly to these challenges can help ensure that non-traditional students see higher education as both attainable and worthwhile.

The Commission acknowledged that while the agency does not currently have a formal system to actively recruit these students, 14 participating institutions already offer programs tailored to adult learners, including evening, weekend, and online options.¹²³ The Commission further testified that between 8 and 10 percent¹²⁴ of current Tuition Grant recipients are non-traditional or adult learners, including students in their 70s who have enrolled through flexible course offerings.¹²⁵

RECOMMENDATION 5

The Committee recommends the agency review and update the agency strategic plan initiatives every 3-5 years, or as agency leadership deems necessary within that time frame.

As noted in Finding 8, the Commission established a strategic plan in 2020. The strategic plan has served as a guiding document, outlining principles such as maintaining program integrity, advocating for Tuition Grant recipients, increasing the impact of the program, and modernizing agency processes.¹²⁶ The Commission acknowledged that the strategic plan is now approaching the point where it should be reviewed and updated.¹²⁷

The Committee recognizes the importance of ensuring that strategic initiatives remain timely, relevant, and responsive to evolving student needs, higher education trends, and state workforce priorities. To that end, the Committee recommends that the agency adopt a structured process for reviewing and updating its strategic plan every 3–5 years, with flexibility for leadership to initiate updates sooner if warranted. Incorporating a 3–5 year review cycle for strategic plan updates would ensure that the Tuition Grants Commission continues to operate with a forward-looking vision while remaining agile in addressing emerging challenges.

MODERNIZATION OF LAWS

RECOMMENDATION 6

The Committee recommends that the General Assembly amend S.C. Code Sections 59-143-10 and 59-143-30 to clarify the allocation of Higher Education Scholarship Grant funds to the Commission on Higher Education and the South Carolina Tuition Grants Commission.

Currently, section 59-143-10¹²⁸ establishes the South Carolina Children's Education Endowment, a dedicated revenue stream intended to strengthen both K-12 and higher education. By statute,¹²⁹ 30 percent of the Endowment's funds are allocated to Higher Education Scholarship Grants, while the remaining 70 percent supports Public School Facilities Assistance. Section 59-143-30 has not been applied, largely due to ambiguous language that complicates consistent interpretation and implementation.

Section 59-143-30¹³⁰ outlines how the 30 percent allocated for Higher Education Scholarship Grants is divided between independent and public colleges and universities. For independent institutions, the statute requires allocations based on

each institution's share of resident undergraduate full-time equivalent (FTE) enrollment. These funds are then subdivided, with half designated for Tuition Grants and half for Palmetto Fellows Scholarships. While the statute¹³¹ directs that the funds flow through the Commission on Higher Education and then be transferred to the Tuition Grants Commission, the current language does not explicitly define the exact mechanics of the transfer. To ensure statutory clarity, the Committee recommends striking out the language within the provisions of section 59-143-30 that reference the Palmetto Fellows Scholarship, as the Commission on Higher Education (CHE) lacks the mechanisms to track the program's distribution.

RECOMMENDATION 7

The Committee recommends the General Assembly consider amending the S.C. Code Section 59-113-20¹³² by deleting subsection (f) and to permit students in good standing with a participating institution, and meeting all other requirements, to qualify for a tuition grant award.

Currently, section 59-113-20¹³³ outlines the eligibility criteria for students seeking Tuition Grants at independent colleges in South Carolina. Among these requirements are residency, enrollment status, and satisfactory academic progress as defined by the participating institution.

However, subsection (f) of section 59-113-20 permanently disqualifies students with a felony conviction from receiving a grant, regardless of when the conviction occurred or whether the individual has since demonstrated rehabilitation.¹³⁴ This provision creates a lasting barrier for individuals who may have committed offenses in their young adult years, served their sentences, and paid their debt to

society. By maintaining a permanent prohibition, the statute may prevent these individuals from pursuing higher education, which is often a critical factor in achieving stability, gainful employment, and community reintegration.

While the statute¹³⁵ allows students with multiple alcohol or drug related misdemeanors to regain eligibility after one academic year, no such opportunity exists for individuals with felony convictions, even when they are otherwise in good standing with their institutions. As a result, the current language disproportionately hinders individuals who are actively seeking to turn their lives around through education.

RECOMMENDATION 8

The Committee recommends the General Assembly consider amending S.C. Code Section 59-113-50, to update the definition of an independent institution of higher learning, specific to the independent institution being defined as must having been chartered before 1962.¹³⁶

Section 59-113-50 states the secondary definition of an independent institution of higher learning as an “independent bachelor’s level institution chartered before 1962 whose major campus and headquarters are located within South Carolina.”¹³⁷ The Committee recommends updating the statutory language to an “independent eleemosynary bachelor’s level institution in good standing with and authorized accrediting agency whose major campus and headquarters are located within South Carolina.” This update would allow more institutions to participate in the Tuition Grants Program by eliminating the reference to a charter year, while maintaining standards expected of an independent institution of higher learning in South Carolina.

The American College of Building Arts in Charleston was founded in 2004¹³⁸ and, according to the Commission,¹³⁹ is the only institution that would otherwise qualify under the statutory criteria but is excluded solely due to the pre-1962 chartering

restriction. In 2004, the Commission on Higher Education (CHE¹⁴⁰) licensed the institution to recruit students for its Bachelor of Applied Science (four-year) and Associate of Applied Science (two-year) degrees in the building arts, programs that represent a distinctive and valuable contribution to higher education in the state.¹⁴¹

Updating the statutory language to remove the chartering year would ensure that this institution, and any others that may be established in the future, are not excluded solely based on date of charter. This would allow the Tuition Grants Program to remain aligned with South Carolina’s broader goals of supporting access to higher education, fostering workforce development, and expanding opportunities for students to pursue degrees at accredited independent institutions.

INTERNAL CHANGE

The Tuition Grants Commission has traditionally received funding from three primary sources: state General Fund appropriations, South Carolina Education Lottery revenue, and Higher Education Scholarship Grants supported by the Children's Education Endowment.

According to Sections 59-143-10 and 59-143-30 of the South Carolina Code of Laws, the Children's Education Endowment was established to support both Higher Education Scholarship Grants and Public School Facility Assistance. Historically, the State Treasurer's Office (STO) allocated 30 percent of the Endowment's resources to scholarship grants and 70 percent to public school facilities. When funding for the Endowment ceased, the General Assembly began supporting Higher Education Scholarship Grants through General Fund appropriations.

This review found that the Children's Education Endowment Fund, managed by the STO, held an unexpended balance of approximately \$4.1 million. These funds remained unused for more than a decade until identified during the course of this study. The STO is now working to disburse the funds in accordance with statutory requirements.

Additionally, the Tuition Grants Commission and CHE have concluded that the statutory distribution formula outlined in Section 59-143-30 has not been applied, largely due to ambiguous language that complicates consistent interpretation and implementation. This report therefore includes a recommendation for legislative action to clarify and strengthen the statutory framework.



ENDNOTES

¹ <https://sctuitiongrants.org/about-us/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <https://sctuitiongrants.org/colleges/>

⁶ <https://sctuitiongrants.org/eligibility/>

⁷ <https://sctuitiongrants.org/about-us/>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Feb 27, 2025 Video Presentation (00:13:47- 00:13:58).

¹¹ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 77)

¹² [Participating Colleges and Universities- South Carolina Tuition Grants](#)

¹³ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 81-82)

¹⁴ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 65-66)

¹⁵ April 29, 2025 Video Presentation (00:16:38- 00: 18:59)

¹⁶ [Commission Members- South Carolina Tuition Grants](#)

¹⁷ [Section 59-113-10. Higher Education Tuition Grant Commission](#)

¹⁸ [Code of Laws- Title 59- Chapter 113- Tuition Grants](#)

¹⁹ [Feb 27, 2025 Video Presentation \(00:10:47- 00:12:40\)](#)

²⁰ [Commission Members- South Carolina Tuition Grants](#)

²¹ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 36)

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Feb 27, 2025 Video Presentation (01:00:25 – 01:01:33)

²⁷ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 42)

²⁸ [Participating Colleges and Universities- South Carolina Tuition Grants](#)

²⁹ [Code of Laws- Title 59- Chapter 113- Tuition Grants](#)

³⁰ [Participating Colleges and Universities- South Carolina Tuition Grants](#)

³¹ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 53)

³² [SCHETGC ANNUAL REPORT 2324.pdf \(Pg, 7\)](#)

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 54)

³⁵ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 56)

³⁶ [SCHETGC ANNUAL REPORT 2324.pdf \(Pg, 13\)](#)

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 55)

³⁹ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 57)

⁴⁰ [SCHETGC ANNUAL REPORT 2324.pdf \(Pg, 7\)](#)

⁴¹ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 57)

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 61)

⁴⁴ [SCHETGC ANNUAL REPORT 2324.pdf \(Pg, 6\)](#)

⁴⁵ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 61)

⁴⁶ [SCHETGC ANNUAL REPORT 2324.pdf \(Pg, 6\)](#)

⁴⁷ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 61)

⁴⁸ April 29, 2025 Video Presentation (00:05:52- 00:06:50)

⁴⁹ [SCHETGC ANNUAL REPORT 2324.pdf \(Pg, 7\)](#)

⁵⁰ [South Carolina-SCTG Strategic Plan \(Pg. 1-3\)](#)

⁵¹ [South Carolina-SCTG Strategic Plan \(Pg. 4-5\)](#)

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ [FY24 Accountability Report Final.pdf \(Pg.3\)](#)

⁵⁴ [2023-2024-South-Carolina-Tuition-Grants-Program-Policies-and-Procedures-Manual.pdf \(Pg. 17-18\)](#)

⁵⁵ May 6, 2025 Video Presentation (01:32:00-01:32:59)

⁵⁶ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 40)

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ [Home | Federal Student Aid](#)

⁵⁹ February 27, 2025 Video Presentation (01:14:08-01:15:19)

⁶⁰ [Home | CHE](#)

⁶¹ [About- South Carolina Department of Education M](#)

⁶² [College Goal SC student booklet REVISED.pdf](#)

⁶³ [Higher Education Day Participant Guide | CHE](#)

⁶⁴ [College And Career Decision Day | CHE](#)

⁶⁵ February 27, 2025 Video Presentation (01:16:25-01:18:27)

⁶⁶ Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf (Pg, 69)

⁶⁷ April 22, 2025 Video Presentation (00:09:37-00:09:55)

⁶⁸ [Code of Laws- Title 59- Chapter 104- Initiatives For Research And Academic Excellence](#)

⁶⁹ SC Code Section 59-104-20

⁷⁰ [South Carolina Commission on Higher Education](#)

⁷¹ [What is the SC HOPE Scholarship Program](#)

⁷² [Agency Title Page \(Pg, 23\)](#)

⁷³ [May 6, 2025 Video Presentation \(00:03:25-00:04:22\)](#)

⁷⁴ [Code of Laws- Title 59- Chapter 104- Initiatives For Research And Academic Excellence](#)

⁷⁵ [South Carolina Commission on Higher Education](#)

⁷⁶ [What is the SC HOPE Scholarship Program](#)

⁷⁷ [Home | Federal Student Aid](#)

⁷⁸ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg, 91\)](#)

⁷⁹ [FAFSA® Application | Federal Student Aid](#)

⁸⁰ [May 6, 2025 Video Presentation \(00:35:33-00:36:18\)](#)

⁸¹ [FY23 Accountability Report Final.pdf \(Pg. 11\)](#)

⁸² [FY23 Accountability Report Final.pdf \(Pg. 4\)](#)

⁸³ [Frequently Asked Questions- South Carolina Tuition Grants](#)

⁸⁴ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg, 48\)](#)

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg, 105\)](#)

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg. 73\)](#)

⁹⁰ [May 6, 2025 Video Presentation \(00:39:00-00:41:30\)](#)

⁹¹ [April 22, 2025 Video Presentation \(00:09:40- 00: 10:52\)](#)

⁹² [South Carolina Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators- SCASFAA Detailed History](#)

⁹³ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg, 107\)](#)

⁹⁴ [South Carolina](#)

⁹⁵ [Home - South Carolina Independent School Association \(SCISA\)](#)

⁹⁶ [May 6, 2025 Video Presentation \(00:31:02-00:32:41\)](#)

⁹⁷ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg. 107-108\)](#)

⁹⁸ [May 6, 2025 Video Presentation \(00:29:33-00:31:02\)](#)

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² [FY26 H060- Tuition Grants Commission.pdf \(Pg. 9\)](#)

¹⁰³ [FY26 H060- Tuition Grants Commission.pdf \(Pg, 9-10\)](#)

¹⁰⁴ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg. 114\)](#)

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ [VLDS](#)

¹⁰⁸ [Kentucky Center for Statistics- KYSTATS](#)

¹⁰⁹ [Home- NSPARC | National Strategic Planning and Analysis Research Center](#)

¹¹⁰ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg. 92\)](#)

¹¹¹ [Home | Federal Student Aid](#)

¹¹² [Increasing FAFSA Completion: Comparisons of Projects Across SREB States- Southern Regional Education Board](#)

¹¹³ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg. 94\)](#)

¹¹⁴ [Increasing FAFSA Completion: Comparisons of Projects Across SREB States- Southern Regional Education Board](#)

¹¹⁵ [2024 Longitudinal Analysis Proviso 11.17.pdf](#)

¹¹⁶ [SCHETGC ANNUAL REPORT 2324.pdf \(Pg. 13\)](#)

¹¹⁷ [Higher Education Price Index \(HEPI\) | Commonfund](#)

¹¹⁸ [About Us | Commonfund | Asset Management](#)

¹¹⁹ [2024 Higher Education Price Index \(HEPI\) Report Released](#)

¹²⁰ [Meeting Packet ONLINE 5.6.2025.pdf \(Pg. 98-99\)](#)

¹²¹ [April 22, 2025 Video Presentation \(00:11:22- 00:12:24\)](#)

¹²² [FY23 Accountability Report Final.pdf \(Pg, 4\)](#)

¹²³ [February 27, 2025 Video Presentation \(01:24:11-01:25:50\)](#)

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ [South Carolina-SCTG Strategic Plan \(Pg. 1-3\)](#)

¹²⁷ [May 6, 2025 Video Presentation \(01:32:00-01:32:58\)](#)

¹²⁸ [Code of Laws- Title 59- Chapter 143- Children's Education Endowment](#)

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ [Code of Laws- Title 59- Chapter 143- Children's Education Endowment](#)

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² [Code of Laws- Title 59- Chapter 113- Tuition Grants](#)

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Feb 27, 2025 Video Presentation at (00:39:15- 00:40:29)

¹³⁷ [SC Code Section 59-113-50](#)

¹³⁸ [History — American College of the Building Arts](#)

¹³⁹ February 27, 2025 Video Presentation (00:39:14-00:40:32)

¹⁴⁰ [Home](#) | [CHE](#)

¹⁴¹ [History — American College of the Building Arts](#)

DRAFT

COMMITTEE CONTACT INFORMATION



MISSION

Determine if agency laws and programs are being implemented and carried out in accordance with the intent of the General Assembly and whether they should be continued, curtailed or eliminated. Inform the public about state agencies.

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