



South Carolina
Forestry Commission



BUDGET REQUEST

FY2026-27



ABOUT US

SCFC ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW

Our history, mission, vision and values

The SC Forestry Commission’s general duties are defined in State Code 48-23-90. In summary, the code requires the agency to make an annual report to the General Assembly on “forest conditions ... including recommendations to the public as to reforestation. ... to prevent, control and extinguish fires, including the enforcement of ... laws pertaining to the protection of the forests and woodlands give such advice, assistance and cooperation to private owners of land and promote ... appreciation by the public of the advantages of forestry and the benefits ... cooperate with the federal government in the distribution of funds allotted to the State for forestry ...”

Mission: Our mission is to protect, promote and enhance South Carolina’s forests for the benefit of all.

Vision: Healthy forests, resilient communities, impeccable service

Values: Safety | Integrity | Community | Service | Commitment

Key officials

Eric Smith

Chair, SC Forestry Commission

Charles Segars

Vice Chair, SC Forestry Commission

Scott Phillips

State Forester

Tom Patton

Deputy State Forester

Cathy Nordeen

Director of Administration

David Jones

General Counsel / Legislative Liaison

Major program areas

Forest Protection

- Wildland Fire Suppression
- Dispatch operations
- Law Enforcement

Forest Development

- Industry recruitment
- Forest Inventory & Analysis (FIA)

Communications

- Public information
- Environmental education
- Media relations
- Creative services

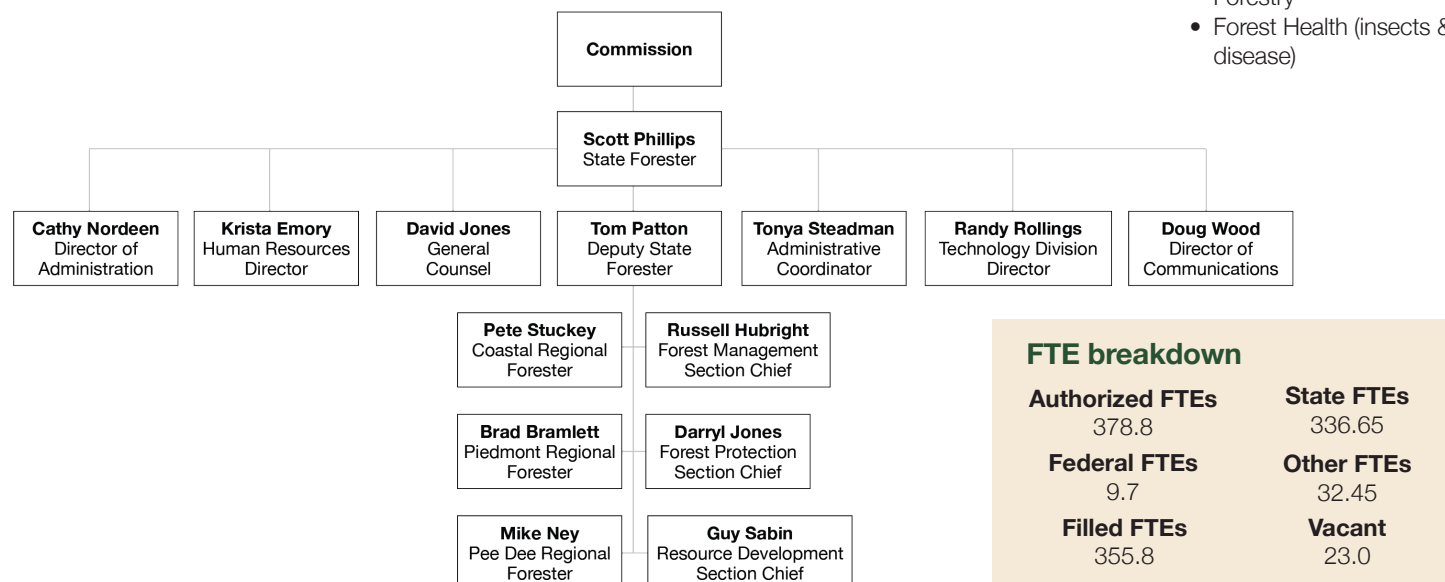
Technology

- I.T. services
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
- Telecommunications

Forest Management

- Landowner Assistance
- State Forests
- Water quality protection (BMPs)
- Nursery & Tree Improvement
- Urban & Community Forestry
- Forest Health (insects & disease)

Organizational chart





SCFC BUDGET REQUEST

FY2026-27, PRIORITIZED SUMMARY

Priority 1: Bolstering Wildfire Response

\$420,000 recurring/ \$5.5 million non-recurring¹

- The Forestry Commission responds to more than 1,200 wildfires annually across 13 million acres of unincorporated land. Current reliance on National Weather Service forecasts lacks the detailed fire behavior analysis needed to anticipate extreme conditions, and federal funding for firefighter PPE, AEDs, and uniforms has become increasingly unreliable. Rising wildfire activity has also quickly exhausted contract funds for single engine air tankers (SEATs) and revealed critical gaps in hand crew availability, especially in mountainous areas impacted by Hurricane Helene. Without additional support, the agency faces gaps in forecasting, firefighter safety, and suppression resources.
- Fully funding this request will provide one new FTE meteorologist with fire behavior expertise, ensure sustainable funding for firefighter protective gear and uniforms, and strengthen overall preparedness. It will also provide one-time funding for SEAT aircraft contracts and qualified hand crews, expanding aerial and ground suppression capacity to better protect lives, property, and natural resources.

Priority 2: Information Technology

\$260,000 recurring / \$560,000 non-recurring²

- The Forestry Commission’s ability to respond effectively to wildfires depends on reliable communications, dispatching, and data systems. Current internet infrastructure is costly and underperforms during high activity, leaving dispatch centers at risk of degraded performance. Firefighting safety is also limited by the absence of real-time vehicle tracking, while agency records remain largely paper-based, slowing operations. In addition, key systems such as dispatch recording equipment are nearing end-of-life and require replacement to maintain continuity of service. Without investment, the agency faces gaps in system reliability, firefighter safety, and operational efficiency.
- Fully funding this request will transition agency connectivity to a more reliable SD-WAN network, install automatic vehicle location (AVL) on all firefighting and road equipment, and implement the OnBase system to streamline document management. It will also provide one-time funding for SD-WAN implementation, initial OnBase setup, and replacement of the dispatch recording system, ensuring modernized technology infrastructure that strengthens organizational efficiency, firefighter safety, and emergency response capacity.

Priority 3: Bolstering Conservation Education

\$75,000 recurring

- For decades, the Forestry Commission’s flagship conservation education programs—Project Learning Tree, the Wood Magic Forest Fair, and school-based initiatives—have been sustained by private and federal grants. Those sources have now largely disappeared due to mill closures, loss of EPA pass-through funding, and reduced industry support. Without stable state funding, these nationally recognized programs face elimination, leaving students and teachers without access to forestry-centered environmental education.
- Fully funding this request will provide \$75,000 in recurring state support to sustain these three programs, covering core operating costs such as educational materials, facilitator stipends, event logistics, and classroom activities. This modest investment will ensure continued delivery of South Carolina’s only statewide forestry-based education programs, strengthening forest literacy and promoting future careers in forestry.

1 Non-recurring components correspond to the B2 designated as priority #5 (\$2 million) and the B2 designated as priority #6 (\$3.5 million).

2 Non-recurring component corresponds to the B2 form designated as Priority #7.

Priority 4: Strengthening Forestland Conservation **\$370,000 recurring / \$20 million non-recurring¹**

- South Carolina is one of the fastest growing states in the nation and as our population increases so does the risk of deforestation. A primary goal of the Forestry Commission is the conservation of working forests and recently the agency has stepped up efforts to conserve working forests in our state through fee-simple acquisitions of forestland to be added to our State Forests system or through the acquisition of conservation easements of working forests. These conservation easements leverage federal funding that requires a state agency hold title to the easements and currently the Forestry Commission is the only agency that fills this niche. Currently the agency does not have dedicated staff for this work and the projects we are working on are outstripping agency capacity. Dedicated funding and staff are necessary to increase the agency's capacity to capitalize on conservation opportunities to help attain agency and state conservation goals.
- Fully funding this request will provide one new FTE, shift one FTE from other funds to state, and increase agency capacity to identify and capitalize on conservation opportunities for forestlands in our state.

Priority 9: BMP Road Mat Cost-Share Program **\$500,000 non-recurring**

- Mud on public roads from logging operations is a longstanding concern that has grown as rural areas develop. Even when entrances are built to SCDOT standards, wet weather and long haul distances often cause mud to reach highways, creating hazards and increasing road maintenance costs. At the same time, landowners face damage to private roads, and loggers encounter costly downtime when weather prevents access. Without intervention, these challenges will continue to hinder timber operations and public safety.
- Fully funding this request will establish a cost-share program to help timber operators purchase steel road mats, covering up to 75% of costs. Because mats can be reused across multiple tracts, this one-time investment will mitigate mud on public roads, protect landowner roads, and improve logger efficiency in wet conditions.

¹ Non-recurring component corresponds to the Capital Request designated as Priority #8.

Total SCFC FY2026-27 budget request: \$27.685 million

FY2026-27 Proviso Requests

- The agency has six existing provisos that it requests to retain and codify if a codification bill is introduced.
- The agency asks that Proviso 43.7 be amended to increase the authorized amount to \$5,000,000, from \$3,000,000, due to increasing costs of wildfire suppression on large complex wildfires, like those experienced in FY25, and the potential impacts to future agency budgets.

FINANCIAL UPDATE

BUDGET EXECUTION, FY2024-25/FY2025-26

Major Budget Categories	Fiscal Year	General Funds Appropriations	General Funds Expenditures	Federal Funds Appropriations	Federal Funds Expenditures	Other Funds Appropriations	Other Funds Expenditures
Personal Services	2024-25	\$18,054,119	\$16,960,600	\$1,028,518	\$1,064,381	\$1,390,000	\$1,259,846
	2025-26	\$19,169,632	\$7,705,607	\$1,028,518	\$173,213	\$1,390,000	\$558,013
Other Operating	2024-25	\$5,428,655	\$6,898,556	\$5,149,567	\$2,534,847	\$7,878,713	\$4,732,594
	2025-26	\$6,119,655	\$2,769,825	\$59,529,167	*\$50,762,885	\$24,662,513	*\$19,376,622
Special Items (Forest Renewal and Projects)	2024-25	\$200,000	\$200,000			\$5,300,000	\$952,094
	2025-26	\$200,000	\$166,078			\$11,989,447	\$1,382,220
Distributions to Subdivisions	2024-25	\$125,000	\$124,238	\$2,050,475	\$1,607,551	\$1,100,000	\$626,772
	2025-26	\$125,000	\$-	\$3,050,475		\$1,055,847	\$1,100,000
Fringe Benefits	2024-25	\$9,838,157	\$9,187,741	\$435,000	\$482,881	\$510,000	\$651,698
	2025-26	\$10,618,933	\$4,216,474	\$435,000	\$85,925	\$510,000	\$298,850
Non-Recurring	2024-25	\$4,184,814	\$2,110,479				
	2025-26	\$2,074,335	\$387,133				
Carry-forward	2024-25	\$2,881,207					
	2025-26	\$1,362,451					
TOTALS	2024-25	\$40,711,952	\$35,481,614	\$8,663,560	\$5,689,660	\$16,178,713	\$8,223,004
	2025-26	\$39,670,006	\$15,245,117	\$64,043,160	\$52,077,870	\$39,651,960	\$21,615,705

* Additional federal authority related to the RMS Pee Dee Basin Initiative



Gov. McMaster joined the Forestry Commission and more than a dozen public, private and non-profit conservation organizations to celebrate the announcement of the largest conservation easement in state history Wednesday, Oct. 29, 2025. The Pee Dee Basin Initiative, which will permanently protect more than 62,000 acres of forestland spanning Georgetown, Marion and Williamsburg counties, also included an 880-acre addition to Wee Tee State Forest.



43.1 - Grant funds carry-forward

The Forestry Commission is authorized to use unexpended federal grant funds in the current year to pay for expenditures incurred in the prior year.

Year introduced: 1996 / Years in budget: 30

Requested Action: Retain/Codify

43.2 - Retention of emergency funds

The Forestry Commission is authorized to retain all funds received as reimbursement of expenditures from other state or federal agencies when personnel and equipment are mobilized due to an emergency.

Year introduced: 2000 / Years in budget: 26

Requested Action: Retain/Codify

43.3 - Commissioned officers' physicals

The Forestry Commission is authorized to pay the cost of physical examinations for agency personnel who are required to receive such physical examinations prior to receiving a law enforcement commission.

Year introduced: 2006 / Years in budget: 20

Requested Action: Retain/Codify

43.4 - Compensatory payments

In the event a State of Emergency is declared by the Governor, exempt employees of the Forestry Commission may be paid for actual hours worked in lieu of accruing compensatory time, at the discretion of the agency director, and providing funds are available.

Year introduced: 2012 / Years in budget: 14

Requested Action: Retain/Codify

43.5 - Sale of promotional items

The Forestry Commission may sell promotional items that advocate for forestry and forest culture, including items featuring the South Carolina Forestry Commission Forest Life brand and logo, for the purpose of generating funds for agency operations. Unexpended funds may be carried forward from the prior fiscal year into the current.

Year introduced: 2022 / Years in budget: 4

Requested Action: Retain/Codify

43.6 - Firefighting equipment & response carry-forward

Proviso Text: The Forestry Commission is authorized to carry forward any unspent funds appropriated for firefighting equipment into the current fiscal year to be expended for the same purpose.

Year introduced: 2023 / Years in budget: 3

Requested Action: Retain/Codify

43.7 - Response to declared emergencies

Authorization to use up to \$5,000,000 from the Disaster Trust Fund of the State or General Fund as necessary to cover costs incurred due to a declared emergency requiring the response of the South Carolina Forestry Commission.

Year introduced: 2026 / Years in budget: 1

Requested Action: Retain/Amend



PERFORMANCE UPDATE

SUMMARY OF FY2024-25 ACCOUNTABILITY REPORT

Accomplishments

As documented in the agency's FY2024-25 Accountability Report, the Forestry Commission's accomplishments are numerous and varied, with notable progress being made toward each of the five goals around which our strategic plan is based. Organized by the five principal areas, or goals, of our agency's multifaceted mission – Enhance Public Benefits From Trees And Forests, Protect Forests From Harm, Conserve Working Forests, Raise Awareness About Our Forests, and Strengthen The Commission For The Future – the plan lays out explicit strategies supporting each goal, and the achievement of each of the strategies is gauged by a combination of individual and composite key performance indicators (KPIs).

Goal 1: Enhance Public Benefits From Trees And Forests

- \$887.5 million (+746% vs FY24) in capital investment and 803 new jobs (+136% vs FY24) were announced in FY25, both the highest in over 5 years. There were 12 forest products-based announcements this fiscal year including two new primary mills.
- For FY25, the Forest Markets Development Index, which quantifies the agency's efforts to retain and grow markets for forest products, was 7.76. This is 29% above the annual target. SCFC staff provided 173 business assists, engaged on 16 economic development projects, and participated in six trade events during the fiscal year.
- For FY25, the Forest Ecosystem Benefits Index was 7.16, which is 6% above the annual target. The agency's Environmental Management Program provided over 97 hours of instruction, reaching 419 loggers, landowners, and forestry professionals. Best Management Practices (BMP) Foresters completed 320 BMP courtesy exams to help ensure compliance. Compliance on sites that receive a courtesy exam remains very high over 99%.
- For FY25, the Community Forestry index was 8.64, which is up 13% from FY24 and 31% above the annual target. The Urban and Community Forestry Program's outreach served an estimated 3.4 million citizens and provided nearly 3,400 training hours to communities and tree care professionals. These higher accomplishments were due in large part to increased grant-related work that occurred in partnership with groups such as the Green Infrastructure Center, Clemson Extension and TreesSC.

Goal 2: Protect Forests From Harm

- The spring of 2025 was one of the most active wildfire seasons in decades, with two Red Flag Fire Alers, two statewide burning bans and two Governor declared state of emergencies for wildfires. Major wildfires burning along the coast and in the mountains, at the same time, stretched agency resources and tested agency preparedness plans. This included the 2,059 acres Covington Drive Fire in Myrtle Beach, and the 15,973 acres Table Rock Complex in Greenville and Pickens Counties. A positive note is that no homes or lives were lost in either of these wildfires.
- The agency purchased 11 safer enclosed-cab dozers, toward the 160 target, in FY25. With this purchase, 100% of frontline firefighting bulldozers will be the safer enclosed-cab units once they reach the field.
- For FY25, the SCFC responded to 1,562 wildfires that burned over 32,000 acres (161% more acres than the 10-year average).
- Average wildfire response time was 36.99 minutes in FY25, which is below the target response time of 38 minutes and 2% below the five-year average.
- For FY25 the Forest Health Index was 6.71, which is 27% above FY24, bolstered by a new Invasive Species Coordinator hired with federal grant funding.

Goal 3: Conserve Working Forests

- The agency assisted 1,546 landowners during FY25, which is 25% below the annual target of 2,000. Shortfall is due to recruitment/retention issues, new/inexperienced forestry staff, and active wildfire year.
- Achieved a 96% customer satisfaction level for forest management assistance for FY25 (95% in FY24).
- For FY25 the agency's Prescribed Fire Effort Index, which is a composite measure that quantifies the agency's efforts to increase the responsible use of prescribed fire, was 3.23. This is a 38% decrease compared to FY24 results and 21% below the target of 4.0. Shortfalls are due to increased agency focus on wildfire response and significant wildfire conditions, which limited good prescribed-burning days. During FY25, the agency recorded a significant decrease in prescribed burning by all sources – 354,000 acres which is nearly 30% less than FY24. SCFC personnel carried out prescribed burning on 8,946 acres and performed standby service on 2,285 acres.
- Partnering with Resource Management Services, Open Space Institute, SC Office of Resilience, SC Conservation Bank, SC Department of Natural Resources, et. al., the Forestry Commission was awarded a \$50 million Forest Legacy grant to protect more than 62,000 acres of working forests, via a 61,134-acre conservation easement and the fee simple purchase of 880 acres, in Georgetown, Marion and Williamsburg counties and received all state-level approvals to proceed with the acquisitions. The Forestry Commission will close on these properties in FY26. The project will open nearly 7,600 acres of new public access in Georgetown County.

Goal 4: Raise Awareness About Our Forests

- FIA plot production was 73% of the target for FY24, which is down 10% from last fiscal year due to difficulties recruiting and retaining FIA Foresters. However, accuracy scores remain very high (98%).
- The number of active Project Learning Tree (PLT) facilitators returned to historical norms in FY25, dropping to 36, as staff time was reallocated to host the National PLT Conference. In FY24 the agency reported 51 certified PLT facilitators active in SC, which was highest number of PLT facilitators ever recorded in SC.
- In FY25 website analytics (8.14, up nearly 31%) and social media analytics (10, up more than 46%) hit record highs, boosted by wildfire alerts and a dedicated social media coordinator.

Goal 5: Strengthen The Commission For The Future

- Successfully recruited the Recruiting Coordinator, Piedmont Region Investigator and two FIA forester positions received in the FY25 budget.
- Funding received in FY24 along with agency efforts to address compensation issues in recent years have improved retention efforts. The overall turnover rate for FY25 is 8.8%, up from 8.4% in FY24 but remains well below the 10% target. The number of qualified applicants for open forestry positions in the agency increased from 12.5 applicants/posting in FY24 to 14.6 applicants/posting in FY25.
- In 2024 the SCFC completed its third comprehensive employee engagement survey since 2018. These triennial comprehensive surveys are complemented by biannual “pulse” employee engagement surveys to allow the agency to continually monitor progress. The results of the 2025 pulse surveys show continued improvement. The 2025 pulse surveys averaged greater than 50% response rate and resulted in an average employee engagement index of 8.23 compared to 7.83 in 2024. The agency uses the feedback from employees gained from these surveys as we seek to continually improve the agency's work environment.
- Appropriations and the strategic use of carry-forward funds have allowed the agency to invest in technology to increase its efficiency and effectiveness. In FY25 over 30% of the agency's IT spending was leveraged to modernize and transform the agency. This is 8% below FY24 as rising software licensing costs limited transformative projects. Examples include fiber upgrades, deployment of PAL800 radios, and the deployment of iPads to modernize agency operations. Two AI-enabled wildfire detection cameras were installed in strategic locations to monitor the horizon for evidence of wildfire but are not operational. A third camera will be installed in FY25 and the system made operational.
- In January the agency began taking online notifications for outdoor debris burns via the agency website at scfc.gov/notify. This new notification method supplements the longstanding toll-free phone notification system.