

# Of Fields and Families: Understanding South Carolina's Agricultural Community Through Data and Farmers' Voices

Quarterly Research Report



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**ISSUE:**

January 2026

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# Introduction

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Farming has long been more than an industry in South Carolina; it is woven into the state’s history, culture, and identity. Agriculture remains central to the state’s economy and communities, shaping not only livelihoods but also South Carolina’s broader social and cultural fabric.

This report has two main purposes. First, it provides an overview of South Carolina agriculture, describing the structure, trends, and economic significance of farming in the state. Second, it highlights the experiences of farmers from under-resourced communities, whose realities are often missing from statewide narratives and data summaries. By connecting these perspectives, the report links the broader agricultural landscape with the lived experiences of those working within it.

Nationally, the agricultural landscape is shifting. From 2012 to 2022, the U.S. lost about 208,816 farms, a 10 percent decline.<sup>1</sup> Between 2017 and 2022 alone, the total number of farms fell by about 141,733 - a decline of 7%. During the same period, average farm size increased slightly from 441 to 463 acres. The total farmland acreage declined by more than 20 million acres from 2017 to 2022.

South Carolina reflects similar dynamics, though with local variations. Agribusiness, which includes both agriculture and forestry, contributes about \$51.8 billion annually in economic output. It also supports more than 259,215 jobs and generates \$12.3 billion in labor income. Despite this strong economic presence, only 32% of the agribusiness products purchased in the state are produced locally; the remaining 68% come from out-of-state suppliers, signaling significant gaps in meeting local demand.<sup>2</sup>

Yet behind these numbers lie uneven realities: disparities in land ownership, access to financing, participation in federal programs, and demographic pressures such as generational farm succession. Climate change compounds these challenges, as the Southeast faces more frequent extreme weather, shifting growing seasons, and pest pressures.

This report therefore offers both an overview of South Carolina agriculture and a focused examination of underserved farmers. It explores structural barriers such as land access, market entry, and demographic pressures including the aging producer population, while also highlighting opportunities for inclusion and resilience. By combining statistical analysis with farmer narratives, this report aims to inform policies and practices that sustain agriculture as an industry and support all producers, especially those historically excluded and lacking access to resources and opportunity.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, Charts of Note: U.S. Farms Decline 10 Percent from 2012 to 2022, 2023, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/charts-of-note/chart-detail/?chartId=108720>

<sup>2</sup> South Carolina Department of Agriculture, The Economic Impact of Agribusiness in South Carolina, 2022, <https://agriculture.sc.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Economic-Impact-Study-Nov-2022.pdf>

## Methodology and Data

This research combines quantitative analysis with qualitative perspectives to capture both statewide agricultural trends and the lived experiences of farmers.

Quantitative data were drawn primarily from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), including the Census of Agriculture and the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Quick stats database.<sup>3</sup> Qualitative insights were collected through direct conversations with farmers, meetings, and written questionnaires, as well as input from farmer support organizations. This included engagement with Black, Latino, women, and beginning farmers, as well as with groups and cooperative associations working across South Carolina.



While the qualitative sample is not statistically representative of all South Carolina farmers, these narratives provide important insights into how economic barriers and infrastructural impediments are experienced in daily farming practices. By integrating statistical trends with firsthand perspectives, this approach captures both the macro-level structure of South Carolina agriculture and the micro-level realities shaping resilience and challenges.

### An Overview of South Carolinian Agriculture

The state's farms are a cornerstone of its economy, generating billions of dollars annually and supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs. Farmers produce a wide variety of crops and livestock, contributing not only to economic output but also to the state's food security and rural livelihoods. Yet, the agricultural sector faces operational pressures. Between 2017 and 2022, the number of farms declined by roughly 8.7%, from 24,791 to 22,633, and total farmland decreased by about 4.6%, from 4,774,913 to 4,553,922 acres. These trends pose challenges for farmers, particularly those with fewer resources or less institutional support, as smaller operations may struggle to remain viable and opportunities for new entrants diminish. Small-scale, minority, and beginning producers are especially at risk of exiting the industry altogether, highlighting the need for targeted support to sustain a diverse and resilient agricultural landscape.

Agriculture in South Carolina encompasses a wide range of activities beyond traditional crop cultivation. Farmers are engaged in livestock and poultry production, specialty crops, forestry, agritourism, direct-to-consumer marketing, and value-added enterprises such as food processing and farm-based retail. Many also manage conservation practices and community-oriented agricultural initiatives that support local food systems. This diversity reflects both the state's varied geography and the adaptive strategies of its producers. The South Carolina Department of Agriculture reports that the state's top commodities are broilers, turkeys, cotton, soybeans, and corn, reflecting the diversity of its agricultural sector.

<sup>3</sup> The 2022 Census of Agriculture was used as the primary reference year, while data from previous censuses (2002–2017) were used for trend comparisons. The 2022 Census is the most recent comprehensive dataset available; the next census is scheduled for 2027. Changes in USDA Census data collection allow up to four producers per farm to be reported in 2017 and 2022, compared to a maximum of three producers per farm in earlier census years.

Producer<sup>4</sup> Demographics

South Carolina had 38,097 farm producers in 2022, compared to 38,970 in 2017, indicating overall stability in the state’s farming population. While the total number of producers remained fairly steady, demographic changes over time reveal important differences in representation among racial and ethnic groups. Between 2017 and 2022, most minority groups saw growth in the number of producers, while White and Black producers experienced declines. White producers, who remain the majority, decreased by 767 individuals (just over 2%), and Black producers declined by 187 individuals (over 7%). In contrast, Native producers grew by nearly 12%, Asian producers by about 5%, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander producers by over 27%, and Hispanic producers rose from 423 to 554, an increase of more than 30%.

Table 1. Changes in Racial and Ethnic Composition of South Carolina Farm Producers, 2017-2022

Race	2017	2022	Change	% Change
White	35,876	35,109	-767	-2.14
Black	2,570	2,383	-187	-7.28
Native	161	180	19	11.80
Hispanic	423	554	131	30.97
Asian	114	120	6	5.26
NHPI	22	28	6	27.27

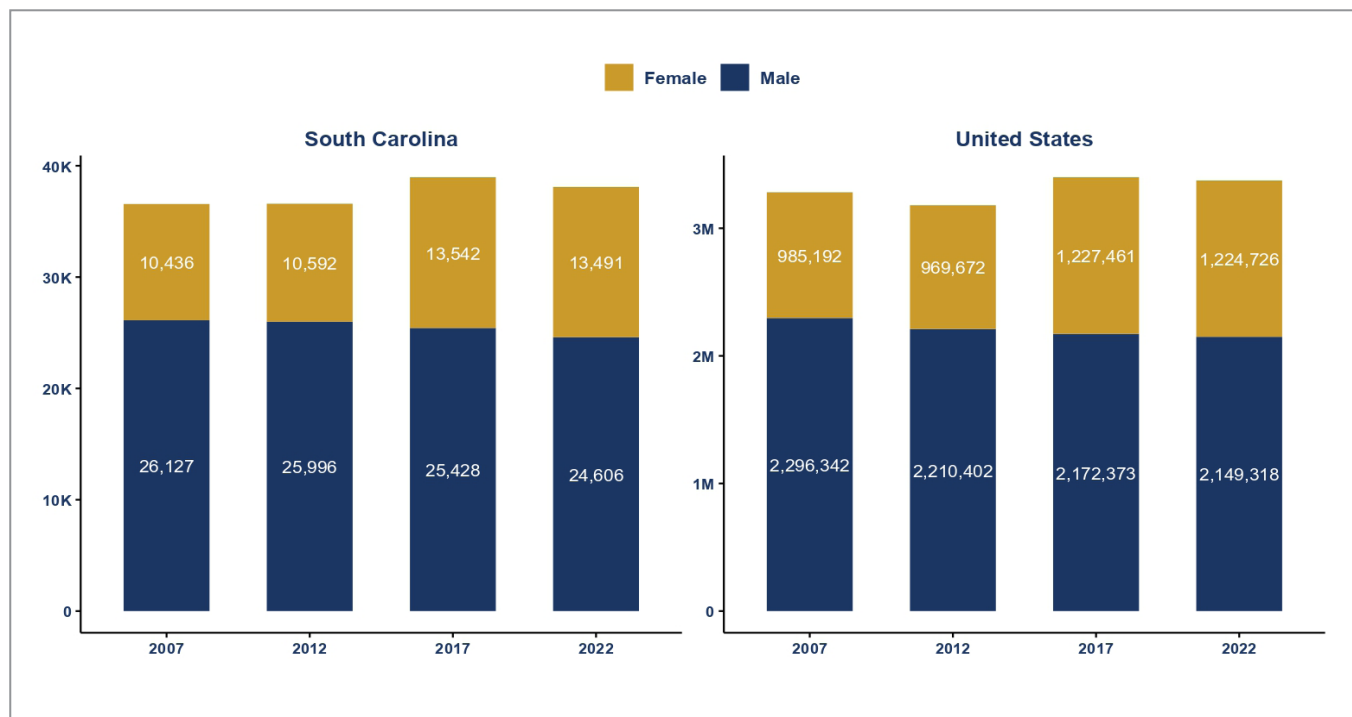
Although agriculture remains a key industry in South Carolina, the racial composition of farm producers differs sharply from that of the state’s overall population. White producers account for about 92% of all agricultural producers, while they make up roughly 65% of the state’s population. In contrast, Black residents represent nearly 26% of South Carolina’s population but only about 7% of producers. Other racial groups, including Native American, Asian, and Pacific Islander producers, together comprise less than 1% of the total.



<sup>4</sup> A “Producer” is any individual actively involved in the operation of the farm. It’s anyone who makes day-to-day or managerial decisions about the farm’s production regardless of the ownership status. They could be the farm owner, someone in the owner’s household, a hired manager, a tenant, a sharecropper, or person involved in operating the farm. A “farm” is any place that produced and sold, or normally would have sold, at least \$1,000 worth of agricultural products during the census year (USDA 2022 Census of Agriculture, Appendix B)

## Gender Dynamics in Farming

Figure 1. Gender Distribution, South Carolina vs U.S., 2007-2022



In 2022, South Carolina had 24,606 male and 13,491 female farm producers, meaning women comprised roughly 35% of all producers in the state. Nationally, women represented about 36% of all farm producers in 2022, showing that South Carolina’s gender distribution is closely aligned with the U.S. average. While men still make up the majority, this reflects a notable increase in female participation over time. Women farmers are increasingly involved in diverse aspects of agriculture, from crop and livestock production to agribusiness management and community-oriented initiatives.

Looking at trends over the last four Census of Agriculture years (2007–2022), the number of male producers in South Carolina has gradually declined from 26,127 to 24,606, while the number of female producers has grown from 10,436 to 13,491, an increase from 28% to 35% of total producers. This trend suggests a slow but steady shift toward greater female representation in farming. Nationally, the pattern is similar: male producers declined from 2.3 million in 2007 to 2.15 million in 2022, while female producers increased from just under one million to over 1.22 million, an increase from 30% to 36% of total producers.

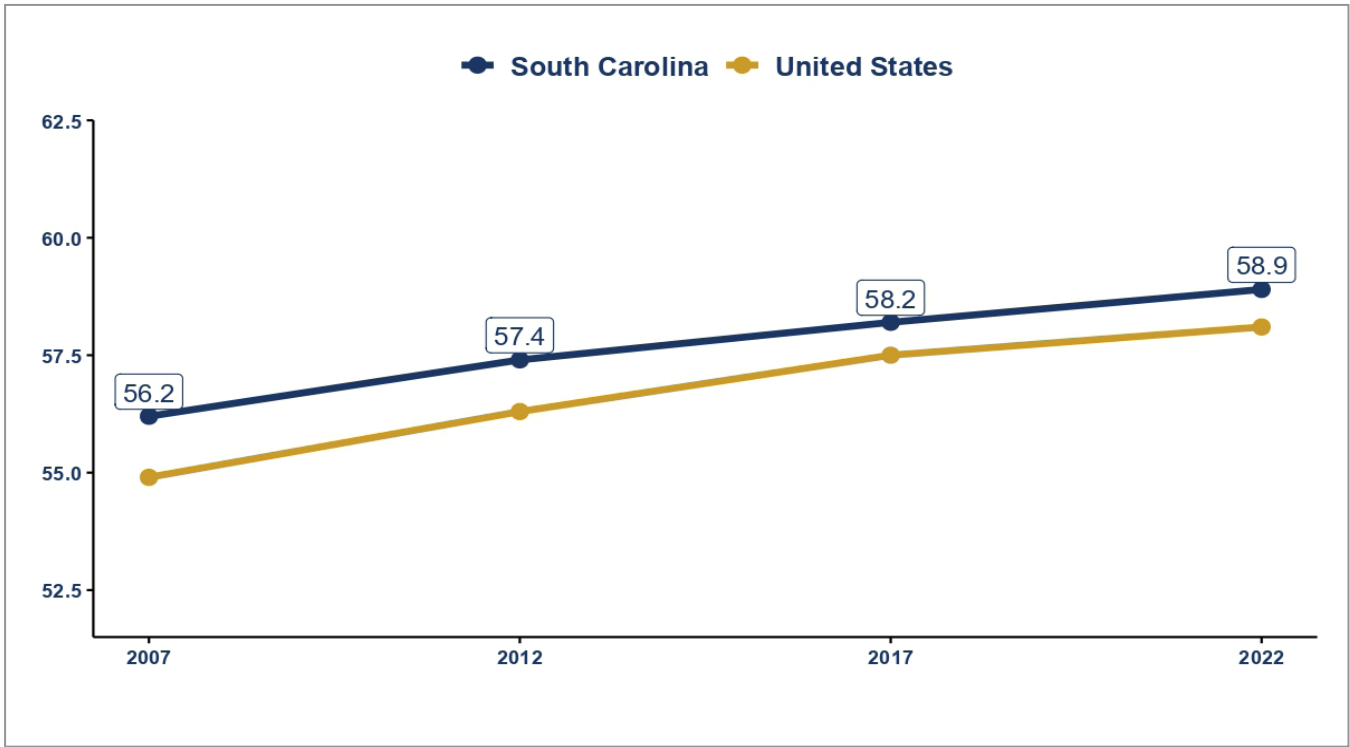
Men continue to constitute the majority in agriculture; however, women’s participation has shown consistent growth, both in absolute numbers and in leadership roles. In South Carolina, this increase is slightly stronger than the national average. One possible explanation is the presence of initiatives such as the South Carolina Women’s Agriculture Network (SC WAgN) and The Annie’s Project, which provide training, networking opportunities, technical support, and access to resources that may support women in expanding their roles in farming, agribusiness, and community-based agricultural activities.

Aging Producer Population

South Carolina’s farming population, like much of the nation, is steadily aging. The average age of farmers has risen with each agricultural census, signaling a demographic shift that poses challenges for the future of agriculture. An older farmer population often means fewer successors, raising concerns about land transfer, generational continuity, and long-term sustainability of family farms.

Between 2007 and 2022, the average age of South Carolina producers increased from 56.2 to 58.9 years, while the national average rose from 54.9 to 58.1 years over the same period. South Carolina farmers have consistently been slightly older than the U.S. average. Of the 38,097 producers in South Carolina in 2022, 2,977 (approximately 7.8%) were under the age of 35, compared with about 8.8% nationally. Meanwhile, 24,651 producers in the state (approximately 64.7%) were 55 years or older, slightly higher than the U.S. proportion of 63.2%. The average age of New and Beginning farmers is 48.9 in 2022, compared to 48.3 in 2017.

Figure 2. Trends in Average Age of farmers, South Carolina and U.S., 2007-2022



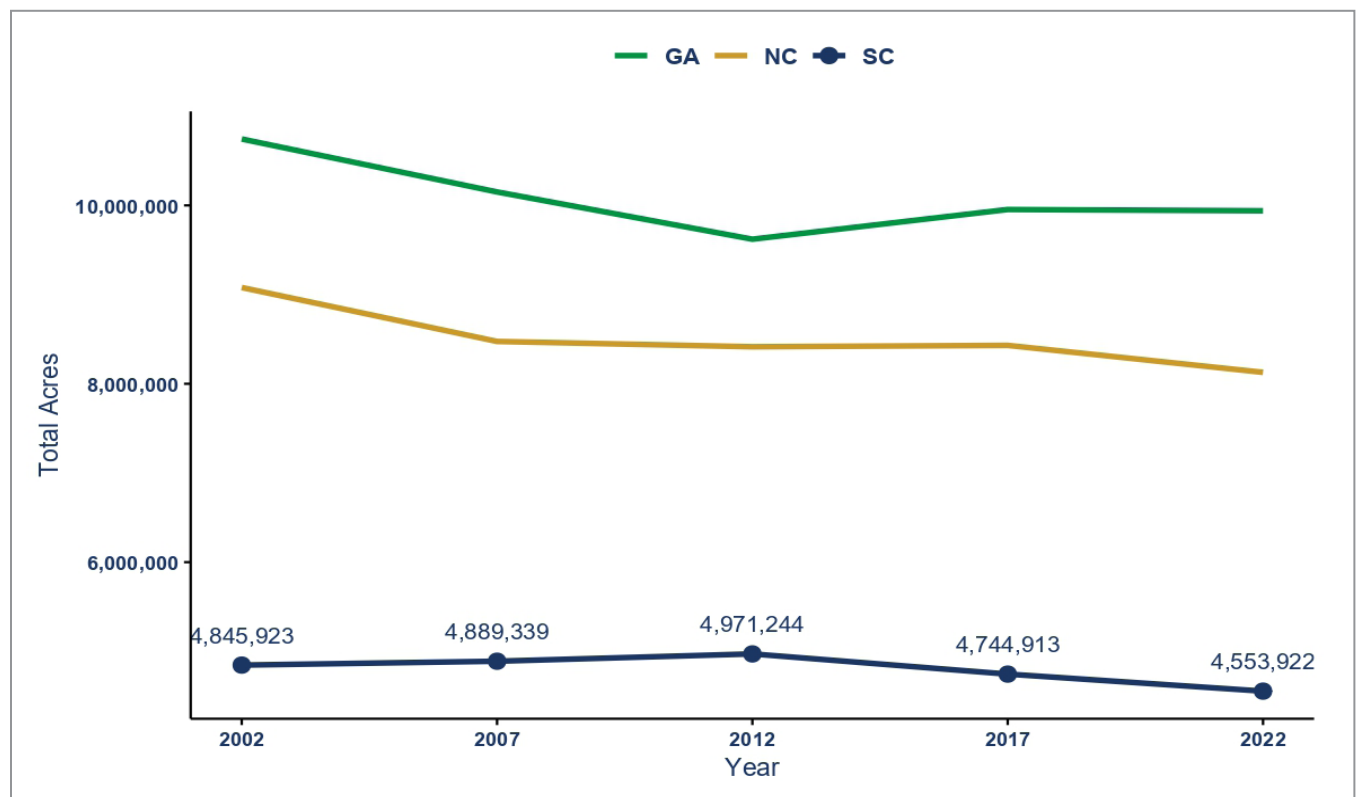
This distribution shows the concentration of producers in older age groups and the limited representation of younger farmers in South Carolina. This pattern emphasizes the need for strategies to attract and retain younger producers, ensuring generational continuity, facilitating smooth land transfer, and maintaining the resilience and long-term viability of the state’s agricultural communities. Programs like the South Carolina New and Beginning Farmer Program (SCNBFP) provide support to younger and new entrants, offering workshops, technical training, mentorship, and networking opportunities to help beginning farmers gain the knowledge and resources needed to establish and sustain successful operations.

## Farmland Trends and Farm Size Shifts

Over the past two decades, South Carolina has experienced notable changes in both total farmland acreage and the distribution of farm sizes. Economic pressures, limited access to financial and technical support, and challenges in land acquisition continue to influence the structure and sustainability of farms across the state. These shifts also have implications for local economies, rural communities, and the diversity of agricultural production.

South Carolina’s farmland acreage declined from nearly 4.85 million acres in 2002 to 4.55 million acres in 2022. Of the 4,553,922 acres in South Carolina in 2022, approximately 1,950,175 acres were cropland, 1,758,440 acres were woodland, 549,036 acres were pastureland, and the remaining 296,271 acres were used for other purposes, such as farmsteads, wasteland, and other non-productive uses. While there was a modest increase between 2002 and 2012, this growth was not sustained. Over the past decade alone, acreage decreased by more than 400,000 acres, representing an 8.4% decline. Comparatively, North Carolina experienced a 3.4% reduction in farmland between 2012 and 2022, a slower pace of decline than South Carolina. In contrast, Georgia’s farmland stabilized and even expanded slightly, gaining 3.3% over the same period.

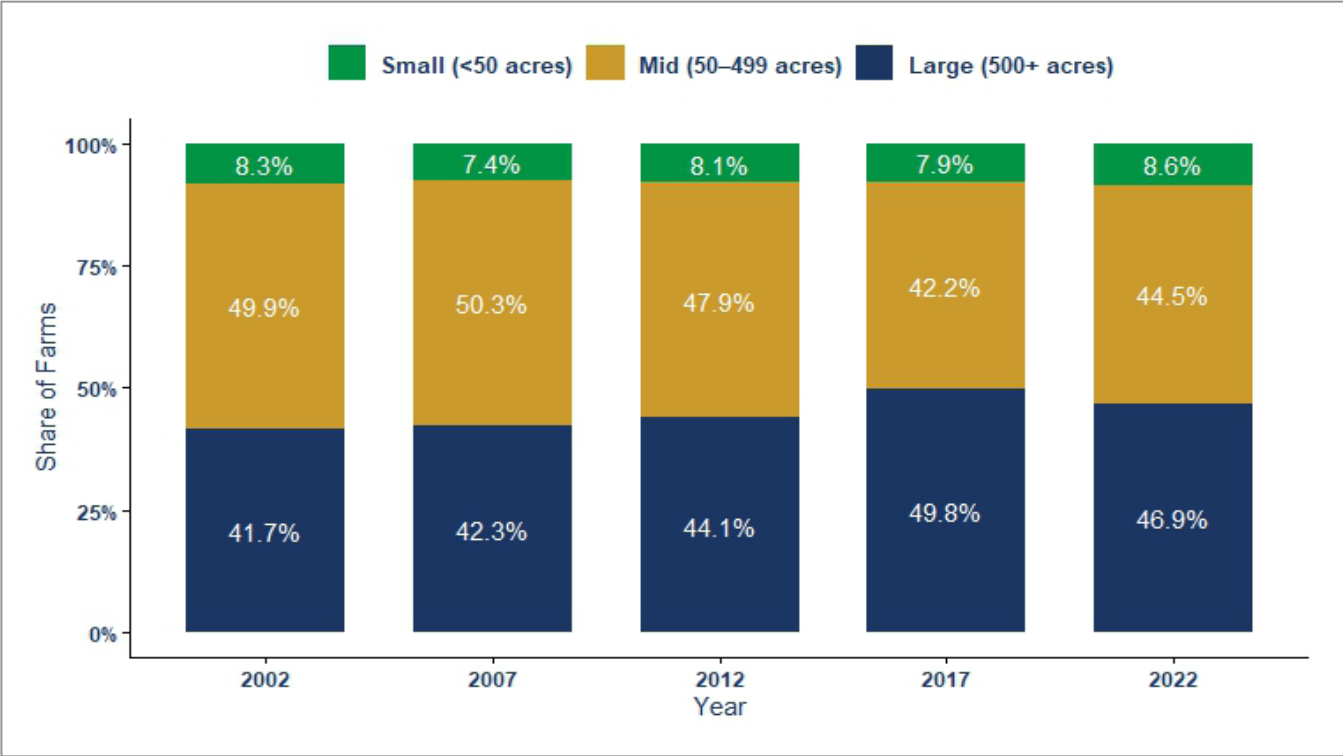
Figure 3. Farmland Acreage in Southeast (2002-2022)



The distribution of farm sizes in South Carolina between 2002 and 2022 experienced notable changes in the state’s agricultural landscape. Farms are grouped into three categories based on size: Small (<50 acres), Mid-sized (50–499 acres), and Large (500+ acres). Over the 20-year period, small farms consistently made up

a large portion of the total farms, though their share varied slightly over time. Specifically, the proportion of small farms grew from 41.7% in 2002 to 46.9% in 2022, indicating a slight increase in the relative importance of smaller-scale operations. Mid-sized farms, which typically accounted for the largest share in earlier years, experienced a gradual decline from 50% in 2002 to 44.5% in 2022. Large farms remained the smallest group throughout the period, representing just over 8% of all farms, and their share stayed relatively stable, moving slightly from 8.3% in 2002 to 8.6% in 2022. While mid-sized farms still form a significant part of South Carolina's agriculture, smaller farms are becoming increasingly common, and large farms, though fewer in number, maintain a consistent presence in the state.

Figure 4. Distribution of farm sizes in South Carolina (2002-2022)



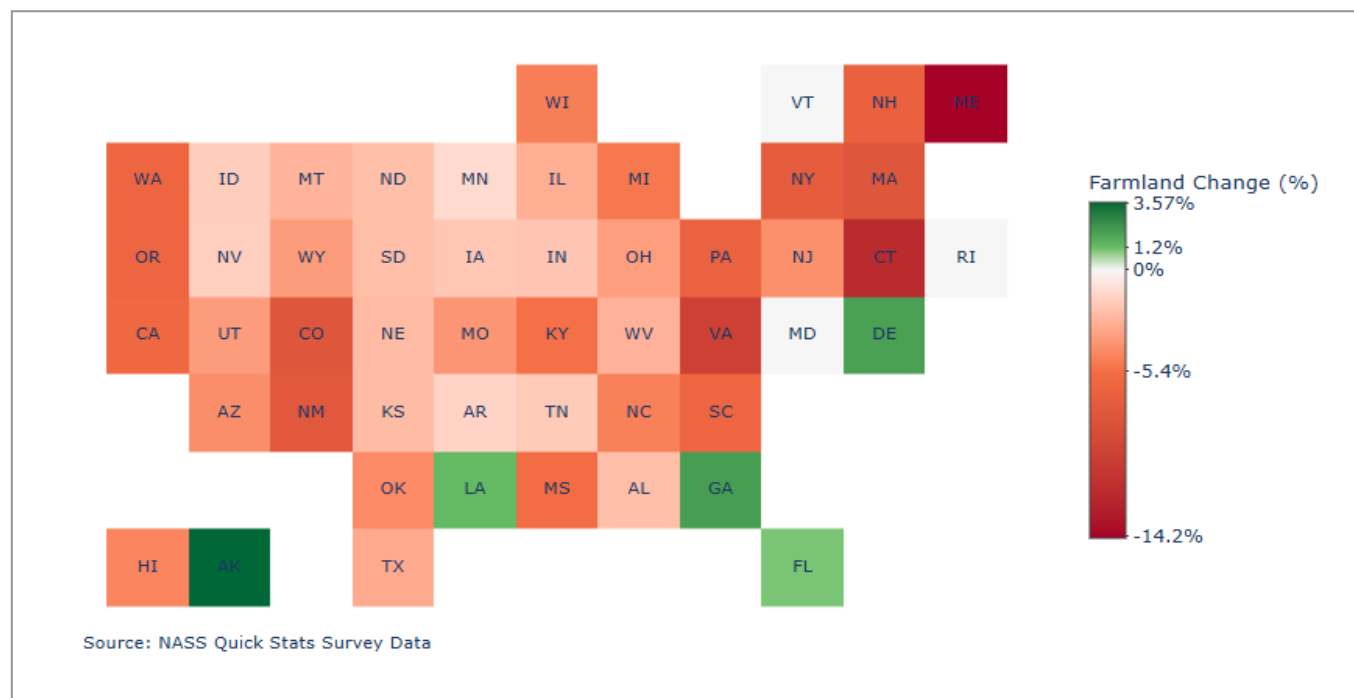
### US Farmland Acreage Trends

Over the past decade, five U.S. states Delaware (DE), Georgia (GA), Florida (FL), Alaska (AK), and Louisiana (LA) experienced an increase in farmland acreage. This contrasts with the general trend of declining farmland in all other states, underscoring regional variations in agricultural expansion and land use patterns. Maine had the largest percentage decrease at 14.2%, whereas Alaska had the highest percentage increase, though this amounted to only about 10,000 acres. In contrast, Georgia added roughly 200,000 acres, representing a 2% increase. South Carolina lost approximately 300,000 acres of farmland between 2014 and 2024, a 6.12% decline, reflecting the broader pattern of farmland reduction in much of the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This is based on survey data covering 2014–2024; values may differ from official Census of Agriculture data (latest available 2022).

These differences in farmland change across states often relate to how land is being reclassified or converted whether it is cropland, pastureland, or woodland rather than crop production alone. In South Carolina’s case, most of the decline came from losses in woodland and pastureland rather than cropland. Woodland decreased from 1,826,595 acres in 2017 to 1,758,440 acres in 2022, and pastureland declined from 573,421 acres to 549,036 acres over the same period. Cropland also slightly decreased from 2,035,329 acres in 2017 to 1,950,175 acres in 2022 suggesting that overall farmland loss in the state was driven more by reductions in non-cropland categories than by changes in cultivated acreage.

**Figure 5. Change in Farmland Acreage by State (2014-2024)**



## Ownership Patterns

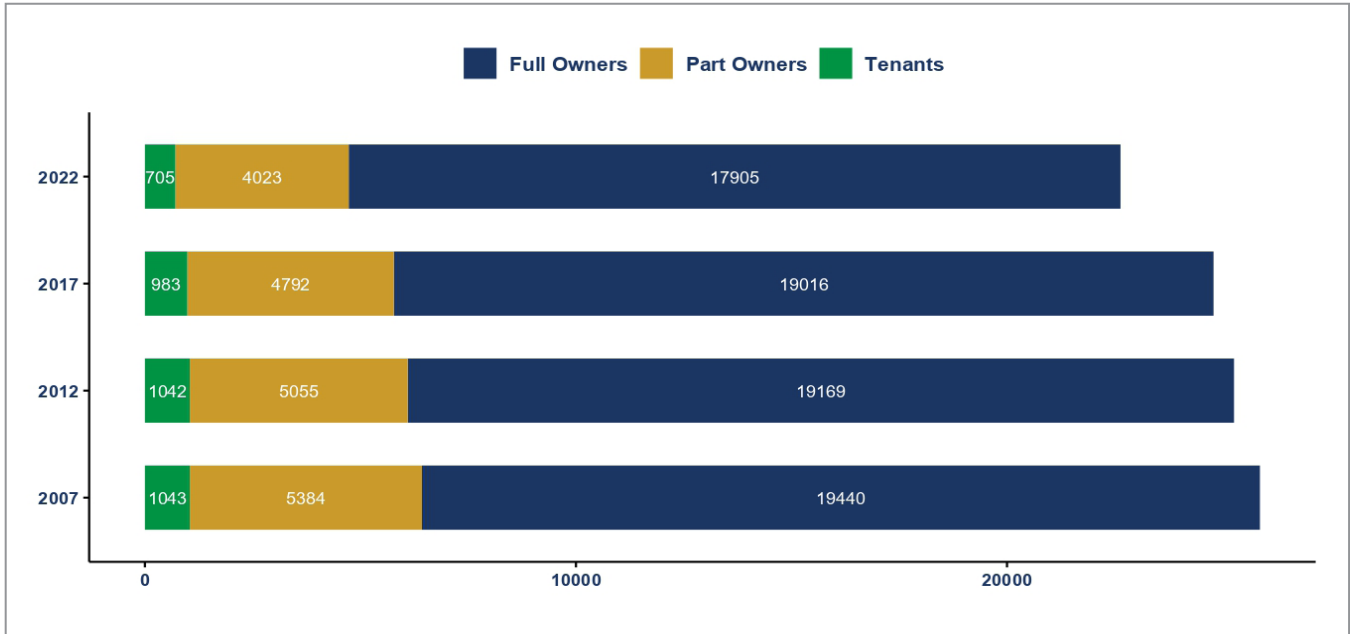
Farm ownership and tenure structures are central to understanding the stability and future of agriculture in South Carolina. Ownership influences not only decision-making authority and long-term investment but also the ability to transfer land across generations and maintain sustainable production. According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, farms are classified by the tenure of their producers, which describes how the land they operate is accessed.<sup>6</sup> In 2022, the majority of South Carolina farms 17,905 out of 22,633 total farms were operated under full ownership, reflecting substantial control and decision-making authority over the land used in production. More than 4,000 farms (4,023) were managed by part owners, with combined ownership with rented acreage, while 705 farms were operated by tenants who leased or rented the land rather than owning it outright.The distribution of harvested cropland differs notably across tenure types.

<sup>6</sup> Farms with hired managers are classified based on the ownership of the land, not the ownership held by the manager (usappxb.pdf).

Within each group, only a subset of farms reported harvesting crops: 8,552 full-owner farms harvested cropland, compared with 3,128 part-owner farms and 431 tenant farms. This indicates that fewer than half of full-owner farms were engaged in active crop production, whereas proportionally larger shares of part-owner farms were involved in cropping. Tenant farmers, the smallest tenure group, also had the lowest participation in harvested cropland.

These patterns suggest that ownership status alone does not necessarily align with production activity. Tenant farmers, in particular, face added challenges due to uncertainties around lease duration, rental costs, and investment risks, which can constrain both production decisions and long-term land stewardship.

**Figure 6. Changes in Ownership of South Carolina Farms, 2007-2022**

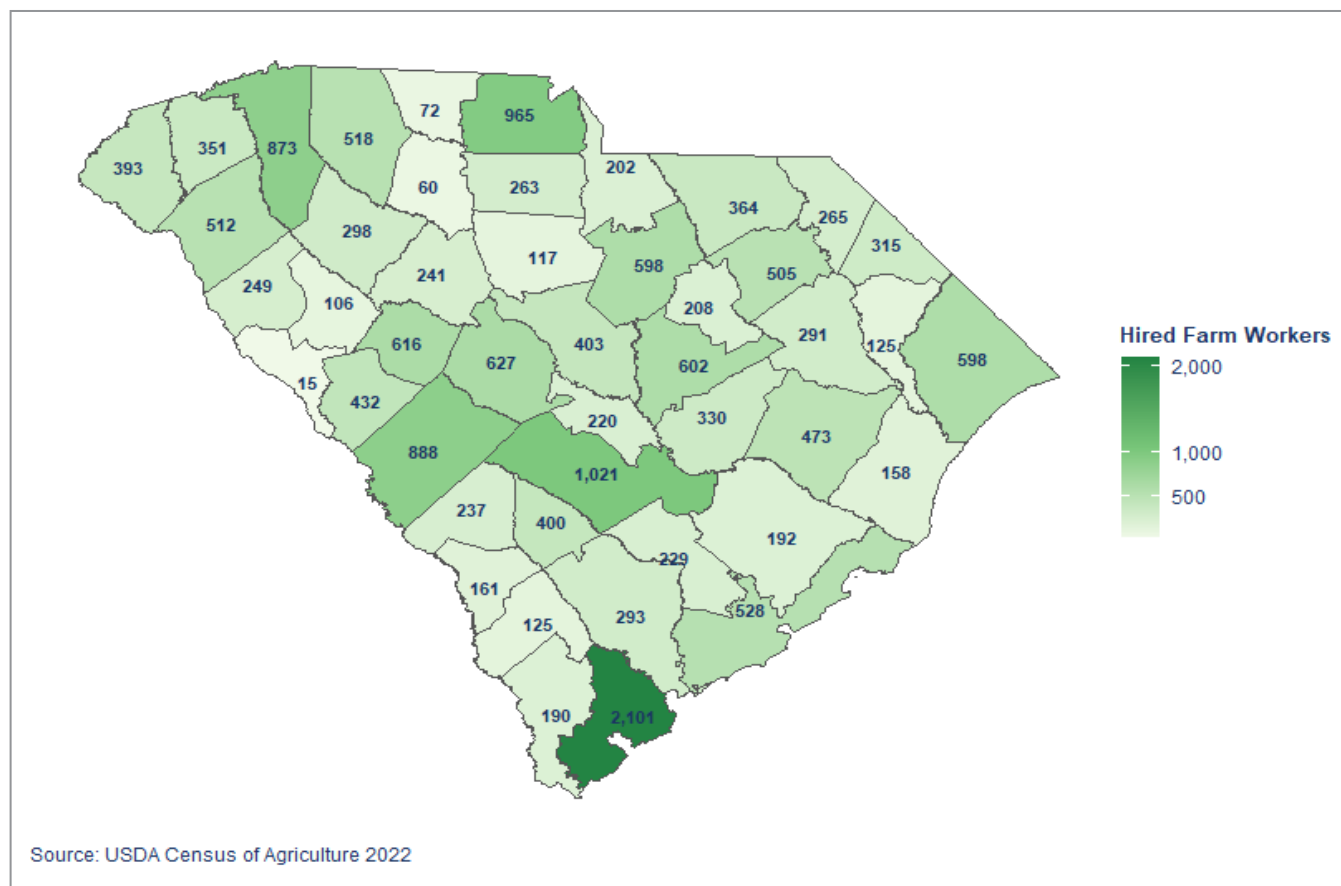


Farm tenure structures in South Carolina have undergone gradual shifts over the past fifteen years. Full ownership remains the dominant arrangement, though the number of farms under full ownership has declined from 19,440 in 2007 to 17,905 in 2022. Despite this numerical decrease, the relative share of full-owner farms has grown from 75.2 percent in 2007 to 79.1 percent in 2022. Part ownership has contracted both in number and proportion, declining from 5,384 in 2007 to 4,023 in 2022, representing a decline in their share from 20.8 percent to 17.8 percent of all farms. Tenant-operated farms, while consistently the smallest category, have also declined over the same period. The number of tenant farms fell from 1,043 in 2007 to just 705 in 2022, with their share dropping from 4 percent to 3.1 percent. Collectively, these changes point to a consolidation of farm tenure, with full ownership becoming increasingly prevalent as both part ownership and tenancy steadily diminish in representation.

## Farm Laborers

In 2022, South Carolina reported 4,449 farms employing 18,730 hired farm workers, along with 8,363 farms with 18,707 unpaid workers. The state also recorded 5,837 migrant workers across 270 farms, reflecting the ongoing reliance on seasonal and temporary labor. Compared to 2017, the number of hired workers declined by approximately 10.5% (from 20,938), while unpaid workers fell by about 30.5% (from 26,925). In contrast, migrant labor grew by roughly 24%, rising from 4,693 in 2017 to 5,837 in 2022, highlighting a shift toward more temporary labor sources. Hired farm worker distribution varied significantly across counties, with Beaufort County employing the largest number at around 2,100 workers, and Orangeburg County with approximately 1,021 workers while all other counties reported fewer than 1,000.

**Figure 7. Distribution of Hired Farm Labor in South Carolina 2022**



In FY2024, South Carolina employers in the agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting sector (NAICS 11) submitted 6,357 H-2A petitions. Of these, 6,252 were approved, resulting in an approval rate of approximately 98.3%.<sup>7</sup>

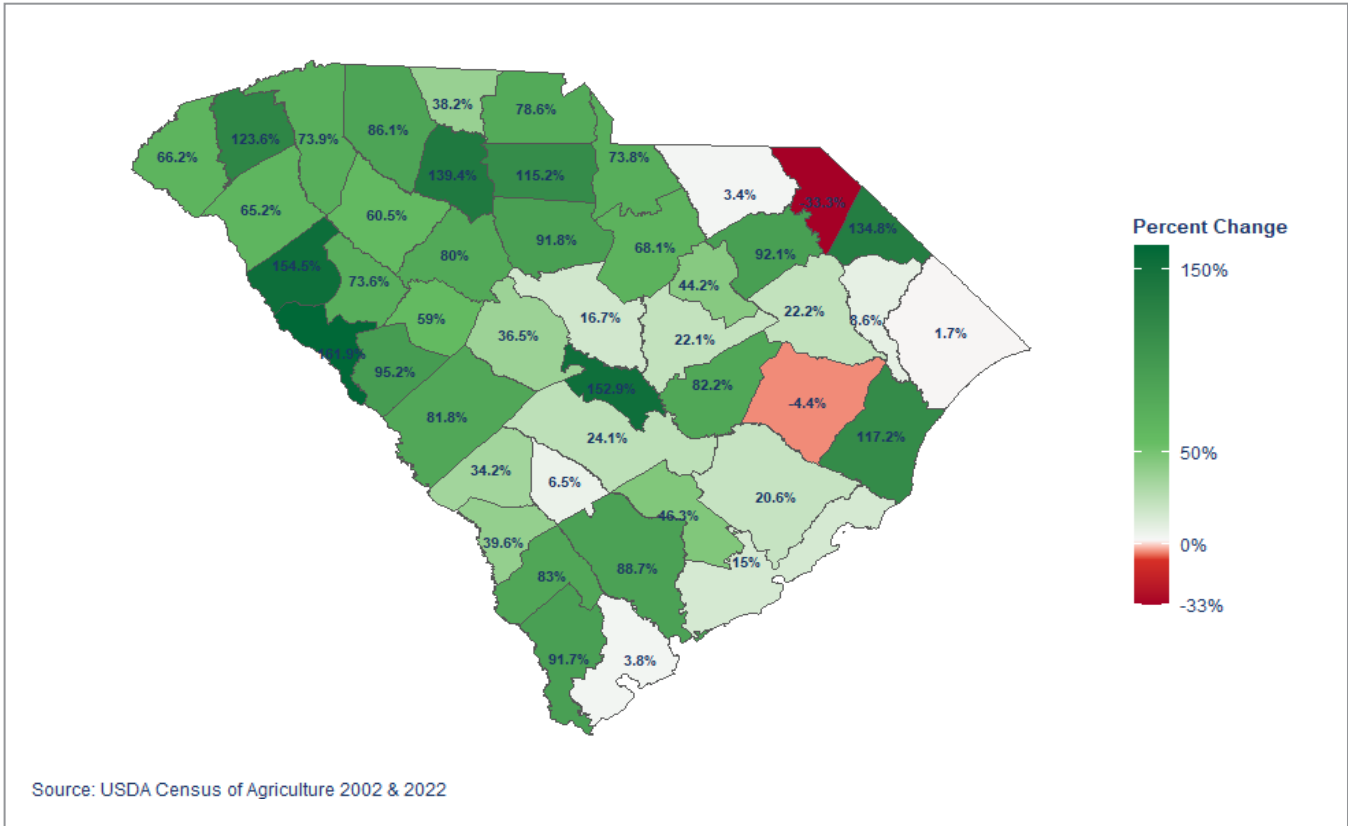
<sup>7</sup> Source: U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), H-2A Employer Data Hub.

Underserved and Under-Resourced Farmers

USDA defines historically underserved farmers as producers who fall into one or more of the following categories: beginning farmers (those with 10 or fewer years of farming experience), socially disadvantaged farmers (individuals belonging to groups that have experienced racial, ethnic, prejudice), limited-resource farmers (those with low farm sales and household income), and veteran farmers. These groups have historically faced barriers in accessing land, credit, technical assistance, and participation in federal agricultural programs.

Although women farmers are not included in this definition, USDA agencies such as the Farm Service Agency (FSA) and Risk Management Agency (RMA) classify women as underserved for certain programs. As of 2022, South Carolina reported 13,491 female farmers, representing over a third of all producers in the state. Between 2012 and 2022, South Carolina saw a 27% increase in female producers. Over the past two decades, most counties in South Carolina experienced growth in the number of female farmers. Marlboro County saw a decline, losing 26 female producers, a 33% decrease since 2002, while Williamsburg County had a smaller decline of 9 producers, or 4%. By percent increase, Abbeville and McCormick counties experienced the most dramatic growth, with female producers rising over 154% and 161%, respectively. In terms of absolute numbers, Spartanburg added the largest number of female producers, 404, followed closely by Aiken with 377. Despite these gains, women farmers continue to face challenges such as limited access to capital, land, and technical assistance.

Figure 8: County-level changes in number of women producers in SC, 2002-2022





In South Carolina, these challenges are particularly evident in the decline of Black farm operators over the past decade. In 2012, there were 2,647 Black producers in the state; by 2022, that number had decreased to 2,383, representing about 7% of all producers. Although Black farmers were once a more prominent part of South Carolina’s agricultural landscape, their share has steadily declined over time. Nationally, Black farmers lost more than 90% of their land from 1910 to 1997, primarily due to discriminatory practices and legal challenges like heirs’ property.<sup>8</sup>

Beginning farmers, defined as those with 10 or fewer years of experience, are a growing demographic in South Carolina. The state counted 12,679 new and beginning producers in 2022. These farmers often encounter barriers such as high start-up costs, limited access to credit, and a lack of mentorship opportunities. The average age of beginning farmers in South Carolina is 48.9 years, which is 10 years younger than the overall average age of farmers in the state. Young farmers under age 35 have decreased from 3138 in 2017 to 2977 in 2022. To better understand how the challenges play out on the ground, the following section highlights perspectives from South Carolina farmers, including those from underserved communities, as well as insights from farmer support organizations.

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<sup>8</sup> Farm Aid. 2022. “Heirs’ Property: 90 Percent Decline in Black-Owned Farmland.” <https://www.farmaid.org/blog/heirs-property-90-percent-decline-black-owned-farmland/>

# Qualitative Findings: Farmers' Perspectives

Farming is a livelihood that demands resilience, but under-resourced farmers particularly those from minority and immigrant communities face additional challenges that make farming even more difficult. These ongoing obstacles not only affect their physical and mental health but also discourage the continuation of farming within their communities.

## Black Farmers and Support Networks

**Tomelia Farms** – Tom and Amelia run a family farm in Ladson, SC, which they started in 2020. The farm specializes in fresh, locally laid chicken eggs and has quickly become more than just a place for production, it also serves as a space for community events, camps, and hands-on learning.

Like many new farmers, they faced early challenges, including zoning hurdles and navigating the details of poultry breeds and genetics for egg production. Amelia shared that additional resources for equipment upkeep, mental health support, and access to agricultural technology would have made the journey smoother. She noted that urban farms often have easier access to people and markets, which rural farmers can sometimes struggle with. Amelia said it was more difficult for them to build strong community relationships because they are an interracial couple, with her being black and Tom being white. Despite these challenges, Tom and Amelia remain dedicated to building a farm that not only provides quality food but also creates opportunities for connection and learning.

**South Carolina Black Farmers Coalition (SCBFC)** - Daryl Orage is the President of the SCBFC, an organization that trains, supports, and advocates for Black farmers in the state. SCBFC connects producers with resources, provides technical training, educational workshops to promote profitable farm businesses, advocates for policy changes, and builds a stronger community of Black farmers across South Carolina.

“Farming is often seen as a form of slavery.”

– Anonymous

In our discussion, Orage reflected on how historical experiences continue to shape perceptions of agriculture, with some community members still viewing farming as tied to slavery and oppression. He emphasized the persistent challenges Black farmers face around land acquisition, farmland loss, and discrimination in lending, particularly with USDA loans that often do not meet farmer’s needs. He noted generational differences, observing that the average age of Black farmers in South Carolina is higher than that of any other racial group, an indicator of the difficulties younger Black farmers encounter when trying to enter and sustain farming. Suggesting that without stronger support, there may be too few younger Black farmers to replace those nearing retirement, putting the future of Black-owned farms at risk.

“Filling out forms for grants and loans is like requiring a master’s degree.”

– Derick Muhammad

Market access emerged as another pressing issue, with many farmers hesitant or even fearful to adopt new practices without adequate support. Orage highlighted the potential of localized cooperatives to strengthen resilience and create shared opportunities, and he pointed to programs like the Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA) as examples of initiatives that have provided support to the farmers. Looking forward, his vision for SCBFC is to help ensure that Black farmers not only gain equitable access to resources but are empowered to thrive as leaders in South Carolina’s agricultural future.

**Bossville Farms** – Bossville Farms is a family-owned hemp farm that began operations in 2020, cultivating over 80 acres of land. They specialize in transforming industrial hemp into a variety of products, including clothing, bags, and cannabinoid-infused items. CEO Derick Muhammad describes their approach as a blend of technology and traditional farming practices, incorporating drone technology through their aerial imaging division, Sky Bossville, to enhance farm management and operations.

Muhammad has faced numerous challenges in establishing the farm. He pointed to the high level of risk involved in hemp farming, changing regulations, and persistent stigma surrounding cannabis-related products. After moving to South Carolina, he described the experience as feeling like he had “jumped back in time.” He noted incidents of racial prejudice and difficulties in dealing with agencies. He also recounted conflicts over land classification, attempts by others to take or undermine their property, and an incident in which local authorities ordered him off his own land.

In addition to these, Muhammad points out barriers related to market access. Despite these hurdles, Bossville Farms continues to thrive. The farm’s dedication to innovation and sustainability has led to the development of a diverse range of hemp-based products. Through their efforts, they are contributing to the growth and acceptance of the hemp industry. In 2024, the South Carolina Black Farmers Coalition recognized him as one of its Farmer of the Year awardees, honoring him with the Connector Award.



Image. Bossville Farms - Derick Muhammad



**Anonymous** – One participant in this study operates a training and support organization focused on historically marginalized farmers, women, and small agricultural groups. Their work centers on helping producers strengthen their operations by connecting them with resources, technical support, and capacity-building opportunities.

In speaking about the challenges faced by farmers, they pointed to the nature of some loan and grant applications, describing them as overly long, often repetitive, and difficult for many old farmers to navigate. They emphasized the lack of consistency, insufficient clarity in communications, and a need for systems and programs that are better tailored to the realities of small and historically marginalized farmers. We also discussed the lack of togetherness among some farmers, which can make it harder and more challenging to achieve better outcomes.

Through their work, they aim to build stronger networks of support and improve farmers' ability to meet regulatory standards, access funding, and sustain their operations. Overall, their mission focuses on strengthening the agricultural ecosystem so that opportunities are more equitable, accessible, and responsive to the needs of underserved producers.

## Hispanic/Latino Farmers

As part of this study, Latino farmers in South Carolina shared their experiences by responding to a series of questions. Both farmers emphasized that while farming itself; tending crops, working under the sun, and caring for the land came naturally, the greater difficulties emerged when navigating financial systems, accessing information, and connecting to markets. One farmer explained that his greatest struggle has been the lack of information about resources. As an immigrant with experience working on farms, he felt confident in the physical aspects of production but found it difficult to locate providers or figure out solutions when problems arose. He also noted that when he had surplus products, he did not know how to sell them effectively.

The second farmer described similar challenges, noting that while farming brought him satisfaction, it was also a lonely endeavor. His limited English proficiency made him feel misunderstood, and at times,

unwelcomed. He recalled moments when asking for help was met with looks that suggested he did not belong. Despite this, he held onto the belief that “he who doesn’t risk, doesn’t win,” and sought support within the community where possible.

“Farming is very hard. And our kids don’t want to do it. I guess my hope is that I can provide for my kids to do something different. It is hard. We need more support for the Latinos to have more farms.”

– Anonymous

Barriers related to loans, market access, and land ownership were consistent across both accounts. The first farmer admitted that, early on, he did not realize the importance of building a relationship with his banker, delaying access to financing. Even now, he still lacks information about land ownership and has not found strong contacts who could help. The second farmer, meanwhile, described loans as intimidating. He shared that he once benefitted from

having a Spanish-speaking staff member at his local bank, but after they left, communication became far more difficult and discouraging. Both also identified market access as a major challenge. While suppliers frequently came to their farms to sell products, neither farmer mentioned receiving active support to help them sell their products. As one explained, “I have never had someone try to help me sell better.”

Reflecting on the decline of minority-owned farms and farmland, both cited limited support and difficult working conditions. The first farmer shared that when he first started farming, the absence of support made it harder to grow quickly or learn how to manage effectively. The second farmer echoed this, linking the decline to a lack of resources and opportunities, which often pushed farmers to leave agriculture entirely. He described this as unfortunate, since “the land is rich and can give a lot.”

Looking toward the future, both farmers expressed cautious hope. The first envisioned receiving more support for branding and marketing so that he could sell his produce more effectively across communities. The second hoped for greater cultural understanding and inclusivity, believing this could create more opportunities for Latino farmers and encourage younger generations to remain in agriculture. He emphasized that “we need to build bridges to get there. Everyone.”



**Image.** Palm Pike Flower Farm – Tasha Trujillo

**Palm Pike Flower Farm** – Tasha Trujillo is the co-founder and CEO of Palm Pike Flower Farm. Her work in flower farming began as a hobby in Miami while she was doing live bee removal and bee keeping. She initially started planting flowers for her bees and soon became interested in growing them on a larger scale. In 2020, she began selling flowers from a small 400-square-foot plot directly to florists. In 2021 she decided to focus fully on flowers and sold her bee business. In 2022, she moved to York County, South Carolina, to have a slower pace of life. With financial help from her parents, she and her partner bought five and a quarter acre, giving her the ability to expand her business.

Moving to rural South Carolina also brought new challenges. In Miami, she had easy access to many florists and could sell nearly everything she grew. In York County, she is farther from major cities like Charlotte, which makes it harder to get her flowers to florists. To adapt, she shifted her business to selling at farmers markets, supplying local stores, and offering floral design services for weddings and events. She has also taken part in programs such as the Clemson New and Beginning Farmer Program, received consultation from the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, and worked a season at Wild Hope Farm, which helped her build skills and connections. Although these programs opened valuable doors, she believes new farmers still need more support, especially in learning the financial and business side of farming.

Finance has been one of her biggest struggles. When she attempted to apply for a USDA microloan to finish building a walk-in cooler, she learned she did not have enough collateral to qualify. Programs were also difficult to navigate because of long, confusing and repetitive paperwork. After Hurricane Helene destroyed 90% of her crops, she felt she didn't qualify for any assistance due to the small size of her farm. She also described experiencing dismissive treatment, microaggressions, or being talked down to when trying to get help, or work with certain companies. These challenges have sometimes made her question whether she should continue farming, especially after major losses. Still, she stays committed and reminds herself that she only fails if she gives up. She also highlighted the importance of supporting local flower farmers, since most flowers sold in the United States are imported, and she hopes the growing interest in local products continues to strengthen small farms like hers.

Tasha also spoke about the social and structural challenges that affect small farmers. She explained that she would love to sell flowers to grocery stores, but many stores prefer to buy from larger farms because it is easier and more consistent for them. She feels this same pattern affecting produce farmers as well. Tasha also worries about how much farmland across the United States is being sold for development and believes more programs should help older farmers who are retiring connect with younger farmers who can take over their operations, so the land does not simply disappear from agriculture. She noted that people sometimes question why someone would choose this career, but she believes perceptions change once people understand the value and happiness it brings.



## New and Beginning Farmers

### Ben Boyles – SC New and Beginning Farmers

Ben Boyles is a Senior Agribusiness Extension Agent with Clemson Cooperative Extension and Director of the South Carolina New and Beginning Farmer Program (SCNBFP). He shared an overview of the program, which has supported more than 600 graduates. The program is offered either in-person typically held in Lexington, SC or online, depending on the year. Each year, about 60 applicants are accepted to the cohort, and they take part in 10 full-day workshops held between April and September, culminating in a graduation ceremony. Applications generally open in December or January and close in March.

He noted several important trends among participants. In recent years, approximately 70% of enrollees have been women, signaling a shift in the demographics of those entering agriculture. About 28% of participants are 35 years old or younger, reflecting the program's role in engaging younger farmers. He also observed that some participants have relocated from other states particularly from the North to South often with land but limited farming experience.

We discussed both opportunities and challenges facing beginning farmers. Agritourism, including events such as Ag + Art Tours, is becoming an increasingly prominent avenue for farm income and community connection. However, the adoption of new technology often requires significant capital investment, which can be a barrier for small-scale and resource-limited farmers. He also emphasized the potential value of farmer cooperatives, which can improve access to markets and resources while fostering stronger community ties.



**Image.** Ben Boyles - SC New and Beginning Farmers Program (SCNBFP) by Clemson (Director)



**Image.** SC Women's Agricultural Network (SC WAgN) Farm Safety Day

### Charlotte Maxwell – Clemson Extension

Charlotte “Charley” Maxwell works as an Agribusiness Agent with Clemson Cooperative Extension and is a workshop coordinator for the South Carolina New and Beginning Farmers Program. In our discussion, we talked about how one of the biggest challenges farmers face today is market access. While many farmers can grow crops successfully, selling them at a fair price is often difficult. Larger grocery stores, for example, often buy their produce from out of state instead of purchasing directly from local farms. Maxwell noted that one reason for this can be the lack of processing and packaging facilities in South Carolina that can handle the wide variety of products grown in the state. Without these resources, farmers struggle

to meet the requirements of larger buyers, which restricts their competitiveness. We also discussed the potential of cooperatives, where farmers can work together to share equipment, reduce costs, and gain access to new markets.

Maxwell serves on the South Carolina Women's Agriculture Network (SC WAgN) Committee which has grown rapidly from 94 members at its inception to about 1,040 members. SC WAgN is a statewide initiative, supported by Clemson Cooperative Extension, that provides women farmers with opportunities to learn, connect, and grow in agriculture. She pointed that women farmers often face extra obstacles when applying for loans and stressed that they should be taken more seriously in these financial processes. When introducing new farming methods, Maxwell explained that it is often more effective to use one farm as an example to encourage neighboring farmers to try the techniques themselves. Many producers feel more comfortable adopting a new practice once they see it working in their local community.



**Image.** SC Women's Agricultural Network (SC WAgN) Farm Safety Day



## Conclusion

South Carolina's agricultural landscape has the potential to provide for a promising future. By investing in the next generation of farmers and ensuring equitable access to resources, the state can nurture a sector that is inclusive and resilient. Farmers envision a future where mentorship, technical assistance, and cooperative approaches empower them to expand operations, access new markets, and adopt innovations that enhance productivity and sustainability. The dedication and ingenuity of producers across diverse communities provide a strong foundation for growth, while sustainable land use safeguards natural resources, intergenerational knowledge transfer preserves the richness of the state's agricultural heritage, and technology adoption supports innovation and efficiency.

In future work, we will explore additional dimensions of South Carolina agriculture, including crop- and livestock-specific revenue trends, regional production differences, and economic outcomes across various scales of operation. Investigating the long-term impacts of emerging technologies, climate variability, and market access strategies on underserved farmers would also provide valuable insights. With deliberate support and strategic investment, South Carolina can cultivate a productive, sustainable, and equitable agricultural sector that provides opportunities for all farmers. Collaboration, innovation, and dedication will ensure the state's agricultural sector continues to flourish as a source of pride and opportunity for generations to come.

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