

OCONEE COUNTY

TASK FORCE

ON AGRICULTURE

FINAL REPORT

Produced by Lisa Jones Consulting, LLC for Oconee County

MARCH 2023

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PART I: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report represents the culmination of six months of work by the Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture (“Task Force”) established by Oconee County Council through Resolution 2022-15, unanimously adopted on August 16, 2022.¹

Recognizing the mounting threats to food producers and farmland, Oconee County Council launched the Task Force to:

- Study the issue of current and projected agriculture industry decline, and specifically, the loss of viable farmland in the County;
- Develop potential solutions for that issue; and
- Report the findings to Council.

Since the resolution passed, the Task Force has met monthly, engaged partners, researched challenges and opportunities, and attended presentations to learn more about tools and opportunities to protect farmland in the county.

The Task Force finds:

- There is sufficient data showing farmland in Oconee County is in decline, in large part due to residential and commercial development. This report contains data from the Agricultural Census, American Farmland Trust, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to support this point.
- The threat to farmland in Oconee County is part of a larger trend, but County Council can act now to implement new policies and investments that can reduce the rate of decline locally.
- There are practical and relevant examples from other South Carolina counties where county policies and programs have helped conserve viable farmland.
- Protecting farmland in the county will require private and public investment; it will not happen passively and without financial and policy prioritization.
- There is existing organizational infrastructure that should collaborate and may require additional capacity to effectively implement the Task Force recommendations, including but not limited to the Oconee County Agricultural Advisory Board, Oconee County Conservation Bank, Oconee Food Council, Oconee County Farm Bureau, FARM Center, and the Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District.
- In order for the Task Force report to positively impact agriculture in Oconee County, there will need to be consistent leadership and action from Oconee County Council to implement the recommendations in this report and in *Oconee County’s 2020 Comprehensive Plan*.

Building on these initial findings, the Task Force assembled recommendations for Oconee County Council to pursue in order to protect viable farmland in Oconee County. The recommendations have been assembled in this report according to urgency and feasibility:

- (1) **Implement the Plan:** Revisit the strategies outlined in the agriculture element of *Oconee County’s 2020 Comprehensive Plan* to identify immediate priorities and approve action steps to implement those priorities.

¹ The resolution can be found in the agenda materials: <https://oconeesc.com/documents/council/agendas-and-minutes/2022/backup-material/2022-08-16-amended-backup.pdf>. It is also included in this report as Appendix A.

- (2) **Fund Land Protection:** Review and adopt a funding strategy to protect farmland that produces food. A detailed description of options—including a county budget allocation, a portion of the fee-in-lieu from multi-county industrial park agreements, and a ballot initiative—are included in this report.
- (3) **Create a Voluntary Program:** The Oconee Agricultural Advisory Board is a resource for County Council to engage to advance the creation of Oconee County Voluntary Agriculture Districts (VAD) for food producers.
- (4) **Increase Staff Capacity:** Further the efficacy of the Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District and other employees dedicated to agricultural land protection by including funding in the annual budget for an employee dedicated to stewarding existing and future agricultural easements, among other responsibilities.

Other actions that County Council can pursue to address the decline of the agriculture industry in Oconee County include:

- (1) Exploring opportunities to increase education programs tied to food production. Programs such as 4-H and Future Farmers of America are important resources for schools and young farmers
- (2) Considering recommendations and findings in the Oconee County Food Council's Community Foods Assessment, projected to be complete in the spring of 2023.
- (3) Implementing planning and zoning policies that support farmland protection, agribusiness, and farming communities.
- (4) Creating a county-level FTE position whose role it is to coordinate and communicate with the many groups and interests involved in food production.
- (5) Conducting polling that will assess the viability of a land conservation ballot initiative.
- (6) Advancing the upgrade of existing meat processing facilities to become USDA certified and work with the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Commerce to promote Oconee County as a site for agricultural processing facilities.

This report is intended to serve as a roadmap for Oconee County Council to protect the agricultural health and character of Oconee County. It provides background information and materials on funding strategies, educational opportunities and programs, and planning tools.

Part VII outlines recommendations and action steps to move the work of the Task Force into the implementation phase. The impact that these recommendations will have on the farming industry in Oconee County will ultimately depend on the level of urgency and action from County Council.

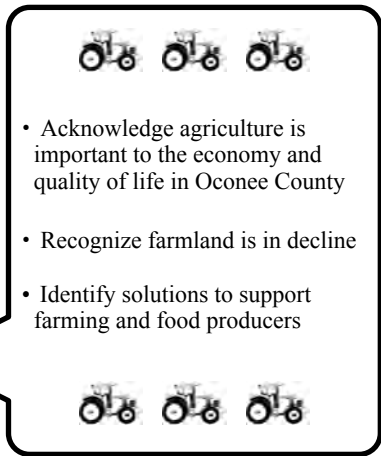
PART II: INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Need

Oconee County’s mission includes protecting “communities, heritage, environment and natural resources, in an ever-changing world”²—a goal that has become increasingly difficult to accomplish in the past three decades.

Farmland is being converted into non-farm uses at an alarming rate. According to recent census data, Oconee County’s farmland has declined approximately 20% from 2002 to 2017.

Farmland decline is part of a national trend stemming from lack of capital; increasing average farmer age; inflation; lack of interest from next generation farmers; and competition from mega-farms. These challenges have led to once valuable farmland being sold to developers for residential tract housing—resulting in a decline in the number of local farm-based businesses.



- Acknowledge agriculture is important to the economy and quality of life in Oconee County
- Recognize farmland is in decline
- Identify solutions to support farming and food producers

To address the threats to farmland in Oconee County, County Council adopted Resolution 2022-15 on August 16, 2022, establishing the Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture. The Task Force met regularly to study the issue of current and projected agriculture industry decline; the loss of viable farmland in the County; and potential solutions for the issue. The results of those meetings are recommendations for County Council to pursue.

The Task Force began with strong foundation of data and research provided through the county’s 2020 comprehensive planning process. Nine public outreach meetings covering all of the voting districts (with approximately 500 citizens participating and 250 comments) revealed that the vast majority of the community considers agriculture to be a valuable county asset. The community values the history, land use, industry, and culture of farming and farmland.

However, the exercise also revealed that one of the biggest challenges in the county is the community’s division on how to manage the growth that jeopardizes valuable assets. Many of the citizens who recognize the value of agriculture also believe that the rights of property owners should supersede the ability of a local government to protect farmland. This opposing viewpoint on the role of local government is a potential challenge that will require leadership at the local level to implement solutions, such as zoning and conservation funding initiatives, that will benefit farmers.

Oconee County Council has formally recognized the need to protect Oconee County’s valuable farmland and to assist farmers as they face increasing challenges to the industry by adopting resolution 2022-15 (Appendix A). The community has expressed a similar desire to take action to protect farmland through their comments during the comprehensive planning process and surveys conducted as part of this report.

The Task Force recommendations contained in this report should serve as a roadmap for the newly elected County Council to protect valuable agricultural resources by building on existing documents, research and data. This report taps into the county’s history, community, land use, and data to identify immediate actions that can prevent further farmland decline, and it explores partnerships that will support Council in accomplishing these goals.

² From Oconee County’s website: <https://oconeesc.com>

Oconee County Task Force Members and Partners

The general composition of the Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture is contained in the language of the resolution. The members are:

(Chair) Frankie Pearson, Oconee County Planning Commission Chair
(Vice-Chair) Emily Hitchcock, Oconee County Conservation Bank Board Chair
(Secretary) Natalie Arnold, Oconee County Food Council Chair
Kim Alexander, Oconee County Agriculture Advisory Board Chair
Stanley Gibson, The Oconee Farm Center Board Chair
Bob Winchester, Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District Chairman
(Advisor) Paul Cain, Oconee County Council District 3
(Advisor) Amanda F. Brock, Oconee County Administrator
(Advisor) James Coley, Oconee County Planning and Zoning Director
(Facilitator) Lisa Jones, LJ Consulting, LLC

The Task Force strategically involved the following partners for input in developing the recommendations included in this report: The Chattanooga Conservancy; Oconee County 4-H; Oconee County Beekeepers Association; Oconee County Cattlemen’s Association; Oconee County Cooperative Extension; Oconee County Farm Bureau; Home Builders Association of Oconee County; Oconee County School’s FFA Chapters; The Oconee Cultivation Project; The Oconee Economic Alliance; Oconee Preservation Unlimited Stewardship Trust (OPUS); The South Carolina Poultry Federation; and The South Carolina Soybean Board.

The Task Force circulated a survey to seek further input and extend outreach outside of the partners listed above (Appendix B). The survey and follow-up phone calls were helpful in identifying community concerns, which can be summarized in the following categories: education, land protection, governance and funding. The survey was not intended to serve as a comprehensive tool for public feedback, as that goal was not included in Resolution 2022-15.³

Agriculture in Oconee County: Challenges and Opportunities

Oconee County’s highest rate of land use is agricultural; nearly two-thirds of the county (excluding the Sumter National Forest) is in agriculture or forestry use.⁴ Farming and agriculture defines the character, health and economy of Oconee County. It is a land use practice rooted in history and, in the case in many agricultural communities, it is under threat.

When it comes to protecting the agricultural industry and land that supports it, there are pervasive issues across the nation—e.g. data gaps, lack of resources and healthcare, regulatory compliance, competition from mega-farms, inadequate infrastructure, and changing weather patterns.

Prime farmland is steadily being lost to development that could be accommodated on degraded soils even when populations are not increasing. Scattered development in farm-



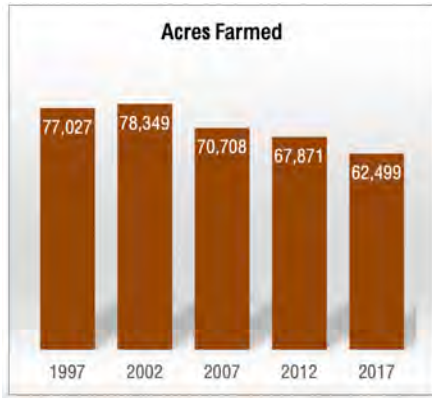
- Challenges include data gaps, property rights, development pressure
- Opportunities include abundant land, demand for local food, agri-tourism, agribusiness, and recreation
- The opportunities outnumber the challenges in Oconee County



³ The 2020 Oconee County comprehensive planning process lasted 12 months and included 49 meetings with 500 attendees. 600 comments were submitted and 1,100 surveys were completed. This public feedback was included in the adopted document. The Task Force report includes a recommendation that the County implement Element 8 of the *Oconee County Comprehensive Plan* to take action on recent public input.

⁴ *Oconee County Comprehensive Plan* Chapter 8-8: <https://oconeesc.com/documents/planning-zoning/comprehensive-plan/agriculture.pdf>

ing areas removes agricultural land from production both directly and indirectly. Development removes farmland’s agricultural productivity directly. Indirectly, development often pushes nearby farmers off of their land by causing a general increase in land values—leading to higher property taxes. Residential development in agricultural areas also fragments the community and concentration of working farmland needed to maintain an economically viable agricultural sector.



Oconee County is experiencing the impacts of this unfortunate trend as farmland has been decreasing in acreage. From 2002 to 2017, farm acreage in Oconee County decreased from 78,349 acres to 62,499 acres.⁵ Much of the once agricultural land that is converted to other uses is subdivided and used for residential, suburban development.

Although the loss of farmland is a national trend, there are actions that can be taken locally that will positively affect the landscape. Local governments can implement zoning to proactively protect farmland. For example, Oconee County can restrict large parcel subdivisions and create overlay districts that support farming land uses.

Currently in Oconee County, it is easy for developers to buy agricultural land with prime soils, subdivide it, and convert it to residential or commercial development. In fact, many developers “zoning shop” to find places like Oconee where there is minimal zoning — making it is easier and cheaper for them to build out tract housing developments.

Despite the absence of significant zoning restrictions, there are several traits that place Oconee County at an advantage for advancing farmland protection⁶ — a rich history with multi-generational farms; a buffer of the Sumter National Forest; a growing tourist economy coupled with the growth of the restaurant sector; a demand for local food; and an abundance of large rural parcels (Figure 2).

Oconee County has demonstrated a commitment to conservation that makes it an appealing investment for agri-business development and land trusts. More than 7,290 acres of land are already permanently protected under 49 easements in the county, not including the Sumter National Forest (84,000 acres), state parks (2,699 acres) and city parks (572 acres).⁷

Another Oconee County advantage is the demonstrated political will to protect farmland, as evidenced by the county resolution that created the Task Force; as well as the adoption of the 2020 Comprehensive Plan that serves as a guide for the County’s growth and development for the next ten years. The plan includes strong recommendations for protecting agriculture, as well as pages of strategies to accomplish this goal. This report reinforces the recommendations in the Comprehensive Plan and provides a roadmap for implementation.

⁵ 2002 and 2017 Census of Agriculture, County Profiles, USDA

⁶ Agriculture is a term that can be used to include forestry and crops grown for feed and fuel. For the purpose of this report, the use of the word agriculture refers to food and husbandry goods that are produced to feed people—a priority for the vitality of the farming community and overall food security in Oconee County.

⁷ Data compiled and provided to the Task Force by the OSWCD

PART III: OCONEE COUNTY'S AGRICULTURAL LANDSCAPE

The simplest approach to understanding the agricultural landscape in Oconee County is through maps that illustrate current trends, large parcels at risk of subdivision, prime soils, and future land use possibilities.

Prime Farmland

Prime farmland is an important characteristic and is elaborated upon in the Comprehensive Plan (p. 8-8). Prime farmland is defined as having the “best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed crops and that is available for these uses.”⁸ USDA soil data shows that 7% of Oconee’s soil is prime farmland. This translates into 30,650 acres.

It should be noted that these soils are highlighted on properties that are available for these uses. In yellow, you will see properties that could qualify if they were protected.

Statewide Importance

The state of South Carolina has also identified soils of “statewide importance,” which means that they are near prime farmland and produce high yields of crops when managed according with best management farming methods. Based on criteria set by the state of South Carolina, 10.4% of the land area of Oconee County (44,829 acres) is considered to have soils of statewide importance to agriculture.⁹

Local Importance

Local governments have the ability to identify valuable farmland and wildlife corridors through their own planning efforts. Oconee County does not have a separate layer of criteria that identifies Farmland of Local Importance (FLI), but it is an option that Oconee planning staff could work together with the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) staff to consider in order to expand priority conservation lands and to qualify for certain federal funds. This type of designation could serve as a benefit that conveys to participants in a Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD), a program that is described in more detail later in the report.

⁸ USDA, NRCS Field Office Technical Guide, https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/CO/5a_Prime_Farmland_Definition.pdf

⁹ *Oconee County Comprehensive Plan*, Chapter 8: Agriculture Element, 2020. <https://oconeesc.com/documents/planning-zoning/comprehensive-plan/agriculture.pdf>; <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-7/subtitle-B/chapter-VI/subchapter-F/part-657>

Existing Land Use Map

Oconee County
SOUTH CAROLINA

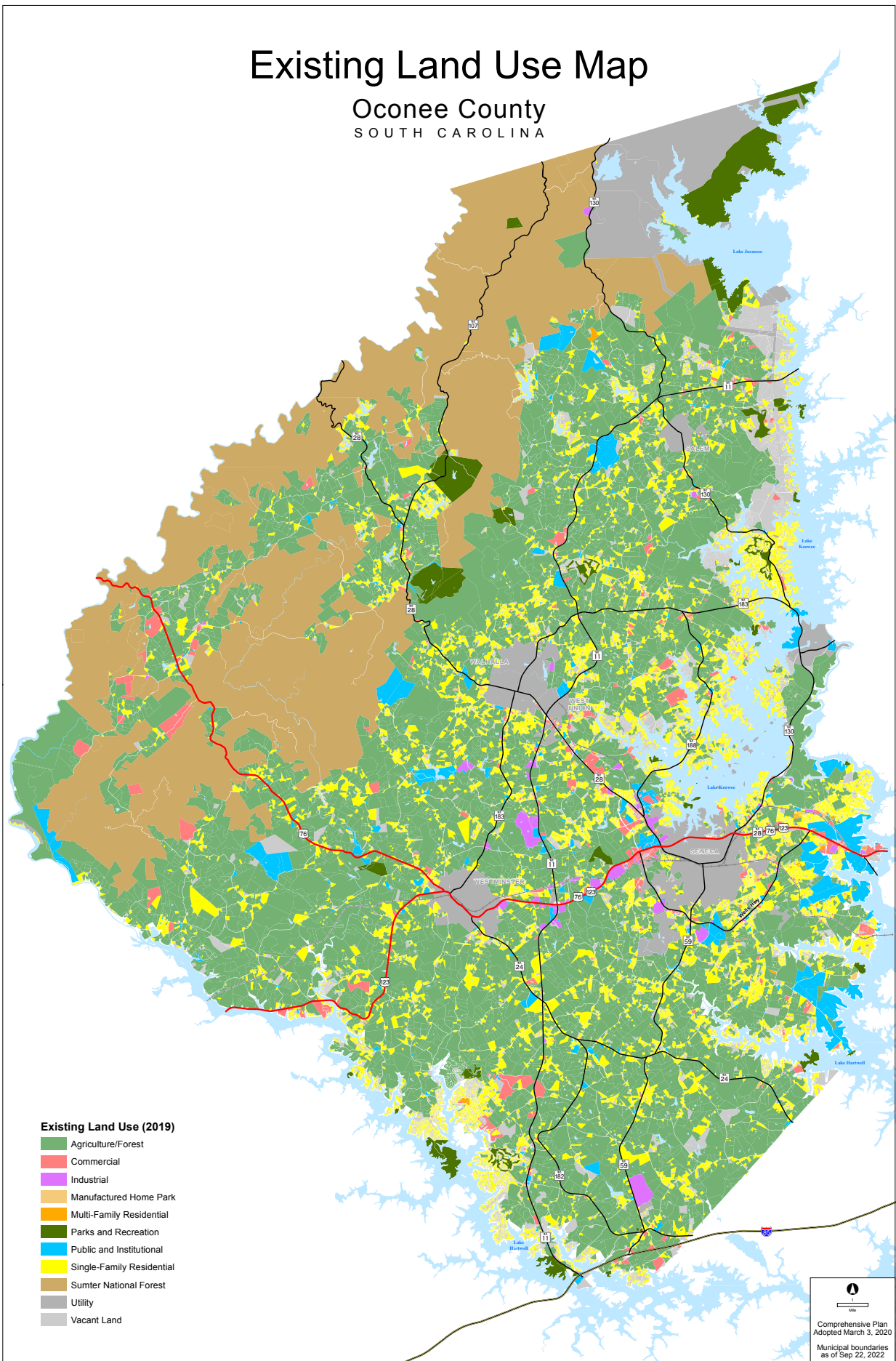


Figure 1 - The existing land use map shows that residential growth (in yellow) follows lakes and roadways, as well as incorporated areas.

Large Parcels

Oconee County

SOUTH CAROLINA

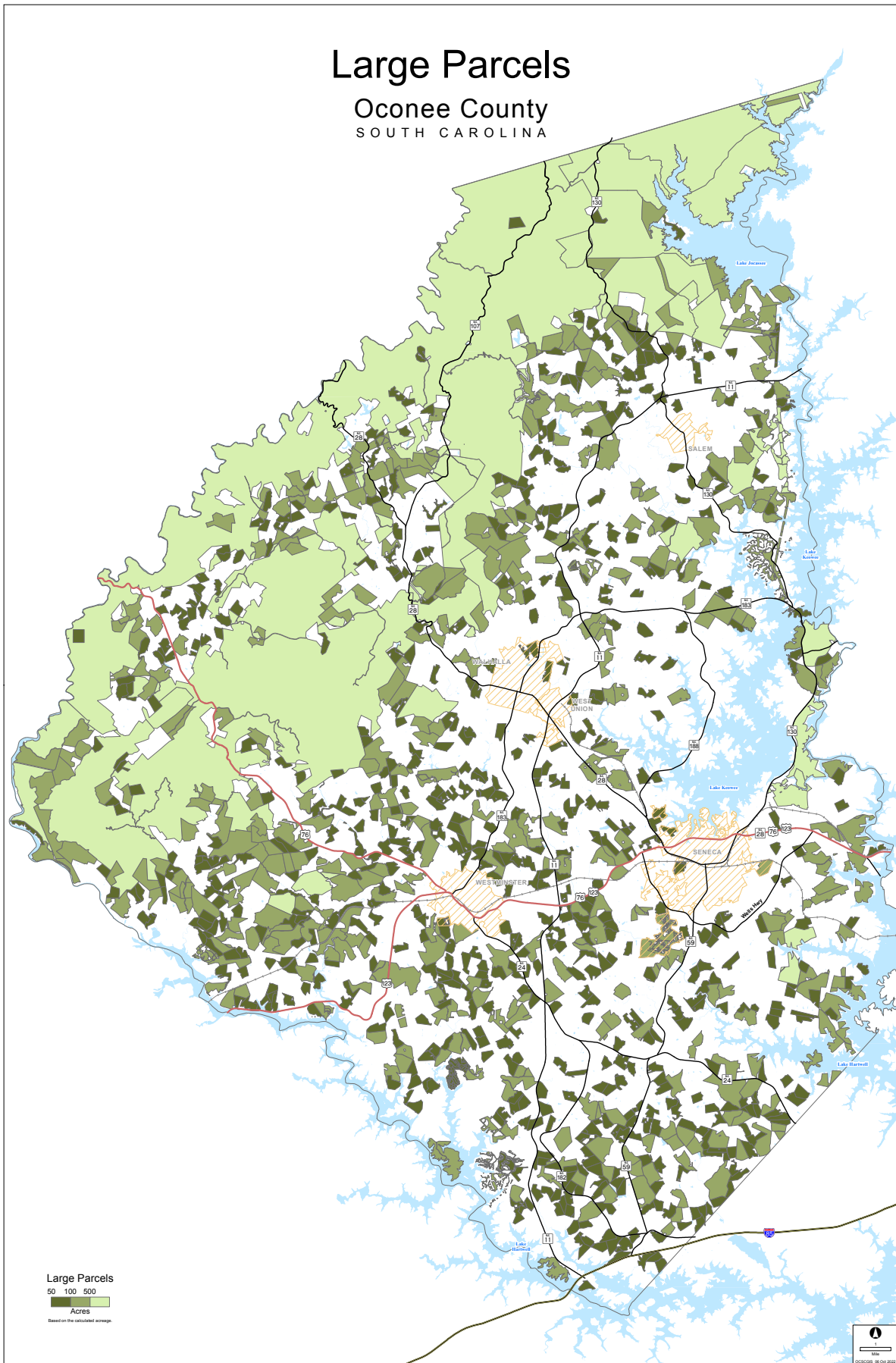


Figure 2 - The Oconee County Planning Department created this map to identify parcels larger than 50 acres (as of December 2022). It shows that there are large tracts in tact in the southeastern corner of the county, as well as along the Sumter National Forest and the eastern side of Lake Keowee. This map can be used to identify opportunities, as well as threats, especially along the I-85 corridor.

Prime Farmlands

Oconee County
SOUTH CAROLINA

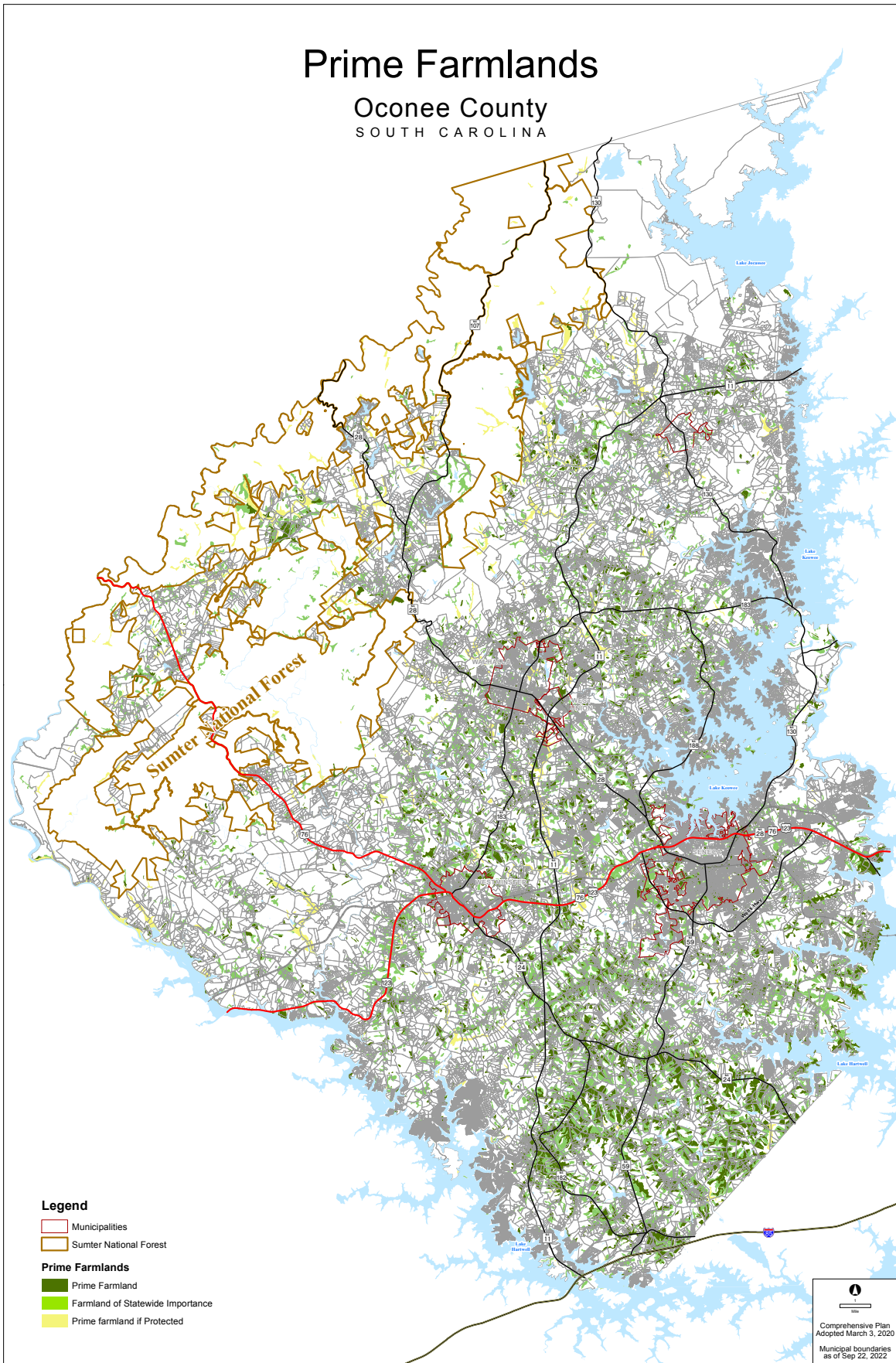


Figure 3 - Much of the prime farmland and soils of statewide significance are in the southeastern corner of the county and also run from south to north from Westminster to just northeast of Walhalla. As the 208 Water Quality Management Agency for Oconee County, Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority should consider avoiding areas with concentrated prime farmlands when planning sewer infrastructure expansion along the I-85 corridor.

Future Land Use Map

Oconee County
SOUTH CAROLINA

This Future Land Use Map is non-regulatory and imposes no standards or restrictions. While the majority of commercial and industrial growth will occur in the rural suburban and small town urban areas shown on the map, factors such as the availability of infrastructure and existing uses will impact the pattern of development. Additionally, a number of nodes of limited commercial and industrial uses will develop throughout the county where sufficient infrastructure and available lands allow.

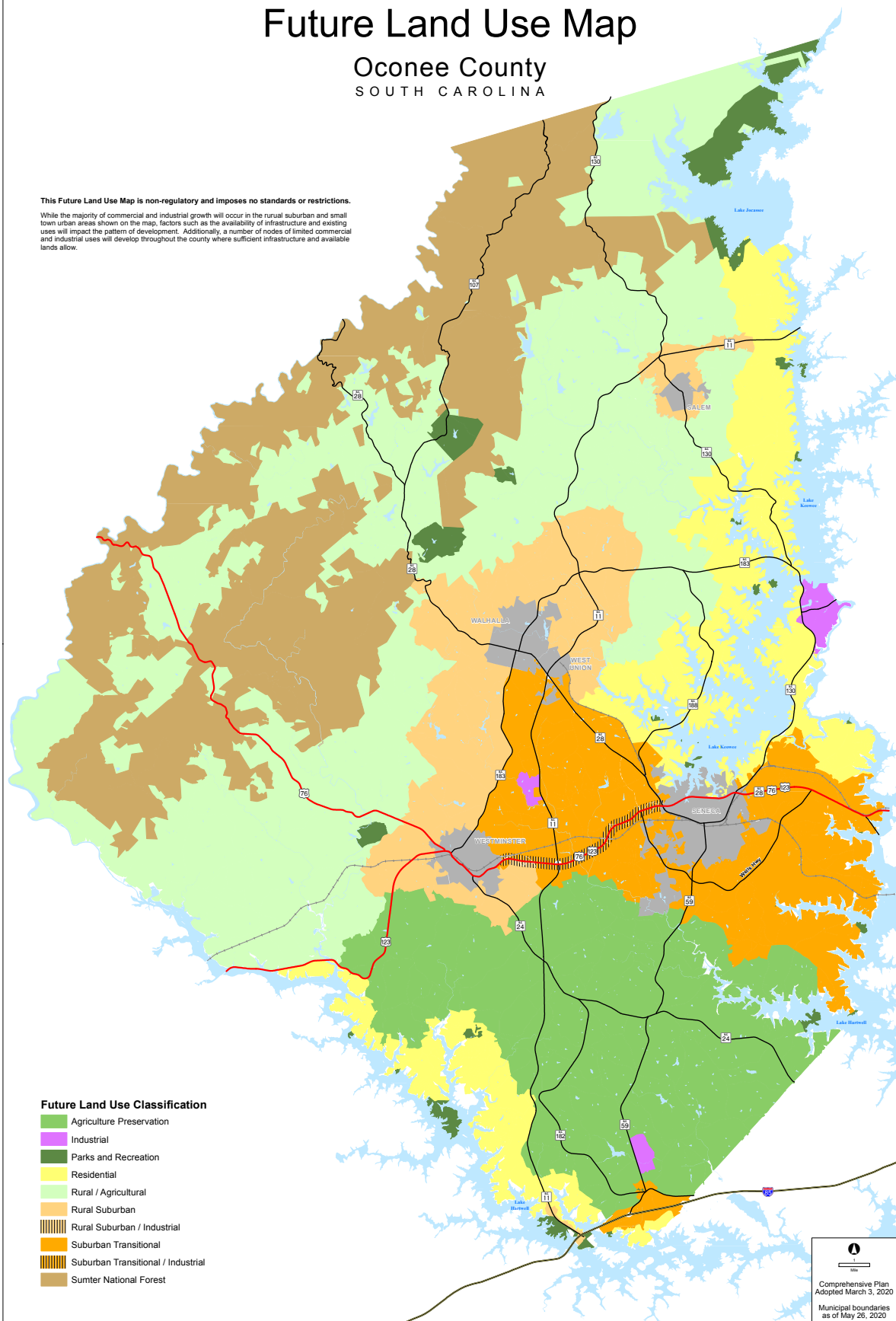


Figure 4 - The goal for future agricultural land uses in the southeastern part of the county follows the pattern of prime soils and current land uses. The extension of sewer infrastructure near the I-85 corridor will impact this land use.

PART IV: TOOLS FOR PROTECTING FARMLAND

There are two approaches to addressing agricultural land protection—conservation easements or deed restrictions; and planning and zoning. Oconee County can plan for land protection corridors that will link agricultural lands and farmer networks by tapping into these important tools.

Land Protection: Conservation Easements and Deed Restrictions

Conservation Easements

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements that restrict land rights in order to protect significant historic, environmental, archaeological, agricultural, or cultural resources. Land trusts, nonprofits and certain government entities can all qualify as easements holders. In Oconee County, examples of qualifying entities include the Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District, Upstate Forever and The Nature Conservancy. Land owners who donate easements may be eligible for tax benefits.

Deed Restrictions

Deed restrictions are similar in nature to conservation easements in that they limit the activities that can occur on restricted properties though the property deed. However, they are less permanent in nature and do not have many of the financial benefits that come with conservation easements. Deed restrictions are frequently used to control commercial development, lot size, and building height.

Planning and Zoning: Agricultural Zoning, Overlay and Voluntary Agricultural Districts

Agricultural Protection Zoning

Zoning through ordinances is the primary tool available to a local governing body to help implement comprehensive plans for future growth.¹⁰ It is often less popular politically in counties that hold strong beliefs in independent property rights, leaving those areas more vulnerable to residential development. Developers often seek out land where planning and zoning is absent. According to South Carolina law, the purpose of zoning is to guide development in accordance with existing and future needs of the community and “to promote public health, safety, morals, convenience, order, appearance, prosperity and general welfare.”¹¹

Agricultural protection zoning can prohibit non-farm development on prime agricultural soils, establish agricultural buffers between working farms and residential development to minimize conflicts, and codify right-to-farm provisions that protect farmers from nuisance complaints.

Once proper zoning is in place to conserve agriculture, county planners and leaders can implement programs that will protect farmland and farm-based businesses.

Oconee Agricultural Overlay Zone

An overlay designation is not a separate district classification and is useful when there is a special interest in an area that does not coincide with the underlying zone boundaries — e.g. farmland and agricultural production. Overlay zones place a set of requirements or relaxes a set of requirements imposed by the

¹⁰ S.C. Code § 6-29-720

¹¹ S.C. Code § 6-29-710

underlying zoning district.¹² This type of zoning designation could be used in conjunction with a Voluntary Agricultural District or stand alone a separate classification.

Another agricultural zoning technique is the use of density zoning which can limit the ability landowners have to subdivide large tracts of land.

Other regulatory approaches include establishing transfer of development rights programs targeted at preserving working farmlands, enacting agricultural land loss mitigation requirements, and requiring conservation or cluster development that preserves working farmland as permanent open space. Local governments may also encourage permanent protection of farmland through the establishment of purchase of development rights programs, conservation easements, or other mechanisms.

Voluntary Agricultural Districts

These districts foster collaboration and partnerships that can help delineate lands where food is being produced. Benefits include protecting the community's rural heritage and economy, creating a sense of community and region and sustaining food production on property by conveying benefits to the landowners.

Oconee County staff should consider working with the Oconee Agricultural Advisory Board to establish parameters for which properties would qualify for inclusion in these districts. The landowner would voluntarily agree to farm his/her land for a certain term length—10 years, for example—and would make a request to apply for this designation to the board. The board would then determine whether the application should be recommended to the Planning Commission, and subsequently County Council. Once approved, a conservation agreement would be put into place. The approved property would be identified on a county map as food-producing land. For more information on Voluntary Agriculture Districts, see Appendix C.

¹² 2018 *Comprehensive Planning Guide for Local Governments*, <https://www.masc.sc/SiteCollectionDocuments/Land%20Use%20Planning/Comp%20Planning%20Guide.pdf>. p 18.

PART V: FUNDING FARMLAND PROTECTION

There are three strategies local governments in South Carolina can pursue to fund conservation and parks—special taxes and bonds; discretionary annual spending (i.e. budget appropriations); and special fees. If the county is committed to protecting farmland and prime soils, there will need to be a financial component to the initiative. Oftentimes, the initiative of local expenditures will poise local governments in stronger positions to match and leverage their investments with state and federal funds.

A funding strategy for Oconee County can be developed through collaborative efforts with non-profits, citizens, staff and Council representation. Many county programs began as citizen initiated efforts that had strong non-profit partners, such as the Trust for Public Land and Upstate Forever.

OCONEE COUNTY REVENUE GENERATING OPTIONS FOR LAND PROTECTION

Strategy 1: Local Option Taxes and Bonds

There are many revenue sources from which you can draw to find land protection. The table below provides a snapshot of options available to local governments in South Carolina.

	Property Tax	Hospitality Tax	Transportation Sales Tax*	Greenspace Tax*	Capital Sales Tax*	Accommodations Tax
Uses	Revenue designated annually to specific purposes, such as parks and conservation projects.	Revenue used for tourism-related activities, such as parks, recreation and open space.	Revenue used for recreation, transportation, and conservation projects; debt service; greenbelt projects can be added if original projects are complete and the ballot language allows it.	Revenue used for conservation & preservation projects and for associated debt service.	Revenue used to fund capital projects such as roads, bridges, public facilities, recreation facilities; water and sewer projects; and related debt service.	Revenue used for tourism related buildings; cultural, historic, or recreational facilities; beach access; renourishment, and other tourism-related lands and water access.
Authorization	Annually by a vote of county council; millage rate.	Council ordinance; not to exceed 2%.	General election referendum; up to 1%.	Referendum; Cannot occur in counties with more than 2 sales and use taxes in place; Up to 1%.	Referendum Up to 1%.	County council ordinance adopted by a positive majority vote. Up to 3% in the county.
Revenue Source	Based on property value and use.	All prepared foods and/or beverages prepared for immediate consumption.	Retail and unprepared foods are taxable.	Retail and unprepared foods are taxable.	Retail sales except unprepared foods.	Rental of hotel rooms, campgrounds, boarding houses, mobile home parks, etc.
Passage and Expiration	Reviewed annually.	Adopted by local council.	When the maximum amount allowed in the referendum is reached or the maximum amount of time is reached, whichever comes first. Not to exceed 25 years.	Referendum must appear on the ballot in a general election on an even-numbered year.	Expires strictly based on the maximum amount of time included in the referendum.	Adopted by local council.

Figure 5 - Options for Local Governments to Fund Conservation in South Carolina (Lisa Jones Consulting, LLC, 2023).

*Bonds can be issued as part of the taxes only if specific language is included as a separate question on the referendum.

Strategy 2: Designate Funds to Conservation Programs through a Budget Appropriation

Generally, conservation funds secured through the budget process are substantially less than those secured through ballot measures. The benefit of the discretionary funding strategy is that an allocation can occur relatively quickly with council approval. Greenville County used this method to fund the recently formed Greenville County Historic and Natural Resources Trust at \$2 million. Council members appointed members to a board that oversees project selection and funding. The Oconee County Conservation Bank could serve as this board.

Strategy 3: Impact Fees

Impact fees paid by developers to a governmental entity can be used to fund certain capital improvements needed to service new growth. A local government may approve impact fees by ordinance approved through a positive majority of the council. In 2022, a legislative amendment passed that severely limits how impact fees can be used in South Carolina.

Strategy 4: Fee-in-Lieu of Taxes (FILOT)

A portion of the fee-in-lieu from multi-county industrial park agreements can be used for farmland conservation. A percentage of the fee could be administered directly through the county or through the Oconee County Conservation Bank.

Strategy 5: General Obligation Bond

General obligation bonds can be authorized for any purpose, including farmland acquisition and improvements for parks and open space. They are the most popular conservation financing tool in South Carolina.¹³

PARTNERSHIPS AVAILABLE TO OCONEE COUNTY FOR LAND PROTECTION

Private and non-profit investments in land protection also exist. In many, if not all of these examples, the entities buying the interest in the property require matching funds. This is why having a local matching fund is exponentially more valuable than the initial outlay of funds.

The US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS)

NRCS programs are funded through the USDA Farm Bill. NRCS helps provide advice and assistance to landowners on best practices to address resource concerns including soil, water, air, plants and animals. They help develop conservation plans and offer voluntary conservation programs that can increase soil health and fertility, reduce erosion, improve animal habitat and diversity, and ensure farm and forestland for future generations of South Carolinians. Through the USDA Farm Bill programs, NRCS in South Carolina offers Financial Assistance (FA) programs that can provide cost-sharing assistance to help landowners implement conservation projects on the ground. They have farmer-specific programs such as the Agricultural Management Assistance (AMA) program that helps producers manage financial risk through diversification, marketing or natural resource conservation practices. NRCS also offers the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) as a partner-driven approach to conservation that helps fund solutions that address challenges on agricultural land.¹⁴ These programs can often be used in combination with other resources and local matches to help farmers stay on their land and improve their farm businesses to become financially viable.

¹³ <https://conservation Almanac.org/programs/south-carolina/>

¹⁴ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/conservation-basics/conservation-by-state/south-carolina>

Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District

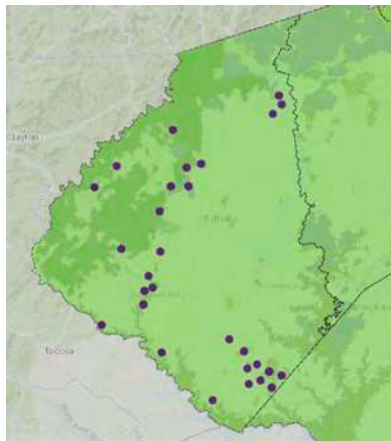
The Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District (OSWCD) is a subdivision of state government whose mission is to lead “conservation stewardship efforts in Oconee County through technical assistance, educational public outreach and agricultural support.”¹⁵ OSWCD is both a land trust and an education resource. They currently hold 24 conservation easements on 2,715 acres since 2007. As part of their strategic plan, they strive to identify and partner with 2-4 landowners seeking conservation easements on their property by working more collaboratively with the South Carolina Conservation Bank and NRCS.

South Carolina Farm Bureau

The mission of the SC farm Bureau is to “promote agricultural interests in the state of South Carolina and optimize the lives of those involved in agriculture while being respectful to the needs and concerns of all citizens of our state.”¹⁶ This agency specializes in advocacy, outreach, education, and leadership development for farm leaders. In some states, and recently up for discussion in South Carolina, the Farm Bureau has been an active participant in developing agricultural land trusts.

Upstate Land Conservation Fund

The Upstate Land Conservation Fund “unites the missions and expertise of local conservation organizations and agencies behind one common goal: to conserve special places before they are lost forever.”¹⁷ The fund is administered by three community foundations and is funded through private donations. Non-profits or government agencies may receive financial support for conservation projects that impact the upstate region, including Oconee County. Funds may be used to buy fee simple land or offset the costs of conservation easements and match federal, state, and private grants for conservation.



Properties protected with SCCB funds in Oconee County, Esri, HERE, Garmin, USGS, NGA, EPA, USDA, NPS | The Nature Conservancy South Carolina

South Carolina Conservation Bank

The SC Conservation Bank's mission is “to improve the quality of life in South Carolina through the conservation of significant natural resource lands, wetlands, historical properties, archeological sites, and urban parks.”¹⁸ Part of their objective is to “protect farmlands, especially family farms” and to “encourage cooperation and innovative partnerships among landowners, state agencies, municipalities, and non-profit organizations.”

Leveraging funds, meaning providing a match from a local funding source, is important in the competitive Conservation Bank process. From the Conservation Bank website: “Applications with the best leverage will often be selected over a similar application without any leverage. By using this leverage, the Bank has been able to conserve over 329,000 acres of significant lands statewide...”¹⁹

¹⁵ Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District’s Five Year Strategic Plan: 2022-2027

¹⁶ <https://www.scfb.org>

¹⁷ <https://www.upstatelandconservationfund.org>

¹⁸ <https://sccbanc.sc.gov>

¹⁹ <https://sccbanc.sc.gov/about-us/leveraging-funds>

PART VI: EDUCATION

One of the best ways to secure the future of farming is by investing in the next generation of farmers. There are several organizations and programs that are supported by Clemson University Cooperative Extension that provide resources and opportunities to children interested in agriculture.

Oconee County 4-H

Clemson Extension has a 4-H Youth Development program that “uses a learn-by-doing approach to help youth gain the knowledge and skills to be responsible, productive and contributing members of society. This mission is accomplished by creating safe and inclusive learning environments, the involvement of caring adults, and utilizing the expertise and resources of Clemson University and the nationwide land-grant university system.”²⁰

Like most education-based programs, there needs to be an adult sponsor or leader who is willing to take on a local chapter. Oconee County could help advertise the opportunity on their website and through recognition ceremonies.

South Carolina Future Farmers of America

FFA is an intra-curricular organization for students interested in agriculture and leadership. FFA helps its members explore interests in a broad range of agricultural career pathways. Agriculture teachers must be registered as a chapter leader and will have access to all chapter-related items, such as membership, ability to order FFA items and access scholarship opportunities for their members. Mentorship could be provided through the Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District position.

Small grants are available through the A.D. Boggs Grant Program to support local 4-H and FFA chapters by offering them additional opportunities to participate in agriculturally related projects.²¹

South Carolina Farm to School Programs

Clemson Extension has many resources for teachers to begin Farm to School programs within the classroom. Those resources can be found here. The challenge with Farm to School is that it is a program that relies on the interest of the teacher. The county could offer incentives to teachers who institute F2S programs in their classrooms. There are also resources for how to have a cafeteria move to more local farm-grown produce procurement.²²

²⁰ <https://www.clemson.edu/extension/4h/county/oconee.html>

²¹ https://www.scfb.org/sites/default/files/documents/County%20Scholarship%20Applications/Grant%20Application_FILLABLE.pdf

²² <https://scfarmtoschool.com>; <https://scfarmtoschool.com/cafeteria/>; <https://scfarmtoschool.com/farmers/>

PART VII: RECOMMENDATIONS

There are steps that Oconee County Council can take in the near future to ensure that progress is being made in protecting agricultural land. Strategies that Oconee County should explore to protect farmland include agricultural zoning, transfer or purchase of development rights programs, farmland mitigation requirements, and conservation development regulations, as well as the strategies outlined in the 2020 Comprehensive Plan.

Most meaningful actions to protect agriculture, especially farming that is producing food for people in Oconee County, will involve financial investments in land and infrastructure, as well as restrictive development measures that prevent farmland from being converted to non-farm uses.

IMMEDIATE ACTIONS

- Revisit Comp Plan strategies
- Invest in farmland protection
- Increase farmland zoning options and farmers incentives
- Hire an additional Oconee Soil and Water District employee



EVALUATE AGRICULTURE STRATEGIES IN THE 2020 COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

Many effective strategies for protecting farmland were identified in the 2020 Comprehensive Plan. These strategies are pulled directly from the Comprehensive Plan:

Goal 8.1. Support and Protect the Agricultural Industry in Oconee County.

Objective 8.1.1. Recognize important agricultural land as a valuable natural resource to protect for future generations.

- Advocate use of “Best Management Practices” in farmland and forest operations.
- Encourage and support collaboration between landowners and public and private agencies in the development of ecologically and economically sound plans for preservation and restoration of farmland and forests.
- Work with SCDOT and other state and regional agencies to ensure projects for infrastructure facility maintenance and expansion will not be detrimental to the continuation of agriculture and silviculture.
- Limit non-agricultural development in productive and prime agricultural areas to densities and development patterns that are consistent with the continuation of economically viable agriculture.
- Support state legislation that links incentives to continue farming (such as state income tax credits or differential assessment for property taxes and affirmative supports for the business of agriculture) with controls preventing conversion of the recipient's agricultural land to non-farm uses.
- Seek grants and take advantage of state and federal programs to assist with the purchase of development rights and agricultural easements on prime agricultural land.
- Ensure that the impacts to adjacent farms and forest land is part of the deliberation and decision making for proposed public projects.
- Work with the state Real Estate Licensing commission to add an “Agricultural Disclosure Act” to ensure that potential home/land/business purchasers are made aware that agricultural activity is occurring on land adjacent to the purchaser’s property of interest.
- Activate vacant and underutilized County owned property to facilitate a program that invites entrepreneurs, non-profits, residents, and other groups to begin entry-level agricultural businesses, community gardens, and pilot programs for engaging residents in the agricultural processes.
- Create a staff position of Agricultural communication and coordination to coordinate and communicate with farmers, foresters, local governments, agricultural groups, and the public on agricultural and forestry matters.

Objective 8.1.2. Enhance agricultural operations and opportunities.

- Work with state and federal agencies to attract agribusiness-related grants and revenue sources and support efforts to establish pilot programs related to new agricultural technologies and products.
- Provide appropriate assistance to expand non-traditional and specialty agribusiness opportunities.
- Ensure the ability of a farm to have a farm-related business onsite.
- Promote the establishment of new farm enterprises through support of training for interested persons.
- Allow agricultural products processing facilities to locate in areas with convenient access to farms, but ensure that they do not negatively impact rural character or scenic vistas.
- Support South Carolina right-to-farm laws and consider adopting a county right-to-farm policy.
- Promote farm stands and farmers markets in rural and urban areas and local food hub(s) with adjoining counties
- Consider adopting a Voluntary Agricultural and Forestal Areas program.

- Encourage and support programs that educate and engage residents of all ages in aspects of farming and agriculture.


Goal 8.3. Ensure continuing access to healthy, fresh food.

Objective 8.3.1. Eliminate food deserts and ensure access to healthy food.

- Integrate food system policies and planning into County land use, transportation, and capital improvement plans.
- Encourage residents to supplement personal food sources with gardening and fresh food preservation.
- Recruit, support, and incentivize businesses that provide healthy food choices in all areas of the County.
- Revise land use policies to require healthy food access as a part of development standards, prohibit private restrictions that limit gardens, and community gardens, in residential areas when economic incentives are offered by the County to a developer .
- Work collaboratively with non-profits and other entities to address the needs of vulnerable populations (e.g. elderly, children, homeless).
- Support new opportunities for distribution of locally and regionally produced food.
- Revise the zoning code to require healthy food access as a part of development standards.
- Work collaboratively to ensure that regional emergency preparedness programs include food access and distribution and are working toward the goal of establishing regional capacity for feeding the population for 2 to 3 months in an emergency.
- Demonstrate the use of agriculture as a method of mitigating climate change.

Action Step

The Oconee Agriculture Advisory Board will work closely with county planning staff to review the strategies in the Agriculture Element of the Comprehensive Plan and will issue a brief report to council on progress to date.



These recommendations are found in the Oconee County Comprehensive Plan, Agriculture Element, Chapter 8-20.²³

Extensive engagement and research went into the last iteration of the Oconee County Comprehensive Plan in 2020. Council should endeavor to review the recommendations in the Agriculture Element of the Comprehensive Plan and create a plan for future implementation. This report provides a starting point for that process. The Agricultural Advisory Board of Oconee County will be a driving force in carrying this work forward.

Action step: The Oconee Agriculture Advisory Board will work closely with county planning staff to review the strategies in the Agriculture Element of the Comprehensive Plan and will issue a brief report to council on progress to date.

INVEST IN FARMLAND PROTECTION

Include **funding in the general budget** and explore the options in Figure 5. Funding should be dedicated to land protection with a focus on prime soils and priority farmland for the state and county. Revenue from these funding streams could be administered through the already in-place Oconee County Conservation Bank, in conjunction with land trusts, the Farm Bureau and Oconee County. Greenville County’s Historic and Natural Resources Trust should serve as a model—Greenville County Council included \$2 million in their most recent bi-annual budget dedicated to land conservation. The Greenville County Council appointed a board similar to the OCCB to review applications using objective funding criteria and make recommendations for awards.

Use **a portion of the fee-in-lieu from multi-county industrial park agreements** for farmland conservation. A percentage of the fee could be administered directly through the county or through the OCCB.

Oconee County Council can simultaneously explore the viability of funding land conservation through taxes and fees through polling—without committing to action unless the public supports it. Many counties in South Carolina have engaged the Trust for Public Land (TPL) and Conservation Voters of South Car-

²³ *Oconee County Comprehensive Plan*, Chapter 8: Agriculture Element, 2020. <https://oconeesc.com/documents/planning-zoning/comprehensive-plan/agriculture.pdf>

olina (CVSC) to conduct polling to **determine the viability of ballot initiative or fee**. Oftentimes, these polling exercises can be fee reduced or free of charge if the full council supports the project.

Another consideration for Council would be to put an advisory question on the ballot to gauge public support for protecting farmland and food producing businesses.

Action step: County Council will request a presentation from the Trust for Public Land on polling options and strategies to fund land conservation.

ESTABLISH VOLUNTARY AGRICULTURE DISTRICTS

Working closely with the county planning department, the Oconee Agricultural Advisory Board should explore advancing an ordinance that would establish **Voluntary Agriculture Districts** for food producers.

Under such a program, landowners could choose to opt into a program that identifies their farm on a map as part of a community of food producers in exchange for an agreement that the landowner will continue to farm a given unit of time. The ordinance would delineate what benefits would convey to the landowner as a result of opting in—such as extending the current property tax valuation for the duration of the agreement—as well as the process for approval.

Action step: This item will be added to the agenda of the next Oconee Agricultural Advisory Board meeting. Work with an expert to create a model ordinance and program.

INCREASE THE CAPACITY OF THE OCONEE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION DISTRICT

Support and fund a county **Soil and Water Conservation District employee** who can help steward existing and future agricultural easements, among other responsibilities. The job description and salary should reflect the complexity and management skills needed to execute the role. This request appears to have widespread support from the community, farmers, and relevant organizations operating in the county.

Action step: Include this FTE in the next county budget cycle.

Action Step

The Oconee Agriculture Advisory Board will take steps to create the framework and ordinance for a Voluntary Agriculture District in Oconee.



Action Step

Council will add a line item for a Soil and Water Conservation District employee in the next budget cycle.



OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

IMPLEMENT COUNTYWIDE ZONING TO PROTECT AGRICULTURE

Ensure that agricultural **future land uses are protected through adequate zoning designations**. Other regulatory approaches include establishing transfer of development rights programs targeted at preserving working farmlands, enacting agricultural land loss mitigation requirements, and requiring conservation or cluster development that preserves working farmland as permanent open space. Local governments may also encourage permanent protection of farmland through conservation easements.²⁴

IDENTIFY SOILS OF LOCAL IMPORTANCE

Work with the Agricultural Advisory Board and NRCS to identify "Farmlands of Local Importance (FLI)". In Massachusetts, for example, a FLI program resulted in an increase of important farmland soils from about 16 to 62 percent.²⁵ Many counties use FLI tools to qualify landowners for NRCS funds that they would otherwise not qualify to receive. Although the county can establish the program, NRCS must agree on the criteria for qualifying parcels. This type of program should dovetail from the VAD program.

EXPAND FARM AND FOOD EDUCATION EFFORTS

Explore opportunities to increase **education programs tied to food production**. Programs such as 4-H and Future Farmers of America are important resources for schools and young farmers. Clemson works with schools on Farm to School programs that should be a part of Oconee school district curricula.

SUPPORT COMMUNITY FOODS ASSESSMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

Food Systems work is critically important. Study the recommendations and findings in the Oconee County Food Council's **Community Foods Assessment**, projected to be complete in the spring of 2023, and take action to support recommendations that align with the recommendations in this report.

EXPLORE INVESTING IN PROCESSING FACILITIES AND FOOD HUBS

Review and implement the recommendations from the Oconee County Comprehensive Plan that focus on agriculture, including planning and zoning policies that support **food production nodes and hubs**, as well as **processing facilities**.

SUPPORT AGRITOURISM

Encourage **agri-tourism businesses** through county events, recognition, advertisement, and investment. The Agricultural Advisory Board should develop a schedule of events and opportunities to showcase area farms.

²⁴ County zoning and overlays will only be as effective as infrastructure development allows it to be. Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority and Oconee County are in the process of considering potential public sewer service in the southern Oconee County and western Anderson County areas. This area is not currently served by public sewer, although there is a planned extension to Exit 1 from Golden Corner Commerce Park. Extending a sewer line through the southeastern corner of the county could pose risks to farmland if it is not limited geographically or by its capacity.

²⁵ <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-08/Farmland%20of%20Local%20Importance%20MA-STC%202022-07-21.pdf>

ADD COUNTY STAFF POSITION DEDICATED TO FARMLAND PROTECTION

Consider creating a county-level FTE position whose role it is to coordinate and communicate with the many groups and interests involved in food production.

EXPLORE OPPORTUNITIES TO UPGRADE MEAT PROCESSING FACILITIES

Advance the upgrade of existing meat processing facilities to become USDA certified and work with the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Commerce to promote Oconee County as a site for agricultural processing facilities. Oconee County has state processing facilities that are currently limited, and could be upgraded to serve consumers and distributors across state lines with USDA certification.

PART VIII: CONCLUSION

Oconee County Council has formally recognized the need to protect Oconee County's valuable farmland and to assist farmers as they face increasing challenges to the industry. Many citizens in the community have expressed support for farming and farmland protection at public meetings and through written comments submitted during the recent 2020 comprehensive planning exercise. As this report was being developed, agencies and partners expressed similar support and concern. The recommendations in this report will help further the goal of conserving farms and farmland if implemented in conjunction with other planning agencies in the region.

On the Future Land Use Map in *Oconee County's 2020 Comprehensive Plan*, agricultural land uses are identified in the southeastern corner of the county—an area with large parcels and abundant prime soils. In the same corner of the county, there is a small area outlined for industrial, suburban transitional, and residential growth. A forced sewer main currently serves the industrial development in this area. This growth and infrastructure prompted Oconee County and Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority to undertake an important Sewer Basin Study that is currently underway and will influence the future of this community's growth. Concerned citizens should engage in the current study process to ensure that critical farms and land are identified and avoided as future infrastructure is developed. Simultaneously, leadership at all levels should work together to implement the recommendations contained in this report.

Farmland protection and agriculture industry growth will not happen in a silo within the confines of Oconee County local government without intentional, proactive support and collaboration with Oconee Joint Regional Sewer Authority, Oconee County Economic Alliance, and the Appalachian Council of Governments. Oconee County should work with these entities to create a common vision for agriculture and land protection that will translate into compatible planning policies—from the Oconee County 208 Water Quality Plan to the ACOG Long Range Transportation Plan.

The Task Force report builds on past input and recommendations to highlight practical and actionable next steps to further the goal of protecting the agriculture industry in Oconee County—beginning with the implementation the Comprehensive Plan. The report identifies committees and organizations that can help partner with the county to implement the recommendations. The Task Force on Agriculture finds that the report recommendations will build a strong foundation for Oconee's farming community, but only if implemented in conjunction with other land use decisions. Every decision affecting agricultural land use in Oconee County must be aligned with the programs and policies recommended in this report for a successful outcome.

Appendix A: Oconee County Task Force Resolution

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA COUNTY OF OCONEE RESOLUTION 2022-15

A RESOLUTION ESTABLISHING THE OCONEE COUNTY TASK FORCE ON AGRICULTURE

WHEREAS, the Oconee County Council (the “Council”) recognizes the need to protect valuable farmland located in Oconee County and to provide assistance to local farmers in order to combat the decline of the agricultural industry in the County;

WHEREAS, Council recognizes Oconee County as having 51% of its land area currently in use for agriculture or forestry, encompassing nearly 900 farms and more than 67,000 acres of land, which impacts the economy, environment, overall health, and character of the County;

WHEREAS, Council desires to promote and support the County’s dedicated farmers, as they face increasing challenges due to various federal and state regulations, lack of access to and capacity of processing facilities, competition from domestic and international mega-farms, increasing costs due to inflation, and the rising average age of farmers working in Oconee County;

WHEREAS, various trends relevant to the health of agriculture demonstrate a very serious state of affairs. By way of illustration, note the following:

1. The aggregate acreage of “land in farms” in Oconee County declined from 78,349 in 2002 to 62,499 in 2017, a decrease of more than 20%. See *2002 and 2017 Censuses of Agriculture, County Profiles*, USDA.
2. Between 2001 and 2016, our nation lost or compromised, on average, 2,000 acres of farmland or ranchland every day. See *American Farmland Trust, Farms Under Threat 2040*.
3. According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, County Profile, published by the USDA, roughly 90% of “producers” in Oconee County were over the age of 35.
4. Food inflation in the United States accelerated for the 13th straight month to 10.4% in June of 2022, the largest increase since February of 1981. *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*.
5. The “food at home” index rose 12.2% over the last 12 months, the most significant 12-month increase since April of 1979. *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*.
6. The “food away from home” index rose 7.7% over the last year, the largest 12-month change since the period ending November 1981. *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*.
7. All six major grocery store food group indexes increased over the 12-month period ending June 2022, with 5 of 6 indexes rising more than 10%. During the same period,

average hourly earnings increased by 5.1%. *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Thus food prices saw an increase that was essentially twice that of the rise in wages; and

WHEREAS, Council deems it prudent to organize a Task Force on Agriculture for the limited purposes of (1) studying the issue of current and projected agriculture industry decline, (2) developing potential solutions for that issue, and (3) reporting its findings to Council.

NOW, THEREFORE, it is hereby resolved by the Oconee County Council, in meeting duly assembled, that:

Section 1: Establishment of the Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture.

There is hereby established the Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture (“Task Force”), which is created for the limited purposes of (1) studying the issue of current and projected agriculture industry decline, and specifically, the loss of viable farmland in the County, (2) developing potential solutions for that issue, and (3) reporting its findings to Council.

Section 2: Membership.

- A. The County Administrator, with the advice of Council District 3 representative, Paul Cain, shall endeavor to select members from the following groups in order to form the Task Force: the Farm Center Board, the Oconee County Agriculture Advisory Board, the Oconee County Conservation Bank Board, the Oconee County Planning Commission, the Oconee Food Council, the Oconee Soil and Water Conservation District Board, other representatives of the agriculture community within Oconee County, and appropriate County staff.
- B. The County Administrator, with the advice of Council District 3 representative, Paul Cain, shall appoint a Chairperson to help coordinate the work and meetings of the Task Force.
- C. The work of the Task Force shall include seeking input from Oconee County residents, as well as various stakeholder organizations such as, but not limited to, the Chattooga Conservancy, Oconee County 4-H, Oconee County Beekeepers Association, Oconee County Cattlemen’s Association, Oconee County Cooperative Extension, Oconee County Farm Bureau, Home Builders Association of Oconee County, Oconee County Schools’ FFA Chapters, the Oconee Cultivation Project, the Oconee Economic Alliance, Oconee Preservation Unlimited Stewardship Trust, the South Carolina Ports Board, the South Carolina Poultry Federation, and the South Carolina Soybean Board.

Section 3: Organization and Meetings.

- A. The Task Force shall be organized by the County Administrator and the Chairperson in a manner appropriate to its tasks and consistent with the make-up

of its members. The Chairperson may appoint such other officers as it deems necessary, including a Vice-Chair and a Secretary.

- B. The Task Force shall meet at such intervals as its members deem advisable and expedient.
- C. The Task Force shall follow the latest edition of the Model Rules of Parliamentary Procedure, published by the South Carolina Association of Counties.
- D. The Task Force shall comply with the provisions of the South Carolina Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA") and the requirements set forth in the Oconee County Code of Ordinances, as well as any other applicable ordinances, regulations, and laws concerning freedom of information, public records, and the conduct of public meetings. As it is an ad hoc committee of limited duration and for a limited purpose, the Task Force shall not be bound by the requirements of § 2-241 of the Oconee County Code of Ordinances, unless stated otherwise herein.

Section 4: Powers and Duties.

- A. The Task Force is constituted as an advisory body only.
- B. The Task Force shall perform its assessment and issue an initial report to Council by December 31, 2022 and shall issue its final report to Council by March 31, 2023, after which the Task Force shall be deemed dissolved.

Section 5: Salaries and Funding.


Members of the Task Force shall receive neither salary nor reimbursements for service on the Task Force.

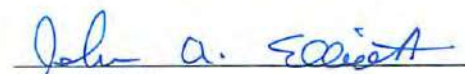
Section 6: Severability.

Should any section of this Resolution be held void or invalid, it shall not affect the validity of any other section hereof, all of which are deemed separable.

RESOLVED in meeting, duly assembled, this 16th day of August, 2022.

ATTEST:


Jennifer C. Adams
Clerk to Oconee County Council


John Elliott
Chair, Oconee County Council

Appendix B: Task Force Survey Summary

Outreach Survey Results (October 4 - October 14, 2022) Survey Planet

Questions:

1. What is your name?
2. Who do you represent (this can be a farm, school, trade group, organization, yourself, etc.) and how are you involved in the agriculture industry in Oconee County?
3. What opportunities exist in Oconee County to protect and/or further agriculture?
4. What would you like to see result from the Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture?
5. What resources currently exist that would help the Task Force develop recommendations for County Council?
6. Are you willing to participate in follow-up conversations about these topics?

Responses:

Participant 1: Nicole Roper; nroper@sdoc.org; Ag Teacher and FFA Advisor at West Oak Middle School I do not live in Oconee County but I deal with students who live and farm in this county; I would like to see more education on the importance of agriculture to not only the consumers but also to businesses which seem to be growing in this county. Without agriculture these businesses would not be able to function so I believe they need to be aware of the importance of agriculture as well; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me; nroper@sdoc.org 815-721-9636.

Participant 3: Emily Hitchcock; emilyanddickey@gmail.com; The Oconee County Conservation Bank Board; Most of the organizations assisting farmers were mentioned in the meeting. Some were NRCS, land trusts, OCCB, FFA, etc.; I would like to see specific proposals for the Council's consideration and adoption, such as zoning in areas that contain statewide prime soils, programs to discourage rural sprawl and encourage town density, funding for the Oconee County Conservation Bank, and programs to encourage new and young farmers; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me: 678-977-1738.

Participant 5: Christopher Lunsford; clunsford@sdoc.org; I am an Agricultural Educator at Walhalla High School. I am in my 5th year teaching at the school and have 5 years of teaching experience overall. I graduated from Clemson University in 2018 with a B.S. in Agricultural Education. I am from Liberty, SC. I have some background in agriculture with beef cattle and meat processing. I was an FFA member at the Pickens County Career and Technology Center while in high school. I served as an officer my Junior and Senior years. During college I was an active member of the Clemson Collegiate FFA Chapter serving as Sentinel and President during my Junior and Senior years; During my 5 years of teaching in Walhalla I have started to get to know people in the community. Our students are looking for an opportunity to be involved in agriculture and the FFA. I feel that if we can provide them opportunities then we can have a strong community of people within our county that we will want to support agriculture in Oconee county; I want to see us be able to provide opportunities for students to be involved in FFA and the community. We need strong Ag programs that prepare our students for life after high

school; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me: clunsford@sdoc.org / 864-380-0905.

Participant 6: James Coley; jcoley@oconeesc.org; I represent the County and am an advocate for supporting the agricultural industry in the County; The Clemson Extension Services, and the Farm Center are excellent resources that help enhance and grow agriculture; i would like to see recommendations to improve the protections of agriculturally significant land, reduce urban sprawl, and educate the general public on land use regulations, and policies; Resources = Clemson Extension, Soil and Water Conservation District, Conservation Bank Board, SC Dept of Agriculture; yes, willing to participate in follow-up.

Participant 7: Debbie Sewell; debbio.sewell@gmail.com; Oconee County Agriculture Advisory Board Agriculture Advocate; Development Standards that protect Farm and forest land , and natural resources; A county employee in the planning Department that represents, advocates, and protects Agriculture and natural resources; resource = Oconee County Agriculture Advisory Board; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me:: Debbio.sewell@gmail.com 864-723-3339.

Participant 8: Ashley Townsend; antwnsnd@gmail.com; I represent district 4 for the Ag Advisory Board I work for two farms - Chattooga Belle Farm and Crooked Oak Orchard; The FARM Center has potential to further agricultural opportunities through education, resources and infrastructure. However, meeting this potential will require funding. The Oconee Food Alliance connects a lot of the agricultural pieces of the county and provides networking opportunity that is necessary to protect and further agriculture. The Ag Advisory Board exists to serve and represent Oconee Agriculture, but this requires engagement from farming constituents; Established agricultural infrastructure necessary to protect the industry (both small and large scale farming). Ag land protection. Preserving the soils and waters that are vital to food production. Farm transitioning. Perhaps a program that makes ag land accessible to new farmers, while ensuring financial security for both the new and passing farmer. County governance that prioritizes and supports agricultural pursuits which will sustain the food supply and welfare of the county first and foremost, thus providing further economic growth; resources = The comments and suggestions from food summit attendees. Agriculture advisory board has history of working with the county and serves to advise Council on agricultural decisions; Yes, and here is the best email/ phone number to reach me:: antwnsnd@gmail.com/706-825-3198.

Participant 9: Mariah Swygert; mswygert@sdoc.org; Seneca High School - Agricultural Education and FFA; FARM Center, Farm Bureau, Young Farmer and Rancher, Clemson Extension, Cultivate Oconee; Increase opportunities for people to become involved in agricultural pursuits and to learn about the agriculture industry; resources = FARM Center, Farm Bureau, Clemson Extension; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me:: mswygert@sdoc.org.

Participant 10: Rannie Bond; rannie.d.bond@gmail.com; Oconee County Beekeepers Association; The Clemson Extension and the USDA/FSA office are the most valuable resources in our county for furthering Agriculture. The robust Future Farmers of America chapters in our High Schools are invaluable. The addition of Observation Hives into all county schools through the Bee Cause project and sponsored by the OCBA are valuable tools to promote agriculture to the future generations in the county. The State and County Conservation Bank and their boards have done a tremendous job preserving areas in the county with easements; The goal of the task force should be to recognize population growth and its effect on the agriculture industry. it should also strive to resolve a county stance on Agriculture, are we an Agricultural Community, A travel and Tourism community or are we an Industrial Community? Oconee County is all three and creating a culture that can embrace all of them simultaneously and create a strategy that leads to harmony amongst them should be the result; resources = Contacting the USDA office in walhalla to get a list of key social organizations and hosting a walk through even where the collective minds could all hear and speak on the topics important to the task force; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me:: rannie.d.bond@gmail.com 864-710-1039.

Participant 11: Rex Blanton; rexb@clemson.edu; Member of AAB, representing it, family and myself. Steward of our land. Grow pine trees; We still have many acres of beautiful land, but it is going quickly, so we need to act. Number one: raise public awareness of agriculture. No. 2: Promote conservation methods, such as conservation banks, land trusts, etc. Start immediately with serious efforts to preserve our land, such as contributing a small percentage of land transfer fees to a group such as a conservation bank, and assisting in the purchase of lands by the cons. bank, or assist those who want to farm to purchase their land; I would like to see the County fully support (fund) the Conservation Bank, and help support the other area land banks, as appropriate. I would like to see assistance and incentives provided to sons and daughters of farmers and anyone serious about farming, who want to buy and/or add on to the family farms. Such things as a tax reduction for a few years to help them get started, in exchange for promising to farm it for the agreed period. And possibly a conservation bank assisting in the purchase of the land, something like a cost share agreement. We appreciate all the County has done to support the FARM Center, and would like them to continue doing so by funding some permanent buildings, for shows, events, etc., a cooler, a cannery, and a full-time manager of the Center. Ideally we need an arena large enough to host conventions, shows, and most importantly, graduate our seniors here instead of sending them and thousands of dollars to Clemson every year. Most of these are mentioned in the introduction of the August 2016 Market and feasibility Study presented to the County by Johnson Consulting. Although it states the initial concept for the FARM Center was for it to be self-supporting, I think that for it to really thrive, it needs more support. The FARM Center needs to be a line item in the budget. We need assistance in animal processing in the county. Whether to build a new processing plant, or augment our two existing, private facilities, growers need their animals processed in a more timely and economical manner. The pandemic really demonstrated how fragile our system is; resources = Refer to the Johnson Consulting Study published in August of 2016. Also review comments from the Farmers' and Ranchers' listening sessions. Include in the discussions, the Ag Advisory Board, the Planning

Commission, and all agriculture related groups; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me:: rexb@clemsun.edu.

Participant 12: Natalie Arnold; naarnold@gmail.com; Choestoea Farm John's Mill Cattle Oconee Food Council; - options to protect agricultural land (easements, districting, etc) - programming to cultivate future generations of farmers; A path forward for protecting agricultural land for future generations in Oconee County. Agriculture is a part of our way of life in the county and is so important to our food system. We are currently facing unprecedented rapid growth without a strategic plan. I hope we can offer solutions on how to protect the rural/ agricultural values of our county while also encouraging economic opportunities, housing and infrastructure for our citizens; resources = -maps (where should the county focus its resources on protecting agricultural land) - the voice of farmers who have recently sold out (why, is it simply money or are other factors pushing them out) - the voice of farmers currently working the land (what are their biggest hurdles in holding onto agricultural land in the county) - FFA, 4-H, SC Young Farmer and Agribusiness understanding the future of Ag in our county. What do the future/ up and coming farmers see as the challenges and directions of agriculture in our area; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me:: 864-247-3868

Participant 14: Eddie Martin; Oconee Preservation Unlimited Stewardship Trust (OPUS Trust); Designated agricultural districts would go a long way to help land owners desirous of protecting their property reduce pressures from newly planted developments. Impact fees for developers in which those funds could be used to help place protections on agricultural property would be a tremendous step. Over wrought development by locals and outside interests are the biggest threat to farmland. Developers should be regulated and have to help pay to offset the damage they do by increasing pressure on infrastructure, increasing traffic in rural and urban areas, decimating farm and forest land, and generally destroying the aspect that has made Oconee the wonderful place that it is. Politicians also need to understand that more people and more housing is not a panacea but an actual burden disguised as the answer to monetary advancement for government. There should be some form of compensation readily available to purchase development rights with easements that is not as cumbersome as the system has in place at this time. Impact fees can slow down the advancement of development and create a pool of funds to offset future destruction; As stated in the previous answer, create a true protection opportunity for landowners that will incentivize their desire to protect the property in their stewardship. Also thought needs to go into how to protect this county from urban sprawl and being overtaken by the expansion of Atlanta. The county is already dealing with that migration of people leaving there because it has become unbearable; resources = easements are a tremendous tool for protection, but besides the structure that is in place now with the Oconee Conservation Bank and the SC Conservation Bank their should be as stated before a responsibility for the ones who gain the most from the destruction of farm and forest. Right now the developers get a step up from incentives and exemptions from the county, they are making money they should pay for the right to destroy the rural aspect of the county; Yes, and here is the best email/phone number to reach me:: tamasseeknob96@gmail.com

Opportunities for Agriculture and the Task Force (Summary from #3 and #4):

EDUCATION

- Increase education to businesses on the importance of agriculture
- Provide students opportunities to be involved in FFA and the community to support agriculture in Oconee county;
- Support agriculture programs that prepare our students for life after high school;
- Increase programming to create future generations of farmers.

LAND USE

- Create specific proposals for the Council's consideration and adoption, such as zoning in areas that contain statewide prime soils, programs to discourage rural sprawl and encourage town density, funding for the Oconee County Conservation Bank, and programs to encourage new and young farmers;
- Improve protections of agriculturally significant land, reduce urban sprawl, and educate the general public on land use regulations and policies;
- Recommend development standards that protect farm and forest land and natural resources;
- Establish agricultural infrastructure necessary to protect the industry (both small and large scale farming);
- Protect and preserve agricultural land — the soils and waters that are vital to food production;
- Explore a program that makes ag land accessible to new farmers;
- Create a true protection opportunity for landowners that will incentivize their desire to protect the property in their stewardship;
- Protect this county from urban sprawl and being overtaken by the expansion of Atlanta;
- Create streamlined compensation readily available to purchase development rights;
- Designate agricultural districts;
- Promote conservation methods, such as conservation banks, land trusts, etc. Start immediately with serious efforts to preserve our land, such as contributing a small percentage of land transfer fees to a group such as a conservation bank, and assisting in the purchase of lands by the cons. bank, or assist those who want to farm to purchase their land;
- Create solutions on how to protect the rural/ agricultural values of our county while also encouraging economic opportunities, housing and infrastructure for our citizens;
- Increase options to protect agricultural land (easements, districting, etc)
- Create impact fees for developers in which those funds could be used to help place protections on agricultural property;
- Fund the Conservation Bank, and help support the other area land banks, as appropriate.

OTHER

- Raise public awareness of agriculture;
- Address farm transitioning while ensuring financial security for both the new and passing farmers;
- Put Observation Hives into all county schools through the Bee Cause project, sponsored by the OCBA, they are valuable tools to promote agriculture to the future generations in the county;

- Increase opportunities for people to become involved in agricultural pursuits and to learn about the agriculture industry;
- Make the FARM Center a line item in the budget;
- Assist animal processing in the county: build a new processing plant, or augment our two existing, private facilities;
- Fund permanent buildings, for shows, events, etc., a cooler, a cannery, and a full-time manager of the Farm Center;
- Provide assistance and incentives to sons and daughters of farmers and anyone serious about farming, who wants to buy and/or add on to the family farms. Such things as a tax reductions for a few years to help them get started, in exchange for promising to farm it for the agreed-upon period. And possibly a conservation bank assisting in the purchase of the land, something like a cost share agreement.

GOVERNANCE

- Prioritize and support agricultural pursuits which will sustain the food supply and welfare of the county first and foremost, thus providing further economic growth;
- Recognize population growth and its effect on the agriculture industry. Clarify the county's stance on Agriculture: are we an Agricultural Community, A travel and Tourism community or are we an Industrial Community? Oconee County is all three and creating a culture that can embrace all of them simultaneously and creating a strategy that leads to harmony amongst them should be the result.

Appendix C: VAD Fact Sheet

Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VAD) Fact Sheet for the Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture

In the Agriculture Element of Oconee County’s 2020 Comprehensive Plan, Strategy 8.1.2.8 states, “Consider adopting a Voluntary Agricultural and Forestal Areas program.” (8-22)

What are some of the benefits of adopting a VAD? They can help ...

- Assist with geographic delineation of land where food is produced
- Protect the community’s rural heritage and economy
- Maintain local jobs
- Preserve scenic views and tourism-based economic activity
- Minimize the infrastructure burden on county and local governments
- Create a sense of community and region
- Sustain food production on rural property by conveying benefits to the landowners

How would a VAD in Oconee County operate?

- Oconee County could work through the OC Agricultural Advisory Board to establish parameters for which properties would qualify for inclusion in the VAD.
- The landowner would voluntarily agree to farm his/her land for a certain term length—10 years, for example—and would make a request to apply for this designation to the board.
- The board would determine whether the application should be recommended to OC Planning Commission, and subsequently, OC County Council.
- Once approved, a conservation agreement would be put into place.
- The approved property would be identified on a county map as food-producing land.

How would the VAD be established?

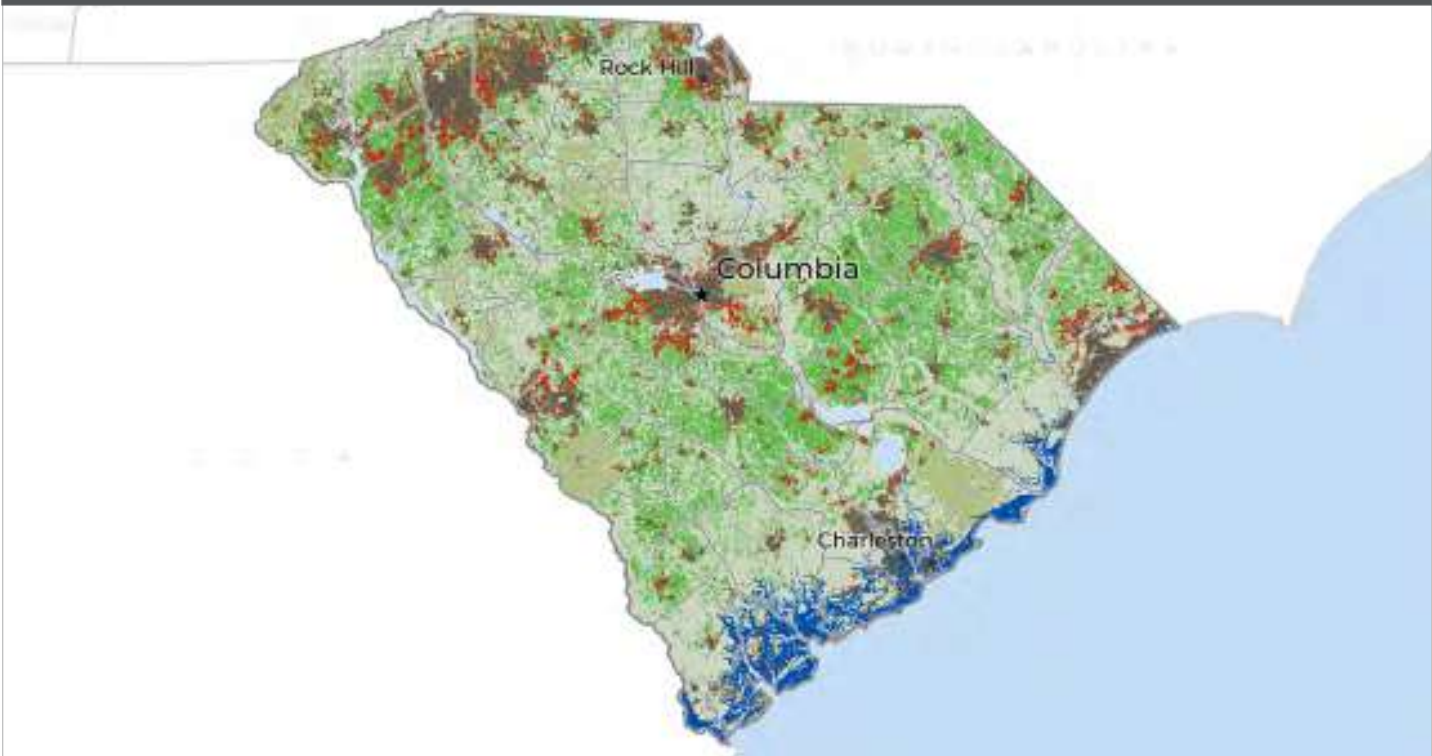
- Together, the Oconee County Agricultural Advisory Board and stakeholders would agree on incentives and term lengths; qualifying entities; land characteristics; and a process for internal approval.
- Oconee County would draft an ordinance incorporating feedback from the Agricultural Advisory Board.
- Oconee County Council approves the ordinance.



South Carolina

Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future mapped three scenarios of development between 2016 and 2040. If recent trends continue, **436,700 acres** of South Carolina’s farmland will be paved over, fragmented, or converted to uses that jeopardize agriculture. **That’s 8%**. South Carolinians can slash conversion, save farmland, and safeguard the future of agriculture and the environment by choosing compact development.

PROJECTED AGRICULTURAL LAND CONVERSION 2016-2040



Projected agricultural land conversion from 2016-2040 in the *Business as Usual* scenario.

Projected Conversion and Flooding (2040)	Land Cover (2016)		
Urban and highly developed (UHD) and low-density residential (LDR)	Farmland*	Federal (no grazing)	Urban areas
Coastal flooding	Forestland	Other lands	Water

*Farmland is composed of cropland, pastureland, and woodland associated with farms.

On recent trends, from 2016 to 2040:

South Carolinians will pave over, fragment, or compromise

436,700 acres of farmland.

51% of the conversion will occur on South Carolina's best land.¹

That’s the equivalent of losing

3,600 farms,
\$239 million

in farm output, and
5,900 jobs
based on county averages.²

Hardest-hit counties:

- ▶ **Lexington**
- ▶ **Spartanburg**
- ▶ **Anderson**

¹ Freedgood et al. 2020
² Census of Agriculture 2017

WHICH FUTURE WILL WE CHOOSE?

How South Carolinians choose to develop will shape the future of farming. The scenarios in **Farms Under Threat 2040** show the impacts:



Business as Usual: Development follows recent patterns. Poorly planned development and low-density residential sprawl continue to rapidly convert farmland.

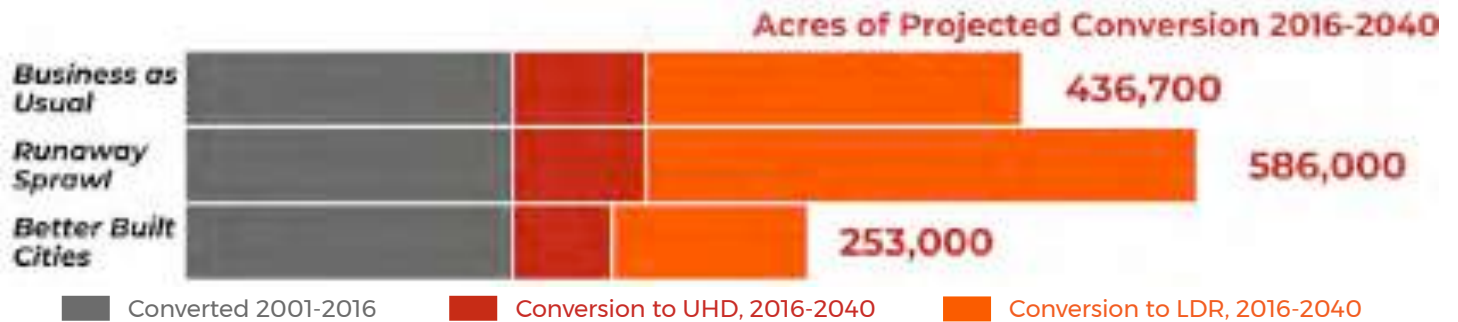


Runaway Sprawl: Development becomes even less efficient than in *Business as Usual*. Low-density housing sweeps across the countryside, displacing farmers.



Better Built Cities: Policymakers and land-use planners promote compact development and reduce sprawl, saving irreplaceable farmland from conversion.

COMPACT GROWTH CAN SAVE FARMS



South Carolina's farmland will be converted to:

Urban and highly developed (UHD) land use includes commercial, industrial, and moderate-to-high density residential areas.

Low-density residential (LDR) land use includes scattered subdivisions and large-lot housing, which fragment the agricultural land base and limit production, marketing, and management options for the working farms that remain.

LDR PAVES THE WAY FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Agricultural land that was in LDR areas in 2016 is

5 TIMES MORE LIKELY

to be converted to UHD by 2040, compared to other agricultural land.

DEVELOPMENT CHOICES MATTER

By choosing the *Better Built Cities* scenario instead of *Runaway Sprawl*, South Carolinians can save

333,000 acres

of farmland.

That's the equivalent of saving

2,700 farms,

\$184 million

in farm output, and

4,300 jobs

based on county averages.¹

¹ Census of Agriculture 2017

COASTAL FLOODING



By 2040, 800 acres of agricultural land may be affected by rising seas due to climate change.

WHAT POLICYMAKERS CAN DO

- **Encourage compact development** to minimize sprawl.
- **Permanently protect our best farmland** with voluntary conservation easements.
- **Forge a path to success** for a new generation of farmers.



Farms Under Threat is American Farmland Trust's multi-year initiative to document the status of and threats to U.S. farmland and ranchland and to identify policy solutions to protect and conserve America's diverse agricultural landscape. For questions and to access the data, please contact AFT's Farmland Information Center: www.farmlandinfo.org or (800) 370-4879.

Explore our interactive maps and read the full report at

www.farmland.org/farmsunderthreat





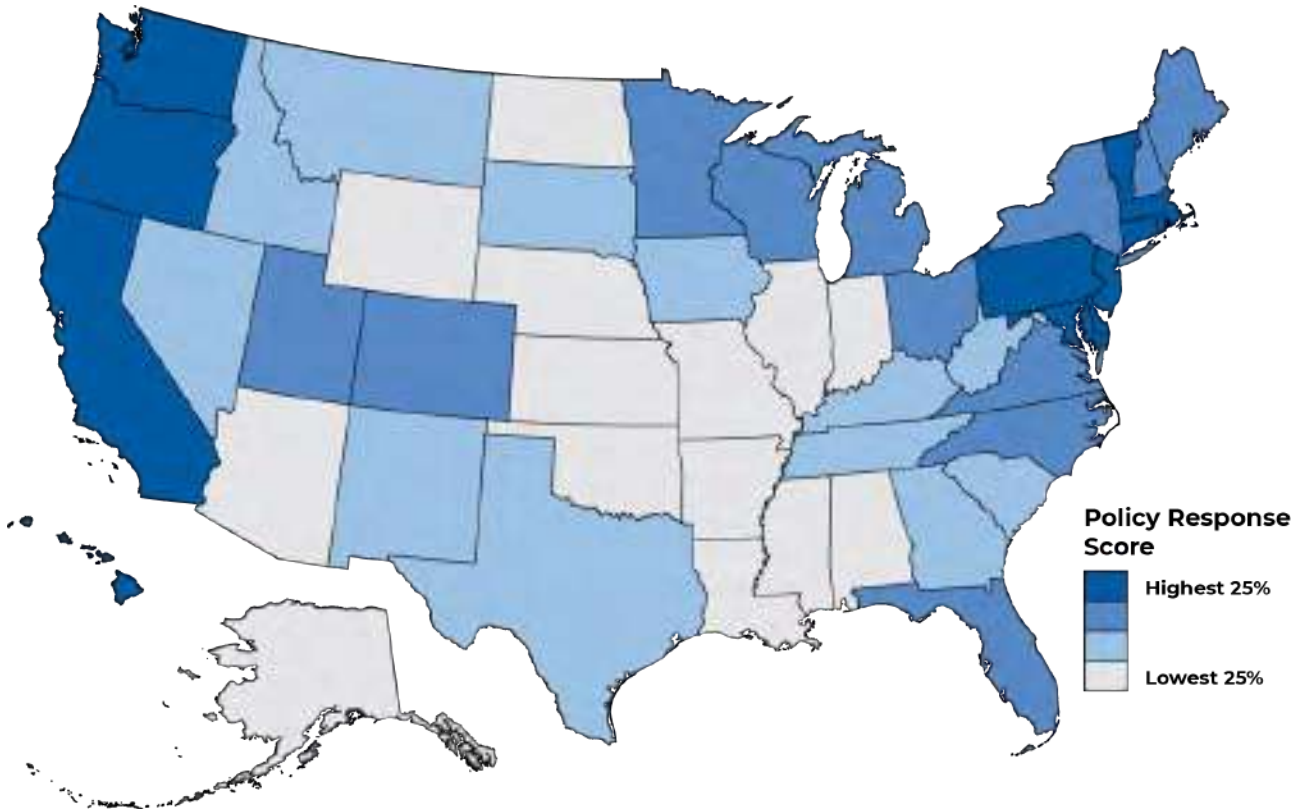
THE STATE OF THE STATES

Agricultural Land Protection Scorecard Highlight Summary

South Carolina

Farms Under Threat: The State of the States mapped agricultural land conversion and evaluated state policy responses. The Agricultural Land Protection (ALP) Scorecard evaluated six policies and programs that protect agricultural land from development, promote farm viability, and facilitate the transfer of agricultural land. American Farmland Trust (AFT) conducted research between 2016 and 2019 and used quantitative and qualitative factors to compare approaches that are tied to the land in all 50 states. Results for each policy are summarized in *policy scoresheets*; scores from the scoresheets are combined into Policy Response Scores in the *ALP Scorecard*. The map shows state Policy Response Scores by quartile.

EXTENT OF STATE POLICY RESPONSES TO THE THREAT OF CONVERSION



RELATIVE CONVERSION THREAT

HIGH

South Carolina scored among the top states for the conversion of agricultural land to urban and highly developed (UHD) and low-density residential (LDR) uses.

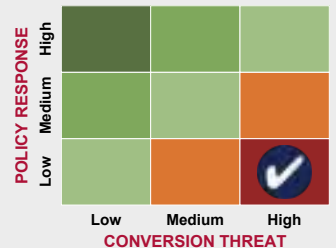
RELATIVE POLICY RESPONSE

LOW


South Carolina scored among the lowest states for policies and programs that address the threat of conversion.

HOW IS THIS STATE DOING?

South Carolina is in a red box because its conversion threat is higher than its policy response, relative to other states. Learn more at www.farmland.org/farmsunderthreat

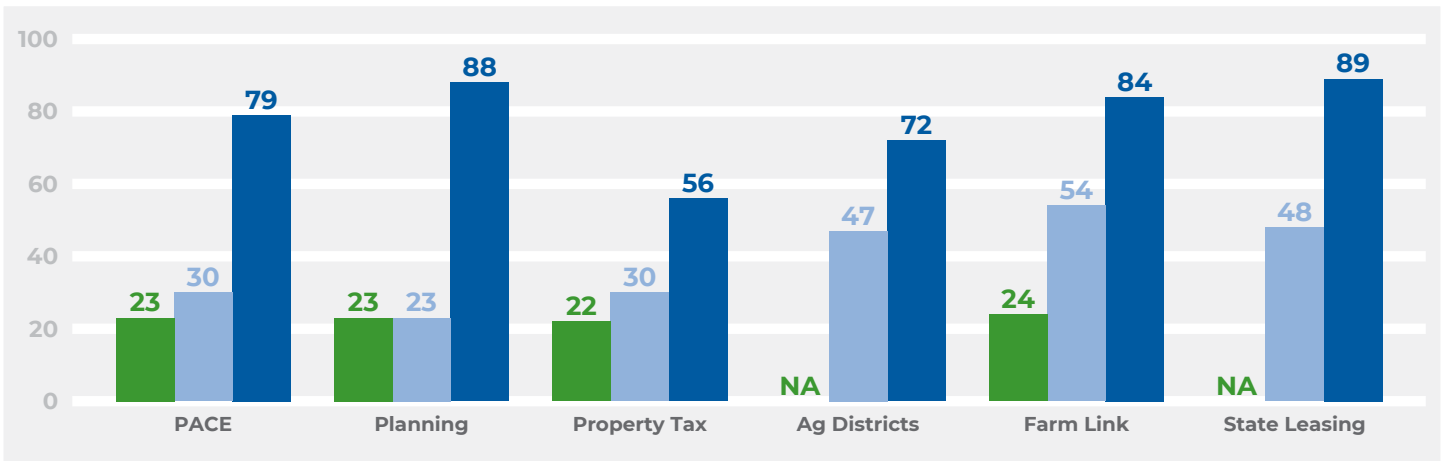


HOW SOUTH CAROLINA STACKS UP

South Carolina Score 

Median Score 

Top Score 



Policy scoresheet scores: Final policy scores compared to the median and the highest scores achieved by all states that have implemented each policy. Even among high-response states, no state received a perfect score for any individual policy; every state has the potential to do more.

ABOUT THE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

PURCHASE OF AGRICULTURAL CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

Purchase of agricultural conservation easement (PACE) programs permanently protect farmland and rangeland from non-farm development. They compensate landowners who voluntarily place an agricultural conservation easement on their property. South Carolina offers the South Carolina Conservation Bank, which provides funds to entities for the purchase of agricultural conservation easements.

LAND-USE PLANNING

Land-use planning policies manage growth and stabilize the land base. Most states delegate planning authority to local governments, but some play a more active role, requiring localities to develop comprehensive plans, identify agricultural resources, and adopt policies to protect them. South Carolina requires local governments to prepare a comprehensive plan if a planning commission is formed.

PROPERTY TAX RELIEF

Property tax relief (PTR) programs reduce property taxes paid on agricultural land. The most common approach is use-value assessment (UVA), which assesses farmland and rangeland at its current use value. South Carolina's program does not require verification that land is in active agricultural use in order to be eligible.

AGRICULTURAL DISTRICTS

Agricultural district programs encourage landowners to form special areas to support agriculture. Farmers receive protections and incentives including: limits on annexation, limits on eminent domain, protection from the siting of public facilities and infrastructure, and tax incentives. Less common is requiring district enrollment to participate in state-administered PACE programs.

FARM LINK

Farm Link programs connect land seekers with landowners who want their land to stay in agriculture. Administered by public or private entities, they offer a range of services and resources, from online real estate postings to technical assistance, trainings, and educational resources. AFT only included publicly supported programs. South Carolina's publicly supported program is South Carolina Farmlink.

STATE LEASING

State leasing programs make state-owned land available to farmers and ranchers for agriculture. Sometimes their primary purpose is to make land available for agriculture. More often, agricultural use is secondary to generating income for a public purpose or protecting wildlife habitat.

SOUTH CAROLINA: KEY FACTS

\$0.25

AMOUNT INVESTED PER CAPITA IN PERMANENTLY PROTECTING FARMLAND THROUGH 2017

Among states with PACE
Smallest (TX): < \$0.01
Largest (DE): \$6.03

0.26

ACRES DEVELOPED PER NEW PERSON ADDED TO THE STATE'S POPULATION BETWEEN 1982 AND 2012

Fewest (CT/MA): 0.11
Most (ND): 4.07

✓ YES

PENALTY IMPOSED WHEN LAND IS WITHDRAWN FROM PTR PROGRAM

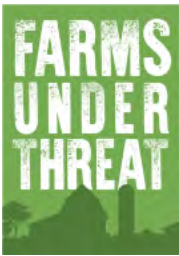
States w/ penalty: 29
States w/o penalty: 21



Farms Under Threat is American Farmland Trust's multi-year initiative to document the status of and threats to U.S. farmland and rangeland and to identify policy solutions to ensure the protection and conservation of America's diverse agricultural landscape. For more information about AFT, visit www.farmland.org. If you have any questions about the analysis methods or would like access to data, please contact AFT's Farmland Information Center: www.farmlandinfo.org or (800) 370-4879.



Explore our scorecard and scoresheets at www.farmland.org/farmsunderthreat



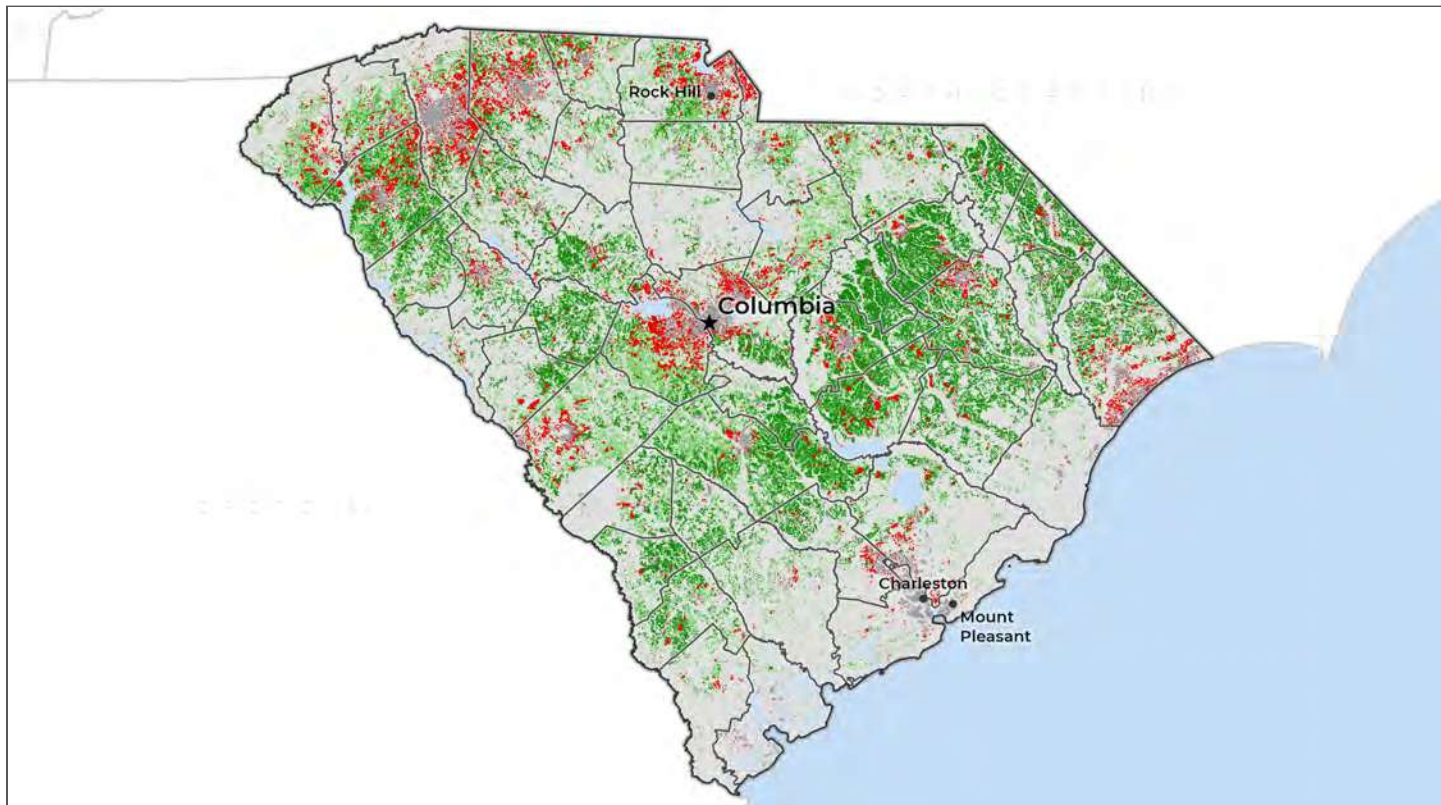
THE STATE OF THE STATES

Agricultural Land Conversion Highlight Summary






South Carolina

Farms Under Threat: The State of the States mapped agricultural land conversion and evaluated state policy responses. The spatial analysis identified the extent, diversity, and quality of each state's agricultural land—and where this land has been converted to both urban and highly developed (UHD) and low-density residential (LDR) land uses.

AGRICULTURAL LAND CONVERSION 2001-2016



Conversion of non-federal farmland to UHD and LDR land uses from 2001-2016. The threat to working farms and ranches is pervasive, often claiming the most productive, versatile, and resilient lands.

 Conversion of agricultural land to UHD and LDR land uses	<p>Farmland* that is:</p>  Above state median PVR**  Below state median PVR	 Urban areas  Federal, forest, and other lands	<p>*Farmland is composed of cropland, pastureland, and woodland associated with farms.</p> <p>** Our productivity, versatility, and resiliency (PVR) index helps identify high-quality agricultural land (see page 2).</p>
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RELATIVE CONVERSION THREAT

HIGH

South Carolina scored among the top states for the conversion of agricultural land to urban and highly developed (UHD) and low-density residential (LDR) uses.

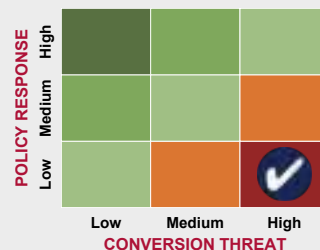
RELATIVE POLICY RESPONSE

LOW

South Carolina scored among the lowest states for policies and programs that protect agricultural land from development, promote farm viability, and facilitate the transfer of agricultural land.

HOW IS THIS STATE DOING?

South Carolina is in a red box because its conversion threat is higher than its policy response, relative to other states. Learn more at www.farmland.org/farmsunderthreat



DEVELOPMENT THREATENS SOUTH CAROLINA'S AGRICULTURAL LAND

From 2001-2016, 280,700 acres of agricultural land were developed or compromised.

South Carolina's farmland and ranchland was converted to:

- **Urban and highly developed (UHD)** land use, including commercial, industrial, and moderate-to-high-density residential areas.
- **Low-density residential (LDR)** land use, where scattered large lot development fragments the agricultural land base and limits production, marketing, and management options for the working farms and ranches that remain.

LDR PAVES THE WAY FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

Agricultural land in LDR areas in 2001 was

8 TIMES MORE LIKELY

to be converted to UHD by 2016, compared to other agricultural land.

84,000 acres

30%

of conversion was to UHD

196,700 acres

70%

of conversion was to LDR

CONVERSION AFFECTED ALL TYPES OF AGRICULTURAL LAND



CROPLAND: 104,800 acres
PASTURELAND: 74,700 acres
WOODLAND: 101,200 acres

SOUTH CAROLINA'S BEST AGRICULTURAL LAND IS UNDER THREAT

We used our unique **PVR index**, which quantifies the productivity, versatility, and resiliency of agricultural land, to identify:

1. **South Carolina's best land**, which has PVR values above the state median, and
2. **Nationally Significant land**, which is the country's best land for long-term production of food and other crops. **49%** of South Carolina's agricultural land, or **2,836,300 acres**, falls in this category.*

Protecting high-PVR land is critical for the long-term sustainability of agriculture, yet from 2001-2016:

- ▶ **124,200 acres** of South Carolina's best land were converted to UHD and LDR uses.
- ▶ **111,300 acres** of South Carolina's Nationally Significant land were converted.

*These two categories overlap and the same land may be included in both.

What's at stake?

- ▶ **5,791,300 acres of agricultural land remain¹**



CROPLAND: 2,640,100 acres
PASTURELAND: 1,049,400 acres
WOODLAND: 2,101,800 acres

- ▶ **\$3.0 billion earned from cash receipts in 2017²**

- \$74.6 million from local food³
- \$750.9 million from agricultural exports⁴

- ▶ **280,700 acres were converted—enough land to generate \$146 million in annual revenue²**

- ▶ **South Carolina's top 3 agricultural products:²**

- Poultry and Eggs \$1.7 billion
- Nursery and Greenhouse \$208.3 million
- Corn \$187.9 million

- ▶ **39,300 producers and 25,600 farm laborers on 24,800 farms²**

- ▶ **5 times as many producers over 65 as under 35 years old²**

1. Farms Under Threat 2016
 2. National Agricultural Statistics Service 2017
 3. Sold directly to consumer and intermediate outlets, NASS 2017
 4. Economic Research Service 2017



Farms Under Threat is American Farmland Trust's multi-year initiative to document the status of and threats to U.S. farmland and ranchland and to identify policy solutions to ensure the protection and conservation of America's diverse agricultural landscape. For more information about AFT, visit www.farmland.org. If you have any questions about the analysis methods or would like access to data, please contact AFT's Farmland Information Center: www.farmlandinfo.org or (800) 370-4879.



Explore our interactive maps at www.farmland.org/farmsunderthreat

Appendix E: Media



<https://wsnwradio.com/oconee-county-council-takes-action-to-protect-farmland-and-farmers/>

WALHALLA, SC — A new Oconee County task force is examining the pressing challenges and opportunities ahead for residents who depend on the agriculture industry in Oconee County.

Oconee County Council unanimously approved Resolution 2022-15 on August 16, 2022— establishing The Oconee County Task Force on Agriculture, charged with studying the issue and making recommendations to address the county’s farmland decline.

“This is a chance for leaders to focus on solutions for the people who grow our food,” says Task Force Chairman, and Oconee County Planning Commission Chairman, Frankie Pearson. “We know there are pressing challenges, and we really can’t afford to wait to take action to protect our agricultural community.”

The Task Force has begun meeting monthly and is composed of representatives from Oconee County’s Farm Center Board, Agriculture Advisory Board, Planning Commission, Conservation Bank Board, Food Council, and Soil and Water Conservation District Board.

“I am excited to be a part of this task force,” says Natalie Arnold, operator of Choestoea Farm in Westminster, and Oconee County Food Council Executive Chair. “As a fourth generation farmer in Oconee County, I understand deeply the daily challenges farmers face, and I hope the work of this task force will help our leaders support the community producing our food.”

Members of the task force have approximately six months to study the issue and form recommendations for Oconee County Council.

To learn more, visit:

[https://oconeesc.com/council-home/committees-and-commissions/boards-and-commissions/agriculture-taskforce.](https://oconeesc.com/council-home/committees-and-commissions/boards-and-commissions/agriculture-taskforce)

LOCAL NEWS

New task force in Oconee Co. addresses declining farmland

by: Elise Devlin

Posted: Oct 31, 2022 / 05:20 PM EDT

Updated: Oct 31, 2022 / 05:20 PM EDT LOCAL NEWS

<https://www.wspa.com/news/local-news/new-task-force-in-oconee-co-addresses-declining-farmland/>

WALHALLA, S.C. (WSPA) – When you're eating food, do you think about where it comes from?

A new task force in Oconee County wants you to pay attention. They said your food may be closer than you think.

Viable farmland is declining in Oconee County, but a new group of representatives is working behind the scenes to address this issue that's been going on for decades.

The new task force is filled with many voices, each one calling for the community to realize what's happening to local farms.

They said the goal is to protect farmers and those jobs, which in turn will protect the community by maintaining food security.

Natalie Arnold is a member of the task force and a fourth generation farmer in Oconee.

"Farmers are feeling squeezed right now," said Arnold. "They really are struggling to figure out a path forward."

Arnold said, as a farmer, she's connected with many people through food. But she wants people to feel connected to her and the food they eat as well.

"If we don't deal with this issue then we're going to continue to see problems with supply chain, with being able to have connection to our land and our agriculture, not only in this area but throughout the country."

James Cooley, Oconee County Director of Planning and Zoning, said a big issue is land usage. Homes are being built where food could be produced.

“Right now, the majority of the larger subdivisions going into Oconee County are in a control free zoning district so they are unregulated for use,” explained Cooley. “So there’s no restrictions on the type of use that’s being done in those areas and there’s a concern that potentially there could be better uses than residential homes in some of those areas.”

Oconee County Council has attempted to address declining agricultural land in the past, but Cooley said this new task force is a big step.

“I think county council has done things in the past, like they have started and funded the farm center, they have continued to encourage the school districts to fund and support Future Farmers of America and 4H,” said Cooley. “They have been involved in some of those processes, this is a formal step that is the next step in that process of continuing to protect farmland.”

The task force said education is key to solving this problem.

“It’s trying to figure out how we can utilize the tools at our disposal in order to stay true to who we are as a county,” said Arnold.

The task force will have a rough draft of their recommendations and plan in December or January before presenting to the Oconee County Council in February.

Appendix F: Reference Material

American Planning Association: Creating Great Communities for All - <https://www.planning.org/knowledgebase/farmlandprotection/>

Conserving Farmland. American Farmland Trust, https://farmland.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/AFT_SFGE-4-Pgr-FINAL9437aa9e6d9409c4e7bc09f5a84939d8955770f4a21f9210ef26db6df7be0707.pdf

Oconee County Comprehensive Plan, Chapter 8: Agriculture Element, 2020. <https://oconeesc.com/documents/planning-zoning/comprehensive-plan/agriculture.pdf>

Oconee County's *Mission Statement*, <https://oconeesc.com>

Protecting farmland: The tools to protect farmland exist. American Farmland Trust, <https://farmland.org/our-work/protecting-farmland/?mission-area=6>

Smart Growth through the Transfer of Development Rights. <https://www.njfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Case-Studies-in-Transfer-of-Development-Rights-8-10-Intern-report.pdf>

Transfer of Development Rights in U.S. Communities: Evaluating Program Design Implementation, and Outcomes. Margaret Walls, Resources for the Future and Virginia McConnell, University of Maryland– Baltimore County. September 2007. https://media.rff.org/archive/files/sharepoint/WorkImages/Download/Walls_McConnell_Sep_07_TDR_Report.pdf