SOUTH CAROLINA PRIORITY CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN

THE HEALTH, WELFARE, AND SAFETY OF THE LIVES AND PROPERTY OF THE PEOPLE OF THIS STATE AND THE CONSERVATION OF ITS NATURAL RESOURCES ARE MATTERS OF PUBLIC CONCERN.

ARTICLE XII, SECTION 1 OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA CONSTITUTION



ACKNOWLEDGMENT

By signing below, the participants acknowledge support of the SC Conservation Plan and the strategies developed by the Task Forces to further the reach of conservation efforts across South Carolina.



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Archaeologists working at a dig site on Pockoy Island.

PURPOSE AND INTRODUCTION

South Carolina is a state steeped in natural history and places. The **South Carolina Constitution** highlights the importance of conserving the State's natural resources, noting that it is a matter of public concern as conservation is integral to the health, welfare, and safety of the State's people and communities. South Carolinians know that one of the many reasons people want to live and work in the State is because of access to its beautiful places from the mountains to the sea. All want to ensure that as the State grows, these special places that attract people to live, work, and play here are maintained for future generations.

Governor Henry McMaster has made conservation a priority at the State level and stressed the connection between the State's economic growth and the protection of our land, history, culture, and environment. Governor McMaster recognized the impact we can have now in shaping what South Carolina will look like one-hundred years from now, in his 2025 State of the State Address:

> *South Carolina's future prosperity requires us to enhance our efforts to respect and protect our land, our history, our culture and our environment. I do not think that it's a coincidence that previous years of economic growth have followed our efforts to conserve, preserve, and display our unique gifts of nature's abundance.*

South Carolina is seen as a leader in conservation efforts thanks to the leadership of Governor McMaster and the work of the state's conservation agencies working collaboratively with private and non-governmental partners. Of South Carolina's approximately 20 million acres, an estimated 3.2 million acres are currently protected, roughly 16 percent of the state's land area. Since 2020, South Carolina lands have been conserved at a rate of approximately 37,600 acres a year. However, now is the time to accelerate conservation efforts before the State loses its unique natural heritage. According to the U.S. Census Bureau between July 1, 2024, and July 1, 2025, South Carolina's population grew faster than any other state in the country at a rate of 1.5 percent. Projections from the South Carolina Office of Revenue and Fiscal Affairs show population growth continuing and accelerating in many parts of the State, such as Greenville, York and Jasper Counties. At the same time Governor McMaster has laid out a bold vision – to conserve a total of 10 million acres, or an additional 6.8 million acres of land, to create a legacy of conservation that will protect the land, history, culture, and environment of South Carolina. Following the Governor's lead, the General Assembly passed the **South Carolina Protected Lands and Conservation Coordination Act** in 2026 which formalizes the State's commitment to conservation at scale.

In May 2025, South Carolina resource agencies and partners in conservation met to kick off this initiative. Leaders discussed priority strategies to accelerate conservation efforts.

The purpose of this document is to outline and formalize priority actions identified and the strategies for implementation to accelerate land conservation. To reach the conservation goal of 10 million acres, priority actions focus on strategic fee simple acquisitions and conservation easements, partnerships, and statewide initiatives. This document outlines priority actions in five areas, each developed by task forces of leaders in the following areas: (1) federal, (2) state, (3) local, and (4) private industry, and (5) private landowners. Since the initial May 2025 meeting, many of these recommendations and strategies are underway. Task forces established will continue to meet and review progress on implementation actions.

SOUTH CAROLINA'S CONSERVATION LANDSCAPE

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA CONSERVATION PARTNERS

Currently, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR), South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism (SCPRT), and the South Carolina Forestry Commission (SCFC) continuously work to utilize existing state funding frameworks and federal grants to opportunistically conserve lands, predominantly through fee simple acquisition and occasionally conservation easements. Additionally, the South Carolina Office of Resilience (SCOR) and the South Carolina Conservation Bank (SCCB) provide financial support mechanisms including grants awarded directly towards acquisition and reimbursable grants that can be utilized by third-party non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to assist in acquiring properties. Additionally, the SCCB provides funding to NGOs for the purchase of conservation easements that aid in conserving natural resources and working lands, such as those in silviculture and agriculture.

State agencies that purchase, own, and manage properties for public use include:

- ***SCDNR*** is charged by State law with the management, protection, and enhancement of wildlife, fisheries, and marine resources in South Carolina. SCDNR's mission is to serve as the principal advocate for and steward of South Carolina's natural resources. Additionally, the SCDNR Board passed a resolution in 1999 establishing "*... habitat protection as its highest priority and instructs staff to prepare and implement, in partnership with interested entities in the public and private sectors, a comprehensive strategy to protect, understand, manage and restore terrestrial and aquatic habitats, including farm and forest lands, that are so necessary for the long-term conservation of the state's natural resources and their associated ecological and social benefits.*" To fulfill the mission of the agency and as the SCDNR Board's number one priority, the SCDNR continues to acquire property. To date, the SCDNR owns and manages over 320,000 acres of land that play a critical role in conserving fish, wildlife, plants, and other natural and cultural resources. These lands are open to the public for a variety of recreational uses, from hunting and fishing to hiking and wildlife viewing.
- ***SCFC*** conserves working forests to ensure the sustainability and active management of South Carolina's forests, in order to maintain the economic, environmental, and societal benefits these lands provide. This includes actively seeking opportunities to acquire land to grow the State Forest system as well as supporting landowners in forest management and management of state forests in active, sustainable and multi-use ways. To date, the SCFC owns and manages over 102,000 acres of land managed as a part of the State Forest system. Additionally, they also hold the largest conservation easement in the State on over 61,000 acres of working silviculture lands in the Pee Dee.
- ***SCPRT*** encourages people to discover SC's state parks by providing resource-based recreation and educational opportunities that emphasize conservation protection, and interpretation of the State's natural and cultural resources. The Parks Service manages and protects more than 90,000 acres, with 48 operational parks.

State Agencies that provide funding support for the purchase of conservation properties include:

- ***SCCB*** improves the quality of life in South Carolina by funding the conservation of significant forest lands, farmlands, wetlands, historical properties, archaeological sites, and urban parks through grants, loans, and matching funds for land acquisition and conservation easements. The SCCB manages and maintains a conservation priority map to assist in identifying and prioritizing conservation opportunities.
- ***SCOR*** lessens the impact of disasters on the communities and citizens of South Carolina by planning and coordinating statewide resilience, long-term disaster recovery, and hazard mitigation. SCOR has developed a conservation priority model to identify areas where conservation will reduce the impact of flooding on the citizens and communities of South Carolina. SCOR funds land conservation projects through funds allocated to the Disaster Relief and Resilience Reserve Fund (state funds) and acquires federal grants, such as the 50-million-dollar Environmental Protection Agency Climate Pollution Reduction Grant, in support of resilience and land conservation.

At the local level, municipalities and county governments can do their part to help conserve quality habitat through fee simple acquisitions, encouraging conservation easements, or implementing zoning restrictions in ecologically sensitive areas. In addition, the SC Land Trust Network (comprised of NGO land trusts) brings together land trusts to increase the pace of land protection in the state, working closely with the state agencies. Conservation NGOs write, support, and advocate for model ordinances. Private landowners manage and improve their own land for ecological benefit.

SOUTH CAROLINA'S LAND RESOURCES

Land Cover Statistics

The SCDNR utilized National Land Cover Data[1] (NLCD) to derive the statistics enclosed in this section. Note there are discrepancies between the total acres of land and water depending on the source utilized due to how things are spatially mapped. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that South Carolina has 19,241,024 land acres and 1,254,016 water acres, whereas the NLCD reports 19,224,869 land acres and 746,677 water acres. Legally, the U.S. Census Bureau is more accurate, but for spatial analysis, SCDNR has to use the NLCD for calculations.

Therefore, according to the NLCD, South Carolina has a total land and water area of nearly 20 million acres, or 31,205 square miles. Of this area, nearly 3.2 million acres are protected, equating to about 16.2% of the State (*Table 1*).

Of the remaining unprotected lands, 16,572, 225 acres are not developed and are classified as a land cover type that provides conservation potential for wildlife habitat, working agriculture or silviculture farms (*Table 2*).

Table 1. 2023 National Land Cover Dataset (NLCD) Metrics calculated February 2026.

Total SC Acres	*(Includes water, including waters off the coast)*
19,971,546	**acres**
Total SC Land Acres	*(Total SC Acres minus Water)*
19,224,869	**acres**
Non-Developed Land	*(Excludes all developed categories, and open water)*
16,571,225	**acres**
Developed Land	*(all NLCD Developed Categories)*
2,653,644	**acres**
13.8%	Total Land Acres Developed
Protected Lands	
3,237,093	**acres**
16.8% (16.2%)	Total Land Acres Protected (excludes water)
19.5%	Non-Developed Land is protected
Available Land	*Total SC Land Acres minus Developed & Protected Lands*
13,334,132	**acres**
69.4%	SC Land Acres neither developed nor protected
Available Land excl. Cultivated Croplands/ Pasture	*Total SC Land Acres minus Developed, Cultivated & Protected Lands*
10,135,252	**acres**
52.7%	SC Land Acres not developed, crop/pasture or protected

1 https://www.usgs.gov/centers/eros/science/national-land-cover-database



Table 2. Statewide 2023 National Land Cover Dataset (NLCD) Metrics calculated February 2026.

National Land Cover Type	Acres	% Total Area
Open Water	746,677	3.7%
Developed, Open Space	1,382,140	6.9%
Developed, Low Intensity	894,713	4.5%
Developed, Medium Intensity	288,467	1.4%
Developed, High Intensity	88,324	0.4%
Developed Total	***2,653,643***	***13.3%***
Barren Land (Rock, Sand, Clay)	70,051	0.4%
Deciduous Forest	1,591,485	8.0%
Evergreen Forest	4,725,128	23.7%
Mixed Forest	818,349	4.1%
Shrub/Scrub	772,850	3.9%
Grassland/Herbaceous	818,926	4.1%
Pasture/Hay	1,392,363	7.0%
Cultivated Crops	1,806,517	9.0%
Woody Wetlands	4,006,008	20.1%
Emergent Herbaceous Wetlands	569,550	2.9%
Non-Developed Total	***16,571,227***	***83.20%***
Total	**19,971,546**	**100.0%**

Egret flying through Santee Coastal Reserve.

Protected Land

Land conservation occurs in fee simple ownership or through the protection of properties with conservation easements. These protected lands are owned and managed by a variety of private, federal, and state partners. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) Conserved Lands of South Carolina Database outlines the percentage of lands and acres by category of protection including private, federal, state, local, and other (*Table 3*). Other lands include properties that are generally protected as they are owned by the federal government for the use of energy generation, flood protection or military preparedness.

Of the lands managed by federal and state agencies, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) owns and manages the most acreage of protected lands in South Carolina with Sumter and Francis Marion National Forests comprising over 650,000 acres; the SCDNR is the state agency with the most protected acreage with over 320,000 acres (*Table 4*).

Table 3. TNC Conserved Lands of South Carolina Database Statistics by Type of Protection2.

Category	Acres	% of Protected Lands	% of State Area
Private	1,211,275	37.4	6.1
Federal	840,435	26.0	4.2
State	619,802	19.1	3.1
Other* *(e.g. USACE, DoE, DoD)*	509,521	15.7	2.6
Local	56,060	1.7	0.3
Total	**3,237,093**	**100.0**	**16.2**

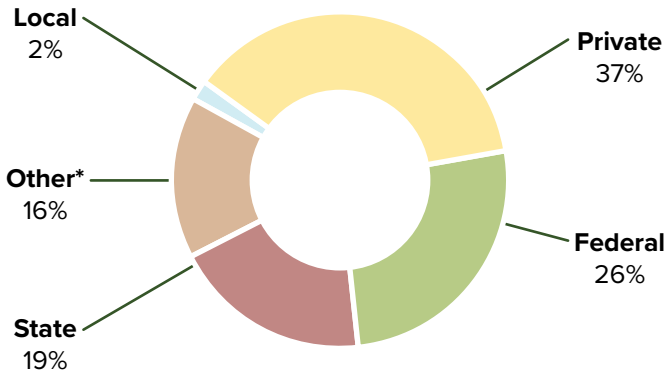


Table 4. TNC Database Statistics of Federal and State Fee Simple Protected Lands calculated February 2026.

Agency	Category	Acres	Protected Lands %	State Land Area %
U.S. Forest Service	Federal	652,333	20.2	3.3
SCDNR	State	354,644	11	1.8
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service	Federal	149,423	4.6	0.7
SC Forestry Commission	State	102,378	3.2	0.5
SC Parks, Rec, & Tourism	State	96,574	3.0	0.5
National Park Service	Federal	32,667	1.0	0.2
SC Public Service Authority	State	26,234	0.8	0.1
Others (DOD, DOE, USACE, etc.)	State and Federal	509,521	15.7	2.6
Total State and Federal		**1,862,506**	**59.5**	**9.7**

2 Data for South Carolina calculated from the Winter 2025 update of the South Carolina Protected Lands database compiled by The Nature Conservancy, to which state agencies contribute twice a year.



Boykin Mill Pond.

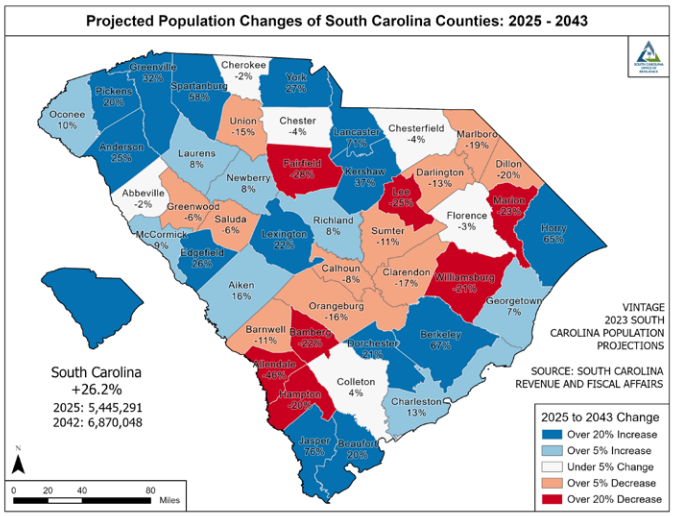
GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

South Carolina continues to be a popular place for people to live, work, and play. According to the 2025 U.S. Census Bureau, South Carolina's population grew by 79,958 people between July 1, 2024 and July 1, 2025, making it the fastest growing state by percent growth in the nation. The State ranks 5th in the nation by numeric growth behind Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Georgia, respectively.

According to U.S. Census Data, in 2024, Jasper County had the nation's third fastest growing population and in 2025, it was number one. Berkeley, Horry, Spartanburg and Lancaster counties continue to see rapid growth. Projections from the South Carolina Revenue & Fiscal Affairs Office (*Figure 1*) and the U.S. Census Bureau show population growth and development continuing to accelerate in the Upstate, Midlands and Lowcountry.

As of July 1, 2024, the South Carolina Revenue and Fiscal Affairs estimates the State's population at 5,478,831 people and that the State's population will reach 6.8 million people by 2043[3]. With increased population growth, the need to conserve the beauty and culture of South Carolina's landscape is imperative.

Figure 1. South Carolina Revenue & Fiscal Affairs Office County Population Projections (from SC Strategic Statewide Resilience and Risk Reduction Plan, 2023).



3 https://rfa.sc.gov/programs/census-state-liaison-and-data-center/population-projections

Harry Hampton pictured next to one of the giant Bald cypress trees in Congaree National Park. Credit: National Park Service

LAND CONSERVATION TRENDS

Through the efforts of South Carolina's conservation community, the protection of the state's beautiful natural resources, historic landscapes and working lands continues. Since January 2017, more than 396,000 acres have been protected by a variety of public, private, and non-governmental organizations. With the support of the Governor, the General Assembly and state and federal grants, state resource agencies have acquired over 73,591 acres and protected over 61,000 acres via conservation easements since 2017.

Protection of large acreage is made possible by leveraging federal grants. However, recent cuts in federal conservation land acquisition programs increase the risk of missing opportunities to conserve and protect lands that are important for public outdoor recreation, natural resource protection, flood resilience, silviculture and agriculture. With the support of the Governor, the General Assembly and state and federal grants, state resource agencies have acquired fee simple ownership of over 73,591 acres since 2017. Additionally, the SC Forestry Commission ensured permanent protection with the State's largest conservation easement for over 61,000 acres of working silviculture lands in the Pee Dee.

CONSERVATION PLANNING AND COORDINATION TOOLS

Conservation Agency Roundtable:

Currently, the SCDNR, SCPRT, SCFC, SCOR and the SCCB meet quarterly to coordinate conservation efforts and priorities. Discussions focus on leveraging state dollars, agency priorities and how to communicate land conservation needs and successes to a variety of stakeholders and audiences to advance this goal.

Conservation Mapping Tool:

To better coordinate, prioritize, and track efforts and accomplish this ambitious goal, the SCDNR developed a tool that assimilates a variety of data to track areas of existing protected lands towards the 10-million-acre goal and assist in identifying areas of conservation potential with support from the conservation community and resource agencies. This tool builds upon the **SC Conservation Bank's Priority Analysis**, which is updated annually.

To access the Conservation Mapping Tool, visit the link found here: **McMaster Conservation Planning Tool**.



DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAN & TASK FORCES

The plan was developed to help guide the conservation community in strategies to implement more land protection. To support the plan, four specific task forces were developed. Participants in each task force are listed below, with leadership and support given by state and NGOs as co-leads, also listed below. Administrative support for these task forces and the writing of this plan was provided by SCDNR and SCOR.

Federal Task Force

Co-Leads: SCDNR and Ducks Unlimited

Conservation Voters of SC
Meagan Diedolf

Ducks Unlimited
Emily Purcell

Open Land Trust
Dana Bauer

Open Space Institute
Lesley Kane

SCDNR
Tom Mullikin, Lorianne Riggin, Fran Varacalli

SCFC
Scott Phillips

SCOR
Ben Duncan

SCPRT
Joy Raintree

The Conservation Fund
Jason Johnson

Trust for Public Land
Doug Hattaway

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Cody Simpson

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Durwin Carter, Beth Goldstein, Alice Lawrence

State Task Force

Co-Leads: SCDNR and Open Space Institute

ACE Basin Task Force
Charles Lane

Coastal Carolina
Chad Leverette

Conservation Voters of SC
Meagan Diedolf

Ducks Unlimited
Emily Purcell

Open Space Institute
Maria Whitehead

SCCB
Amber Larck

SCDNR
Fran Varacalli

SCFC
James Douglas

SCOR
Eric Fosmire

SCPRT
Rachel Snuggs

SC Farm Bureau
Gary Spires

The Conservation Fund
Jason Johnson

The Nature Conservancy
Katy McWilliams

Trust for Public Land
Pegeen Hanrahan

University of South Carolina
Julius Fredrickson

Local Task Force

Co-Leads: SCOR and Lowcountry Land Trust

ACE Basin Task Force
Charles Lane

Coastal Conservation League
Dana Beach

Congaree Land Trust
Sarah Stewart

Lowcountry Land Trust
Kate Schaefer, Matt Williams

Open Space Institute
Maria Whitehead

SCCB
Amber Larck

SCOR
Alex Butler

Trust for Public Land
Pegeen Hanrahan

Upstate Forever
Aldon Knight

SCDNR
Anna Huckabee Smith

Private Industry and Landowners Task Force

Co-Leads: SCOR, Sustain SC, SCCB and Audubon South Carolina

Audubon SC
Rebecca Haynes, Tim Evans, Erin Giebner

Center for Heirs Property
Esther Adams

Longleaf Alliance
Lisa Lord

Lowcountry Land Trust
Matt Williams, Kate Parks Schaefer

SCCB
Amber Larck

SCDNR
Tyler Brown, Brooke Myers

SCOR
Hope Warren

SC Land Trust Network
Jen Howard, Lyles Cooper

Sustain SC
Kristen Gunter

The Nature Conservancy
Katherine McWilliams

SCDNR Oyster Recycling and Enhancement Program staff and volunteers unload bagged oyster shell to create a living shoreline.





PRIORITY STRATEGIES

Priority strategies in this plan have been organized in two ways, one by the task force that identified the strategy and the following overarching themes:

1. Funding
2. Policy
3. Coordination
4. Outreach
5. Data

Strategy Intent

The focus of each task force is outlined below.

FEDERAL: Coordinate and accelerate federal funding and initiatives that support conservation.

STATE: Coordinate and accelerate state government efforts to increase conservation.

LOCAL: Coordinate and accelerate local government efforts to increase conservation.

PRIVATE LANDOWNERS: Engage private landowners to promote the protection of private property, and the variety of options available to landowners from state, federal and local sources as described in the strategies above.

PRIVATE INDUSTRY: Identify streams of funding to support continued work to protect lands by fee simple acquisition or with conservation easements and creative ways to support land conservation through voluntary mitigation offsets.

While the federal, state, local, private industry, and private landowner task forces worked independently, the strategies identified above can be summarized in 5 main areas of effort:

1. Funding
2. Policy
3. Coordination
4. Outreach
5. Data

This report highlights the need for accelerated conservation across South Carolina and provides creative ways to identify mechanisms to support the 10-million-acre goal.

Sandpipers foraging at Botany Bay Heritage Preserve.

FEDERAL

FEDERAL STRATEGY 1: Increase Forest Legacy Funding

Overview:

South Carolina has historically been successful in obtaining Forest Legacy grants. With funds in jeopardy, the South Carolina delegation was successful in efforts to protect Inflation Reduction Act funds during budget reconciliation, and grants were awarded for the SCFC Chelsea and SCDNR Bigbee tracts. Building on this momentum, this strategy is focused on increasing Forest Legacy funding in the future, recognizing there are always more projects than funding availability.

Action Items:

To achieve the above, and maximize funding to the state through Forest Legacy programs, the following steps should be taken.

1. Increase coordination between South Carolina conservation leaders and federal staff leaders and other groups to ensure future funding is allocated and to ensure funding is robust and increased on a national level, thus benefiting South Carolina. Educate federal delegation members on the benefits of the Forest Legacy program to SC and the public benefits provided by past projects.
2. Continue to develop a strong list of projects for submission to this competitive grant program consistently putting forward projects that would score well and maximize the amount that may be received.
3. Work with delegation members to submit requests for direct appropriations as available and appropriate

Strategy Lead(s):

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources; South Carolina Forestry Commission

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

The Nature Conservancy; Open Space Institute; The Conservation Fund; Trust for Public Land; U.S. Forest Service

FEDERAL STRATEGY 2: Increase Education on Perpetual Conservation Easements

Overview:

Following a move by some congressional leaders in Washington D.C. to limit the use of easements and convert permanent easements into time bound ones, there is a renewed need for educating and ensuring conservation easements continue to be a powerful tool in permanent land protection.

Action Items:

1. Continue discussions with federal SC Delegation on importance of conservation easements in South Carolina.
2. Communicate efforts to highlight how important conservation easements are for forest landowners, farmers, hunters, anglers, outdoor recreationists, and historic preservation.
3. Continue to increase large-scale working forests through conservation easements (e.g. SCFC's recent 62,000 acre, tri-county Forest Legacy projects).

Strategy Lead(s):

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources; SC Conservation Bank

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

The Nature Conservancy; Open Space Institute; The Conservation Fund; U.S. Forest Service; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; SC Conservation Bank; SC Forestry Commission; American Battlefield Trust; SC Farm Bureau

Scenic view of the Broad River in Sumter National Forest.



FEDERAL STRATEGY 3: Protect National Lands

Overview:

This strategy focuses on supporting the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the planning, justification, and outreach needed to successfully navigate major federal acquisition boundary expansions to increase conserved lands.

Action Items:

While these expansions are ultimately the decision of the federal agencies, South Carolina partners can support identifying opportunities, and aid in the acquisition process by doing the following:

1. Work with federal staff to identify priority land acquisition targets within the boundaries of the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests and support expansion of the National Wildlife Refuge boundaries.
2. Identify opportunities to streamline and accelerate the timelines of acquisition processes.
3. Identify where NGO partners can assist.
4. Establish policies that can be implemented to streamline/improve the due diligence processes.
5. Support increased funding for staffing federal agencies for land management.
6. Investigate SCFC/USFS Shared Stewardship Program opportunities.
7. Invite federal agency heads and legislators to visit and tour South Carolina's forests and working lands including planning opportunities for engagement and coordination of events.

Strategy Lead(s):

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; U.S. Forest Service; SC Forestry Commission; SC Department of Natural Resources

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

The Nature Conservancy; Open Space Institute; The Conservation Fund; Trust for Public Land

FEDERAL STRATEGY 4: Increase use of Natural Resources Conservation Service Conservation Easements

Overview:

This strategy involves developing creative agreement mechanisms for NGOs to help accelerate working land conservation and streamlining the process for U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service conservation easements. This may include advocating for property staffing levels and Farm Bill provisions support, U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency Direct or Guarantee Farm Ownership Loans, and Rural Development funding lending.

Action Items:

1. Develop creative mechanisms for NGOs to help accelerate working lands conservation with federal and state partners.
2. Encourage the ongoing process to streamline NRCS conservation easements, with the goal of a 12-month timeframe for conservation easements to align with SCCB grant program match requirements.
3. Encourage further collaboration between the National and South Carolina Easement acquisition team.
4. Support and encourage land trusts in being named an eligible entity by USDA to authorize some administrative flexibilities.

Strategy Lead(s):

U.S. Natural Resources Conservation Service; U.S. Farm Service Agency; SC Conservation Bank, Soil and Water Conservation Districts

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

SC Farm Bureau; Pee Dee Land Trust; Upstate Forever

Francis Marion National Forest.



FEDERAL STRATEGY 5: Increase use of Military Protection Funding

Overview:

Partner with Department of Defense to continue funding for the Readiness and Environmental Protection Program (REPI) and aggressively seek to protect land around SC's military installations, operations areas, and military communities. This includes coordination with NGO and federal military contacts at SC installations.

Action Items:

1. Schedule meetings with NGOs and federal military contacts at installations to ensure SC is utilizing all funding for conservation projects.
    a. Increase awareness and leverage of DOD REPI funding opportunities beyond traditional REPI, by applying for REPI long-term funding, REPI Challenge, REPI/NFWF NCRF, REPI/NPS Readiness and Recreation Initiative, etc.
2. Engage, maintain, and increase awareness of SC Federal Delegation to SC Lowcountry Sentinel Landscape, REPI Programs, and SC land protection projects supported by REPI to increase support for robust programs and funding.
    a. Secure SC federal delegation support as co-sponsors of and advance passage of H.R.1083/S.439 the Incentivizing Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Sales Act of 2025.
3. Engage SC Lowcountry Sentinel Landscape Coordinator and Working Group, resource agencies, and NGOs to conserve base and operations buffer areas.
4. Engage and collect five-year plans from all SC military installation Integrated Natural Resources Management Plans (INRMPs) as currently integrated into the State Wildlife Action Plans and other related programs as applicable, e.g. REPI SERPPAS.
5. Engage with a representative of SC Veterans Affairs (Military Enhancement Fund) for this effort.

Strategy Lead(s):

SCDNR; Department of Defense; SC Lowcountry Sentinel Landscape

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

The Conservation Fund; The Nature Conservancy; Open Land Trust; Lowcountry Land Trust; Ducks Unlimited; Open Space Institute; Southeast Regional Partnership for Planning and Sustainability; Trust for Public Land

FEDERAL STRATEGY 6: Engage Secretaries of Federal Departments

Overview:

Highlight land protection successes tied to federal agencies, funding programs, and conservation programs with Departments of Interior, Agriculture and Defense. Organize events aimed at fostering engagement with each Department Secretary such as press events for project celebrations and property dedications.

Action Items:

1. Highlight land protection successes tied to federal agencies, funding programs, and conservation programs with DOI, USDA, and DOD by setting up meetings with Federal Secretaries.
2. Organize events aimed at fostering engagement with Secretaries of Federal Departments including project celebrations and dedications.

Strategy Lead(s):

SCDNR

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

SC Resource Agencies, NGOs

SCDNR staff on a shark and red drum longline tagging survey for an episode of Boots on The Ground.



STATE

STATE STRATEGY 1: Increase and Diversify Conservation Funding

Overview:

Increase and diversify funding for voluntary land conservation, including fee-simple acquisition, voluntary conservation easements, working lands conservation, land stewardship, and public access. Ensure that South Carolina has the resources necessary not only to acquire land held in the public trust, but also to steward those lands and allow South Carolinians to experience and benefit from them.

Action Items:

1. Explore expanded and dedicated sources of state policy to advance state and local funding for land conservation, stewardship and access, including recommendations from the Trust for Public Land feasibility study.
2. Advance new and expanded financing mechanisms that can support conservation, including use of the Clean Water State Revolving Fund, SCOR funding, SCCB funding and other programs that recognize land protection as a water quality and resilience strategy.
3. Advance state policy revisions and actions that support counties and local governments to more readily utilize existing revenue tools, including capital sales tax and other dedicated funding mechanisms, for conservation and greenbelt programs.
4. Clearly identify and communicate long-term funding needs for acquisition, conservation easements, stewardship, management, and public access on lands held in the public trust.
5. Support coordination with legislators and other decision-makers to build understanding of conservation funding needs and opportunities.

Strategy Lead(s):

SC Resource Agencies; SC Conservation Bank; SC Department of Environmental Services; SC Office of Resilience

Identified Partners:

Local Governments; Land Trusts; Conservation Organizations; Legislators; Utilities; Landowners

STATE STRATEGY 2: Build Public and Political Support for Conservation

Overview:

Communicate the value of land conservation and build broad understanding of its benefits to South Carolina's economy, natural resources, water, working lands, communities, and quality of life. Emphasize the role of conserved lands held in the public trust and the benefits they provide to current and future generations.

Action Items:

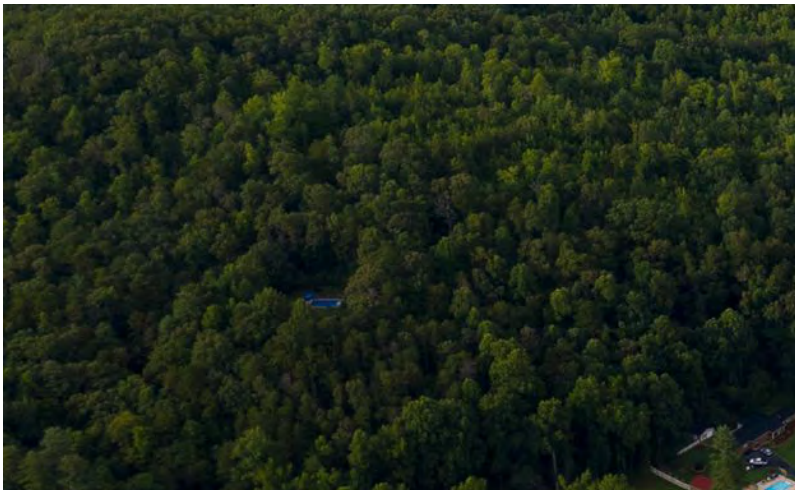
1. Develop a coordinated message that communicates the costs, benefits, and return on investment of land conservation, drawing on existing research including the Conservation Return on Investment Study and other available analyses.
2. Coordinate and leverage existing partnerships and opportunities to engage legislators, community leaders, landowners, and the public, including the SC Land Trust Network, nonprofit education days, Tree Farm events, and Conversations with Conservationists.
3. Convene and engage statewide forestry leaders and other key sectors - such as agriculture and rural communities—to identify shared interests in conserving working lands and supporting rural economies.
4. Explore opportunities for South Carolina to share lessons and coordinate with neighboring Southeastern states and existing regional conservation partnerships.

Strategy Lead(s):

SC Resource Agencies

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Landowners; Legislators; Soil and Water Conservation Districts; SC Forestry Association; Farm Bureau; Universities; Land Trust; NGOs



STATE STRATEGY 3: Protect South Carolina's Most Vulnerable and Valuable Lands

Overview:

Identify and prioritize lands at high risk of conversion and lands that provide significant conservation benefits, including working forests and agricultural lands, wetlands, longleaf pine landscapes, water resources, wildlife habitat, and other vulnerable natural lands.

Action Items:

1. Utilize and improve available data and prioritization tools to identify vulnerable lands and conservation opportunities where protection can provide significant natural, water, economic, and community benefits.
2. Support current conservation programs and funding sources that prioritize voluntary protection of vulnerable working lands and natural areas, including conservation easements and fee-simple acquisition where appropriate.
3. Support development of voluntary, incentive-based approaches to conserve wetlands and other high-value natural systems, including coordination with state and local governments on data, incentives, model approaches, and land-use tools.
4. Use conservation return-on-investment, land-use change, and other available analyses to help communicate the benefits and urgency of protecting high-priority lands.

Strategy Lead(s):

SC Conservation Bank; SC Office of Resilience; SC Resource Agencies

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Farm Bureau; Land Trusts; Ducks Unlimited; Local Governments; Universities; Landowners

STATE STRATEGY 4: Expand Voluntary Conservation Tools and Private Landowner Options

Overview:

Expand voluntary, incentive-based options that allow private landowners to conserve working lands, forests, wetlands, wildlife habitat, and other important natural resources while retaining flexibility and supporting landowner goals.

Action Items:

1. Support legislation and policies that strengthen incentives for voluntary land conservation, including the proposed revisions to Conservation Tax Credit legislation and the State Scenic Rivers Act.
2. Improve landowner awareness of available conservation options, including conservation easements, sale or donation of land to conservation organizations or public agencies, and voluntary natural resource and working lands programs.
3. Analyze the use and effectiveness of existing conservation incentives, including conservation tax credits and other state and federal programs, to identify opportunities for improvement.

Strategy Lead(s):

To be identified

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

SC Resource Agencies; Land Trusts; Local Governments; Farm Bureau; Forestry Organizations; Landowners; Environmental and Conservation Organizations

Aerial view of Bramlett Bottoms farmland below the North Saluda Reservoir of the Greenville Watershed. Credit: Mac Stone / South Carolina Conservation Bank.



LOCAL

LOCAL STRATEGY 1: Recognize Counties with Successful Initiatives

Overview:

Develop a strategy to recognize, or otherwise use as a model, counties who have implemented conservation funding or overall conservation planning and implementation strategies. May include financial incentive, or matching funds for those counties that has invested in such activities.

Action Items:

1. Identify and engage with counties that have implemented conservation funding streams or overall conservation planning and implementation strategies. Support peer to peer learning from leading counties to interested counties likely through Association of Counties on a predictable basis so counties can receive technical assistance.
2. Explore providing financial incentives, such as matching funds, for those counties that invest in their own activities.

Strategy Lead(s):

SC Resource Agencies

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Local Governments; Elected Officials; NGOs; South Carolina Association of Counties

LOCAL STRATEGY 2: Engage Counties on Possible New Funding Options and Opportunities

Overview:

Engage and educate county officials and staff on ways that they can support conservation in their jurisdictions.

Action Items:

1. Educate/engage on conservation bonds or sales tax option such as the greenspace tax or the greenbelt option within the transportation sales tax.
2. Educate/engage on capital projects tax options. Twenty-three counties have enacted voter-approved Capital Projects Taxes, which can be used for named projects, but not to establish a conservation program, as enabled by the Greenspace Tax (only used once in Beaufort) or the Greenbelt provision of the Transportation Sales Tax (used by Berkeley, Charleston, Dorchester and Jasper Counties). Work towards amendments to allow for the proceeds of taxes to be used for greenspace and greenbelt programs (e.g., S.1006)
3. Educate/engage on Clean Water State Revolving Fund opportunity and others.

Strategy Lead(s):

SC Resource Agencies

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Local Governments, Elected Officials; NGOs; Trust for Public Land

Attendees at the 2026 South Carolina Conservation Districts Annual Conference.



LOCAL STRATEGY 3: Gather Input on how the State can Better Support Local Conservation Efforts and Develop Materials As Needed

Overview:

Conservation agencies, through existing programs, and through enhanced coordination and collaboration with each other and local governments, will meet with counties and municipalities and offer support and resources.

Action Items:

1. Coordinate with SCOR watershed coordinators and SCDNR's Urban Outreach Program to engage localities to catalog their needs and actions that increase conservation and hazard resilience.
2. Catalog existing ordinances related to conservation (wetlands protections, buffer ordinances, toolbox, comp plans, concurrency, plans for smart growth, Municode review)
3. In urban or developed areas, engage with SCDNR Urban Outreach Program in reviewing comprehensive / land use plans and advising on nature-friendly ordinances and zoning, passive park design, conservation subdivision design, and nature-based solutions (e.g. bioswales, rain gardens, pollinator habitat).

Strategy Lead(s):

SC Resource Agencies

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Local Governments; Elected Officials; NGOs



Lake Jocassee.

PRIVATE LANDOWNERS

PRIVATE LANDOWNER STRATEGY 1: Identify Barriers to Landowner Conservation Participation

Overview:

Identify key barriers to landowner participation through a comprehensive barrier assessment and use those insights to reduce obstacles.

Action Items:

1. Conduct a comprehensive barrier assessment that includes polling land trusts on their knowledge of landowner barriers and concerns.
2. Conduct an assessment that includes polling or study of landowners to identify incentives that would meaningfully shift landowner behavior.
3. Map the highest areas of land use changes and/or gaps in conserved lands.
4. Follow up on findings when assessments are completed to produce a set of clear deliverables aligned with existing State and Federal authorities.

Strategy Lead(s):

Land Trust Network

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

NGOs; Landowners; Research Partners

PRIVATE LANDOWNER STRATEGY 2: Continue Education and Outreach Efforts

Overview:

Utilize partnerships like the SC Land Trust Network to engage with more landowners.

Action Items:

1. Gather and pilot an education and outreach plan to engage landowners through regional workshops and field days, leveraging partners like Clemson Extension, the SC Forestry Association, and the SC Land Trust Network to reduce costs and staff burden.
2. Expand the communication toolbox to support land trust conversations with private landowners, focusing on land loss trends and financial benefits of conservation for distribution through the SC Land Trust Network.
3. Offer specialized workshops for attorneys, appraisers, forestry consultants, CPAs, and financial advisors, equipping them to identify conservation opportunities and refer landowners.

Strategy Lead(s):

Land Trust Network

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Land trusts; Landowners; Research Partners

Stewardship Week Field Day on Soil Conservation at Yon Family Farms.



PRIVATE LANDOWNER STRATEGY 3: Recognition and Storytelling

Overview:

This strategy focuses on using recognition and storytelling to elevate conservation successes and build broader public support.

Action Items:

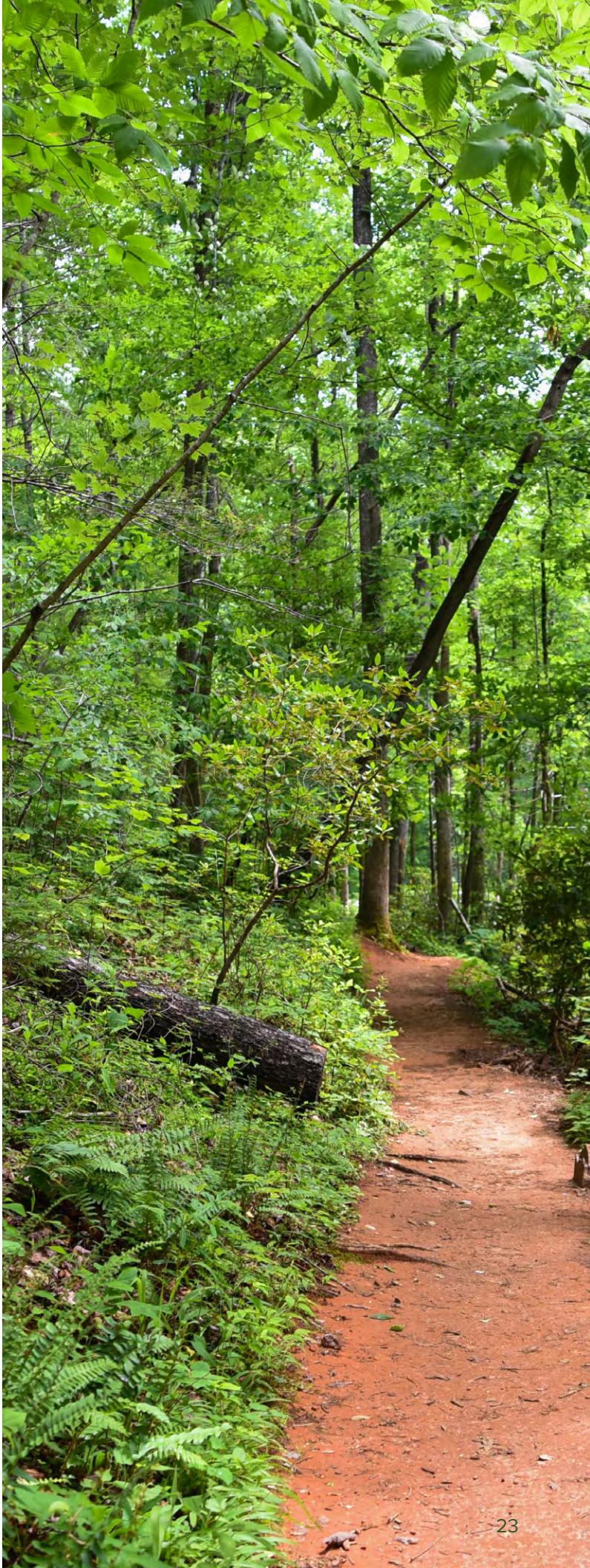
1. Develop or expand opportunities for legislative recognition for conservation landowners, including those donated easements. Examples include: Governor's Certificate of Appreciation and Land Legacy Day at the State House.
2. Identify partners to elevate stories to the general public.
3. Continue efforts to install protected property signage to increase public visibility.
4. Host project completion celebrations on site or at community venues to honor landowners and partners
5. Integrate recognition into existing events to reach broader audiences.
6. Land Trust to further engage a "Conservation Champions" network of recognized landowners who can serve as spokespeople and peer mentors.

Strategy Lead(s):

Land Trust Network, SC Conservation Bank

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Land trusts, landowners, funders, federal program leads



Path in Table Rock State Park.

PRIVATE INDUSTRY

PRIVATE INDUSTRY STRATEGY 1: Support Sustain SC Land and Water Action Platform

Overview:

Sustain SC operates the Land and Water Action Platform (LAWAP), a conservation funding initiative that connects corporate investment with tangible conservation outcomes across South Carolina. LAWAP supports land protection projects by funding the land value of a project as well as required due diligence expenses that are often difficult to fund, yet critical to moving conservation land deals forward.

Action Items:

1. Increase private funding for the Land and Water Action Fund.
2. Work with Sustain SC to understand corporations' interests and the types of projects they would support.
3. Provide specific metrics that can be used for sustainability goals.

Strategy Lead(s):

Sustain SC

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

NGOs; Corporate Partners; Industry

PRIVATE INDUSTRY STRATEGY 2: Create Private Land Conservation Funds with Community Foundations

Overview:

Private philanthropic donors have played a significant role in South Carolina's conservation efforts. Typically, donors will donate funds directly to a conservation nonprofit to support a specific project. However, there are donors who are interested in land conservation and not necessarily a specific conservation organization or project. This proposed strategy is to grow philanthropic support by overlaying growth centers in South Carolina with local community foundations to replicate Greenville Community Foundation's model. The Greenville Community Foundation has an existing fund to accept donations for the purpose of land conservation and Foundation staff coordinate to find worthy conservation projects.

This can bring in new private funding sources that otherwise may be missing for land conservation.

Action Items:

1. Overlay high-growth areas with local community foundations working in these areas.
2. Develop an outreach plan, working with Greenville Community Foundation as a model.

Strategy Lead(s):

Sustain SC

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Land Trust; Foundations; NGOs

Della Coulter property protected by Upper Savannah Land Trust. Credit: Wade Harrison / South Carolina Land Trust



PRIVATE INDUSTRY STRATEGY 3: Private Industry Voluntary Mitigation Offset Program

Overview:

In 2025, Atlantic Packaging worked with Lowcountry Land Trust to support funding for the Barry Tract in Dorchester County through a Voluntary Mitigation Program developed together. Atlantic Packaging financially assessed their company's footprint in Dorchester County and funded the Barry Tract in the amount to offset their impact. These funds were critical to the land project's success. This example shows a voluntary way for a business to work locally to support the natural resources the business depends on while accounting for the impact that is made through the cost of doing business. Amplifying the Barry Tract story can illustrate the best management practice to inspire other businesses. This has potential to correlate with a company's sustainability plan, specifically with biodiversity reporting.

Action Items:

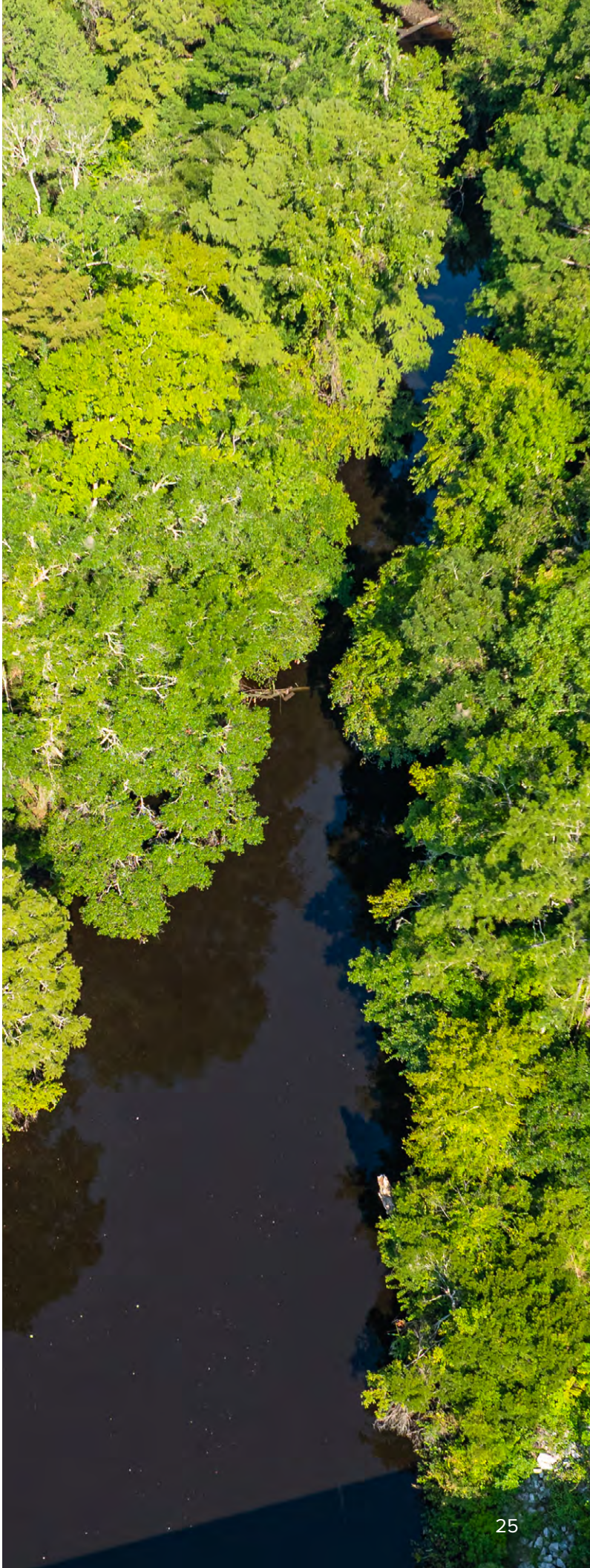
1. Research Voluntary Mitigation Offset Programs in other States and understand the mechanics for the Barry Tract Voluntary Mitigation Offset Program.
2. Develop a concept informational handout about Voluntary Mitigation Offset Programs.
3. Assess program potential through discussions with Sustain SC, industry members, and conservation partners
4. Develop a concept one-pager about a Voluntary Mitigation Offset Program

Strategy Lead(s):

Sustain SC

Identified Partners (non-exhaustive):

Land Trust; Corporate Entities



A drone photo of the Ashley River.

Birdwatchers enjoying Botany Bay Heritage Preserve/Wildlife Management Area.

