



January 16, 2026

### The Gang's All Here!

Legislators returned to Columbia this week and the 2026 Legislative Session began in earnest. As a reminder, this is the second year of a two-year legislative cycle, meaning all legislation that does not pass both the House and Senate by the end of the session (May 14, 2026) will "die," or have to be reintroduced in 2027.

Also shaping this legislative session, all 124 members of the SC House of Representatives are up for reelection this year, in addition to the Governor and state constitutional officers. The SC Senate will not be up again until 2028.

South Carolina Farm Bureau continues to advocate for our priority policies on behalf of our farmers and agricultural community, including farm property annexation, conservation easement tax credits, budget priorities and others.

### Governor Reveals FY2026–2027 Executive Budget

Governor McMaster held his annual press conference this week introducing his FY2026–2027 executive budget recommendations. Constitutionally, the House Ways & Means Committee must begin the first draft of the annual appropriations bill, subsequently sending the plan to the full House for approval, then the Senate Finance Committee and full Senate before ultimately reaching the Governor's desk for potential vetoes.

Of particular interest, this year Governor McMaster recommended the following:

- \$68M for Land Preservation and Conservation – to be allocated between the State Conservation Bank, Department of Natural Resources, Office of Resilience and Forestry Commission to help identify and preserve culturally or environmentally important properties, as well as for flood mitigation;
- \$20M for the SC Public Assistance Program for disaster relief;
- \$1.1B for Roads, Bridges and Interstate Repair;

- Funding for starting teacher salary increases; and,
- Additional funding for healthcare and law enforcement.

## In the House

### House Ag Committee Hears State of Agriculture and Forestry

Members of the full House Agriculture Committee heard from SC Department of Agriculture (SCDA) Commissioner Hugh Weathers and State Forester Scott Phillips this week on the state of their respective industries.

Commissioner Weathers reported to members that the agriculture industry was healthy and still the largest economic sector in the state. The difficult year some farmers and forestland owners experienced due to the residual effects of 2024's Hurricane Helene is set to be aided by \$38M in federal funding allocated to SCDA. The "South Carolina Disaster Relief Block Grant for Helene" program is scheduled to begin early this year and is aimed at certain revenue losses not covered by USDA assistance or insurance. The program will cover four categories of eligible losses: **infrastructure damage, market losses, future economic losses, and timber losses.**

To determine whether you may be eligible to apply, visit the grant's webpage [here](#).

The Commissioner also broadly covered market prices, the effect of tariffs on input costs, the increasing loss of farmland, H-2A and foreign worker program challenges, as well as the closing of SC's only soybean processing plant crippling many producers.

Next, Cam Crawford, President/CEO of the Forestry Association of SC, and State Forester Scott Phillips, discussed the major impacts seen on the forestry industry this year.

During his report, Mr. Phillips addressed the significant disruptions to the state's timber market within the last few years. One-third of markets in the last 3 years have been lost, along with the recent closure of two pulp mills. New sawmills are slated to come online, and energy demands remain a large focus, but the industry remains hopeful. Mr. Crawford also highlighted the Association's support and need for bridge replacement and infrastructure investments this fiscal year.

### SC Conservation Bank Presents Budget Request

SC Conservation Bank Executive Director, Raleigh West, presented the agency's state budget request to a House Ways & Means budget subcommittee this week, specifically requesting \$31M for overall grant funding and \$16M for the Working Ag Lands fund. These funds are

vital to conservation efforts in our state and permanently protecting working lands. SCFB supports the Bank in their requests.

### House Ad Hoc Committee Discusses Major SCDOT Reform

The House established an ad hoc committee last year to examine the state's Department of Transportation and contemplate legislation to modernize and update the Department to ensure projects are moving forward appropriately.

The group met twice this week and discussed draft bill language to propose. The draft legislation includes items such as changing SCDOT governance, increasing the number of toll roads, expanding electric car fees, and allowing counties with sufficient resources more control of local roads. When finalized, the legislation will move to the full House. The Senate plans to introduce its own version of major SCDOT reform legislation in the coming weeks.

### In the Senate

**State Income Tax Reform – H. 4216** (Bannister, others) – A Senate Finance subcommittee met this week on what remains a House and Senate legislative priority for 2026: income tax reform. The bill, which passed the House 64–47 at the end of the 2025 Session, proposes to flatten the state's 6% top income tax rate to 5.39% for income above \$30,000. For income below the level, the rate would go to 1.99%. The bill now moves to the full Senate Finance Committee for consideration.

### New Legislators Join the General Assembly Mid-Term

The start of the 2026 Session also brings five new legislators, filling an unprecedented number of vacated seats during the off-session. The newly sworn-in legislators below each won recent special elections within their districts:

- **Senator Lee Bright (R)** – Spartanburg, Senate District 12 – Sen. Bright replaces retiring Sen. Roger Nutt. Uniquely, Sen. Bright resumes the same Senate seat he held from 2009–2017.
- **Representative Dianne Mitchell (R)** – Greenville, House District 21 – Rep. Mitchell replaces retiring Rep. Bobby Cox.
- **Representative Keishan Scott (D)** – Lee, House District 50 – Rep. Scott replaces retiring Rep. Will Wheeler.
- **Representative John Lastinger (R)** – Lexington, House District 88 – Rep. Lastinger replaces outgoing Rep. RJ May.
- **Representative Greg Ford (R)** – Dorchester, House District 98 – Rep. Ford replaces retiring Rep. Chris Murphy.

## National Update

All eyes were on the *Whole Milk for Healthy Kids Act* this week, which was signed into law and our very own SCFB leader **Kevin Satterwhite** joining the bill signing in the Oval Office representing the dairy farming industry. This legislation is a major win for the dairy industry as it expands demand for fluid milk, particularly for products containing butterfat allowing schools to serve whole and 2% milk in federal school meal programs. This will increase student milk consumption by offering additional options and reducing waste.

## SC Farm Bureau Represents in Anaheim, CA



SC Farm Bureau takes over CA!

American Farm Bureau's 2026 Annual Convention was held in Anaheim, California January 9–14 and our SCFB members showed up in force.

We are proud to showcase our member accomplishments this week. **Matt Rutter** (Anderson) was selected last Fall for AFBF's **2026 Veteran Farmer of Excellence Award**. This prestigious honor recognizes one veteran annually who has served, or is currently serving, in any branch of the United States Military and actively involved in agriculture and their community. Matt and his fellow veteran wife, Kara, began *Project Victory Garden*, a veteran-led nonprofit in Townville, SC, dedicated to cultivating resiliency, healing, and renewed purpose among veterans through agritherapy, animal therapy, and agricultural education.

A big congratulations to Matt on this recognition! To learn more about Matt and Kara's mission, watch [here](#).

Big shout-outs also go to our other competitors and SCFB representatives in Anaheim this week:

- SCFB won the **New Horizon Award for Palmetto Threaded**. This is the second consecutive year SCFB has won this award for an innovative new program;
- **Katie Martin** (Anderson) for making it to the YF&R Discussion Meet Sweet Sixteen;
- **Caleb & Kate Miller** (Dillon) represented SCFB for the AFBF YF&R Achievement Award;
- **Mary Katherine & Madison Harrington** (Bamberg) competed for the AFBF YF&R Excellence in Agriculture Award;
- **Tracy Woodard** (Darlington) led the Sunrise Service on Sunday morning;
- **Megan Floyd** (Horry-Conway) served on AFBF's Womens Leadership Committee;
- **Andy & Allison Whiten** (Oconee) served on the AFBF YF&R Committee; and,
- **Angel Brabham** (Allendale) is a member of the AFBF GO Team.

Congratulations to all these amazing leaders!