

Program Name

South Carolina New and Beginning Farmer Program

Team Members

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Educational Objectives

South Carolina's agricultural economy depends on the development of new and beginning farmers to sustain and grow the state's food system. Many aspiring farmers enter agriculture with strong interest and passion but face significant barriers to success, including limited agribusiness knowledge, difficulty accessing capital, and lack of familiarity with technical and financial support resources. At the same time, a large portion of South Carolina's existing farmers are nearing retirement age, creating both challenges and opportunities for farm transition, land access, and long-term food system stability.

To address these challenges, Clemson University Cooperative Extension delivered the South Carolina New and Beginning Farmer Program (SCNBFP) from 2022 – 2025 through support from a USDA-NIFA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) grant. The program provided structured education and networking opportunities designed to equip emerging farmers with the skills and confidence needed to establish viable agricultural enterprises.

The primary educational objectives of the SCNBFP were to:

- Increase participants' knowledge of farm business planning, financial management, and agricultural marketing.
- Strengthen participants' understanding of production systems, environmental stewardship practices, and regulatory requirements.
- Improve farmers' ability to identify and utilize federal, state, and nonprofit agricultural resources.
- Support the development of viable farm business concepts and formal business plans.

- Build strong professional networks among beginning farmers, agricultural service providers, and Extension educators.

Program Activities

From 2022 – 2025, the SCNBFP delivered coordinated educational programming and networking opportunities for emerging farmers across South Carolina through four major program components.

1. Core Agribusiness and Production Training

The cornerstone of SCNBFP programming was an annual cohort-based training program designed to provide beginning farmers with a comprehensive foundation in agribusiness and production management. Over the four-year project period, the program served 209 cohort participants and included the delivery of 40 full-day workshops.

Educational topics included farm business planning, financial management, direct and mediated market channels, branding and marketing, risk management, soil health, integrated pest management, and farm regulatory compliance.

Throughout the program, participants developed or refined farm business concepts and planning documents that positioned them to start or strengthen their farm operations.

2. Advanced Agribusiness and Production Training

SCNBFP expanded introductory training by delivering 53 advanced workshops for farmers with several years of operational experience. These workshops (some on-farm) addressed more specialized topics that help farmers scale and strengthen their enterprises.

Advanced workshop topics included enterprise budgeting, agritourism development, farm website and social media marketing, comprehensive business planning, farmland access and transfer, agricultural financing, tax management, grant opportunities, and natural resource conservation practices.

3. Resource Connections and Technical Assistance

Access to trusted agricultural networks and service providers is critical for farm success. To strengthen these connections, the program hosted two statewide South Carolina Farmer Resource Rodeo events in 2023 and 2025, which connected 251 participants with more than 35 agricultural agencies, service providers, and nonprofit organizations offering technical and financial assistance.

Project staff also provided individualized technical assistance throughout the grant period, helping farmers navigate regulatory requirements, identify funding opportunities, and connect with appropriate agricultural resources.

The SCNBFP website served as a hub for program information and agricultural resources, generating more than 11,900 website visits and 7,600 page views, including over 1,000 visits to the dedicated beginning farmer resource page.

4. Partnerships and Participant Support

Strategic partnerships were central to the success of SCNBFP programming. Through 17 mini-grants awarded to partner organizations, the program expanded training capacity and delivered additional advanced workshops across the state.

The project also provided 75 participant scholarships that allowed farmers to attend external conferences, farm tours, and professional development programs such as Annie's Project, the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association Sustainable Agriculture Conference, and South Carolina Agriculture Council farm tours.

Teaching Methods

SCNBFP utilized a combination of structured instruction and peer-to-peer engagement to help participants apply new knowledge directly to their farming operations.

Full day in-person and virtual core cohort workshops introduced participants to practical farm business planning tools including the Business Model Canvas, AgPlan, and one-page business planning frameworks. Participants applied these tools through collaborative group exercises, homework assignments, and instructor feedback throughout the program.

Participants also practiced communicating their farm business concepts through structured presentations and pitch sessions, which allowed them to refine their ideas while receiving feedback from instructors and peers.

Additional learning opportunities were provided through advanced workshops and external partner training events (some on-farm) and interactions with agricultural professionals and service providers. This blended educational approach allowed participants to immediately apply newly acquired knowledge to their own farm enterprises.

Results

From 2022 – 2025, the SCNBFP delivered extensive educational programming that reached farmers across South Carolina and generated significant participant engagement.

Program outputs included:

- 57 in-person educational workshops
- 37 educational webinars
- 10,216 in-person workshop participant hours
- 6,962 webinar participant hours
- 11,942 website visits

The annual SCNBFP cohort program served 209 beginning farmers and graduated 185 participants, resulting in a 94% completion rate. Advanced programming included 53 workshops that reached 769 participants, as well as two statewide Farmer Resource Rodeo networking events that connected 251 participants with agricultural support organizations.

Impact Statement

Program outcomes demonstrated significant improvements in participant knowledge, decision-making, and farm business development.

Evaluation data showed that:

- 126 cohort graduates started or prepared to start farm businesses.
- 180 graduates improved the number and quality of their farm business plan components.
- 150 graduates strengthened professional and peer networks within the agricultural community.
- 150 graduates improved farm business management skills.
- 148 graduates increased their knowledge of environmental stewardship practices.

Every program graduate reported measurable progress in at least one core business-planning element, and many completed their first comprehensive farm business plan during their participation in SCNBFP.

Participants reported increased confidence in using financial planning tools, developing marketing strategies, and assessing enterprise profitability. Many adopted improved recordkeeping systems, diversified product offerings, or expanded into new markets as a result of the training.

Beyond individual farm outcomes, the program strengthened South Carolina's agricultural support network by connecting farmers with Extension educators, agricultural agencies, and nonprofit organizations. Mini-grant partnerships expanded training capacity statewide and helped institutionalize beginning farmer education as an ongoing priority within South Carolina's agricultural education system.

Through these combined efforts, SCNBFP contributed to stronger farm businesses, more resilient local food systems, and increased economic opportunities in South Carolina's agricultural sector.

Evaluation

Program evaluation was conducted using pre- and post-program surveys administered through an online evaluation platform. Baseline assessments collected demographic information and measured participants' initial knowledge of business planning, marketing, financial management, and agricultural resources.

Post-program surveys measured changes in knowledge, skills, and intended management practices. Individual workshop sessions were also evaluated to ensure high-quality educational delivery and continuous program improvement.

SCNBFP also contracted with Matson Consulting to assist with program evaluation and impact reporting. Evaluation results demonstrated significant gains in participant knowledge, improved farm business planning capacity, and stronger connections to agricultural resources across South Carolina.