

2026 Questions for Candidates

Recommendations and template questions for discussing food and agriculture policy with candidates for local, state, and federal office

The Carolina Farm Stewardship Association (CFSA) is a membership-based, farmer-driven nonprofit providing education, technical assistance, and advocacy in support of local, organic agriculture and small-scale farms in the Carolinas. In our advocacy capacity, we work with individual advocates, community organizations, and policymakers alike to center sustainable, local, and organic food and farming issues in policy at every level of government. Through training programs, resource development, legislation analysis, stakeholder listening events, and community engagement efforts, we prepare advocates and decision-makers to have constructive, productive conversations that move legislation and policy forward in favor of small-scale and sustainable agriculture and local food systems.

This *2026 Questions for Candidates* resource equips you with food and farming policy-related questions you can ask candidates for elected office. Farm and food policy should be a part of every candidate's platform, and asking these questions will ensure they consider these issues and reflect on their position on food, farming, food security, and the environment – and if they already have a farm and food policy platform, their responses will help you understand their positions. We encourage you to use this guide to discuss food system issues at public debates, forums, and town hall meetings.

The more candidates hear and learn about the importance of sustainable farming and food systems now, the more likely they'll be to support policies that foster these systems once elected. Public discourse about these issues is critical to increase awareness and prepare to hold our elected officials accountable.

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Tips For Building Relationships With Candidates

Relationships matter. The stronger your relationship with a current or future policymaker, the more likely you will impact issues that matter to you. Although you're unlikely to agree on every issue, you can still work effectively together and build a positive relationship in the long run.

1. Introduce yourself to them and their staff: The best way to get to know your candidates personally is to spend time with them. For incumbent lawmakers, arrange an in-district meeting. Write a letter, attend a town hall meeting, send an email, or write a letter to the editor of your local paper — take action to let candidates know your stance. Sign candidates and elected officials up for your organizational email list, newsletter, and action alerts. It's also essential to know their staff, especially at the state and federal levels; staff opinions inform candidates' policy positions.

2. Invite them early and often: Candidates are usually very busy. Invite them to every event you hold, remind them of your invitation about a month beforehand, and then once more the week of the event.

3. Follow up with a thank-you note: Take a moment after a meeting or event with a candidate to express gratitude for their participation. A simple email will do. Thanking candidates for their time goes a long way toward building stronger relationships and encouraging future interactions.

4. Learn about their interests: Educate yourself on the candidate's interests, as this may help you understand their motivations and why they take a certain position around specific issues. Background information about their life, career, and concerns will better inform your engagement efforts. For example, it might help to talk about sustainable agriculture as a tool to promote healthy ecosystems with one candidate. Another might better understand the benefits of public health, and someone else may be more interested in sustainable agriculture's role as an economic driver.

Local Level Questions

Questions for candidates running for Commissioner of Agriculture, school board, city council, and county commissioner positions.

1. What are you willing to do to make local food accessible to all community members?

Context: Farmers markets, roadside stands, and food hubs create direct access to fresh food from local farmers. Access to affordable and healthy food is a significant factor in community health outcomes like obesity, diabetes, and heart disease.¹ In recent years, communities across the Carolinas have worked to make markets and roadside stands more available to all community members through increased EBT machines. Here are some ideas where communities in the Carolinas have found success:

- The City of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County committed resources to support the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Food Policy Council in running a 'Double Up Bucks' for EBT users at 16 farmers market locations.²
- The Foothills Food Hub partnered with McDowell Transit to deliver fresh foods to homebound rural residents.
- In South Carolina, the Healthy Bucks program operates as a reliable and sustainable resource at farmers markets in 31 counties to incentivize the purchase of healthy, local fruits and vegetables.

2a. For South Carolina candidates: How are you working with, or planning on working locally with, this program to reduce food waste and increase food recovery?

2b. For North Carolina candidates: In North Carolina, there seems to be varying knowledge, resources, and implementation of food waste initiatives across the state. This leads to additional food entering landfills that could be recovered for human consumption, fed to animals, or composted. How will you foster a conversation around food waste like South Carolina has developed to support our local food waste recovery or diversion efforts?

Context: Up to 40% of our nation's food ends up in landfills.³ In response, South Carolina implemented the "Don't Waste Food SC" campaign, which brings together stakeholders

¹ "Social Determinants of Health." New England Journal of Medicine Catalyst. Dec. 1, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://catalyst.nejm.org/social-determinants-of-health/>

² 'Double Up Bucks' programs typically double the value of federal nutrition (SNAP or food stamps) benefits spent at participating markets and grocery stores, by offsetting the cost and allowing people to bring home more healthy fruits and vegetables while supporting local farmers.

³ National Resource Defense Council. (2018). Retrieved from: <https://www.nrdc.org/issues/food-waste>

from across the public and private sectors to share knowledge, coordinate resources, and work together to help reduce food waste and increase food recovery statewide.⁴

3. How will you support a comprehensive plan that preserves our agricultural land, fosters our local food economy, and ensures that our community has a healthier future?

Context: A county's comprehensive plan is an essential tool that provides a long-term vision for communities' growth and development. Site design and locations for private developments, schools, and parks all impact how easy, safe, and convenient it is to walk or bike. Likewise, the land-use policies outlined in comprehensive plans can influence how easily communities access fresh food and how effectively agricultural land is preserved, promoted, and valued.

4. Food policy councils are community-based coalitions that help promote more robust local food systems. If elected, will you support our council (or the development of a food council) to improve our local food system?

Context: In North Carolina, more than 35 food councils are serving 40 counties. In South Carolina, there are nine councils. New groups are forming every year across the Carolinas. These groups build connections and collaboration across stakeholders to improve health, food access, natural resource protection, economic development, and production agriculture for all community residents.

⁴ S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control. Don't Waste Food S.C.. Retrieved from: <https://www.scdhec.gov/environment/recycling-waste-reduction/dont-waste-food-sc>

State-Level Questions – North & South Carolina

Questions for candidates running for the legislature, governor, and other state-level Agriculture positions.

1. How will your administration support the development of local and regional food processing infrastructure (e.g. small-scale meat processing, cold storage and on-farm equipment) to encourage local farmers to be incorporated into regional supply chains?

Context: Small and mid-sized growers, as well as food hubs, often struggle with a processing bottleneck, where the lack of small-scale facilities and expensive infrastructure prevent them from accessing local distribution networks and scaling up into institutional markets. With the expiration of the successful Resilient Food System Infrastructure (RFSI) grant program at the federal level, demand is still incredibly high for additional supply chain investments.

2. Are you in favor of developing and implementing maximum limits for PFAS “forever chemicals” in groundwater, surface water and soils?

Context: As of September 12th, 2025, the Environmental Management Commission in North Carolina voted to move forward with proposed groundwater standards (limits) for PFAS “forever chemicals” in North Carolina. North Carolina sued several companies in 2022 that manufacture PFAS, and a settlement was reached in 2023. South Carolina has seen the beginning of similar PFAS assessments from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control. Farmers are concerned that PFAS in groundwater, surface water and soils will eventually migrate into crops if the affected water is used for irrigation, jeopardizing not just food safety certifications, but also public health.

3. What specific policy mechanisms will you champion to protect existing farmland from development, particularly for small-scale and diversified operations that may not qualify for large-acreage easements?

Context: Farmland loss is a critical issue in the Carolinas due to rapid urbanization, including residential and industrial development. The Carolinas routinely rank in the fastest-developing states and need creative solutions to ensure that farmland is preserved not just for present agricultural purposes, but for future generations to farm. From local easements to right-to-farm law updates, small-scale diversified operations must be incorporated into any conservation efforts.

State Level Questions – North Carolina Specific

1. Will you support \$4 million in state funding to continue the success of the FarmsSHARE program?

Context: FarmsSHARE is a statewide partnership of food hubs, small and mid-sized farms, farmer cooperatives, and community-based organizations working together to purchase locally grown food and distribute it free to food-insecure individuals across North Carolina. The program has experienced massive success, with 18 food hubs purchasing from more than 300 farms.

From 2024 to 2025, nearly \$4 million was allocated directly to participating farmers and food hubs, resulting in a net return on investment (ROI) of approximately \$8 million for the local economy. With the expiration of federal funds, reauthorized state support is critical to ensure farmers can continue selling into local markets via this program.

2. Will you support an effort to simplify the state's Present Use Value requirements in support of diversified producers?

Context: Under current law, an N.C. farm must have a minimum of 10 acres in active production to qualify for a Present Use Value tax break. Due to complexities and restrictions under the law, assessors often are not able to accurately document the farmland size of diversified farmers. By removing the emphasis on the acreage of the farm and allowing the program to instead focus on recognizing the activities underway on farms, N.C. policymakers can reduce the complexity of a widely-used program and reduce the tax burden on small farm businesses.

As the N.C. House and Senate are looking at property tax reform, small farmers with less than 10 acres must also be eligible for PUV participation, provided they can demonstrate they meet an alternative threshold of at least \$10,000 in annual whole farm revenue. Many small farmers can sustain an on-farm living on less than 10 acres by growing diversified crops, and utilizing direct-to-consumer channels such as Community Supported Agriculture (CSAs), farmers' markets, or Food Hubs like those that participate in FarmsSHARE.

3. Do you support active efforts to conserve the rural feel of North Carolina, either through conservation, land conservancy, or farmland preservation?

Context: It is estimated that North Carolina could lose between one and two million acres of farmland by 2040, according to the American Farmland Trust. Since agriculture and timber are our top industries, losing this land to development—whether commercial or residential—means we may never recover it. Innovative strategies are critical to ensure that our farmland remains viable. This includes helping farmers earn a sustainable income through market access, assisting new or small farmers in acquiring land, and providing incentives such as reforms to the Present Use Value (PUV) program. These reforms would allow more farmers to access tax breaks, enabling them to improve infrastructure and expand their market reach.

State-Level Questions – South Carolina Specific

1. Do you support continued state investment in healthy local food supply chains?

Context: Local and regional efforts have been underway for years to cultivate a thriving, equitable, resilient and just food economy in South Carolina. Local producers, aggregators and distributors have voiced needs for additional infrastructure improvements, and federal investments via the Regional Food System Infrastructure Program grants were in high-demand and short-lived.

2. How will you support efforts to preserve farmland from development encroachment?

Context: Since 2007, South Carolina has lost 1,326 farms and more than 43,416 acres of farmland. The South Carolina Conservation Bank and the South Carolina Farm Bureau Land Trust program work to prevent additional loss of farmland; the Conservation Bank conserves almost 20,000 acres of agricultural land throughout the state and is the only state agency offering farmers monetary incentives for conservation easements to protect against urbanization. The recent passage of the Working Lands Conservation Bill is a step toward continued farmland preservation, but record development continues in South Carolina.

3. How should the state government take action to support food hub development in South Carolina so that more South Carolina farmers can access wholesale markets?

Context: Many food-producing farmers in South Carolina focus on direct-to-consumer sales. While some of these farmers are interested in expanding into wholesale markets like schools, distributors, and larger grocery stores, scaling has several challenges. Food hubs help overcome some of the challenges. A food hub is a centrally located facility that facilitates the aggregation, storage, processing, distribution, and marketing of locally and regionally grown and raised food products.

Federal-Level Questions

Questions for candidates running for U.S. Congress and president.

1. Will you champion federal funds for states to continue local food purchasing efforts?

Context: Born out of the COVID-19 pandemic, USDA's Local Food Purchase Assistance program supported local farmers and producers by providing small and mid-sized farms and businesses market access; it supported food-insecure communities by improving food access and connecting local food with local at-need households. Before funding was terminated, LFPA powered FarmsSHARE, a local food box purchasing in N.C. that purchased food from more than 300 farmers selling to 18 food hubs, and similar LFPA programs in South Carolina were equally successful, and require additional support to restore this reliable market for local farmers.

2. How will you ensure USDA provides disaster relief and technical assistance that is accessible to all farmers?

Context: Extreme weather and staffing cuts within USDA and the Natural Resources Conservation Service have resulted in costly losses for farmers across the Carolinas, and disaster relief efforts have consistently fallen short. In addition to understaffed state and local Farm Service Agency offices and inequitable relief payment calculations, small-scale and diversified agriculture operations deserve an accurate, revenue-based relief model.

3. Are you willing to support the continued growth of the LAMP grant program, which supports new and existing local food systems?

Context: The Local Agriculture Market Program (LAMP) was created in the 2018 Farm Bill and streamlines two existing local food system programs: the Farmers Market and Local Food Promotion Program and the Value-Added Producers Grant Program. These programs provide critical and ongoing funding to help local and regional food systems, including supporting farmers markets, local and regional food businesses, supply chains, etc. Funding for the LAMP ensures that local food systems are resilient and strong enough to weather future supply chain disruptions.

4. Will you champion federal support of programs for new and beginning farmers and ranchers?

Context: The average age of a farmer in the United States is 60 years old. There are already several programs to support new and beginning farmers, but there are often social and cultural stigmas around embracing farming as a way of life. Rather than consolidating agriculture into a handful of commercial operations, we must find a way to recruit new farmers to start their local operations to bolster local food economies. The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) and FSA Beginning Farmer Loans are just a few of the most critical pathways and need continued support.