

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL LANDS
CONSERVATION GRANT PROGRAM 2.0:

Cultivating Solutions

Final Report

May 2026



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Together, these contributions reflect a shared commitment to strengthening the long-term economic sustainability of agriculture in San Diego County.

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01

Executive Summary



1.1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

San Diego County's agricultural sector plays a vital role in supporting the region's economy, food systems and climate resilience, yet findings from the SALC 2.0 grant project indicate that long-term economic sustainability is increasingly at risk. Analyses conducted as part of this effort shows that rising costs, market pressures, and operational constraints are outpacing revenue growth for many agricultural producers, particularly small-scale operations. These challenges threaten not only farm viability, but also the long-term effectiveness of agricultural land conservation efforts across the county.

Rising labor and water costs, increasing regulatory complexity, market competition, and limited access to infrastructure and markets have contributed to narrowing profit margins for many producers. While conservation tools such as agricultural easements remain essential to protecting farmland, the analyses undertaken for SALC 2.0 demonstrate that land preservation alone is insufficient to sustain agriculture over the long term. Economic viability and land conservation are mutually reinforcing, and successful agricultural preservation requires pairing land protection with strategies that enable farms to remain competitive, resilient, and profitable.

Building on the findings and recommendations of the San Diego Agricultural Planning Program (SALC 1.0) completed in 2023, SALC 2.0 was initiated to provide a deeper understanding of agricultural economics in San Diego County and to identify practical strategies to strengthen farm viability. SALC 1.0 identified the need for quantitative analysis of commodity trends and operating costs as a critical gap in local agricultural planning. SALC 2.0 was initiated to respond directly to that identified need.





SALC 2.0 was implemented through a phased planning process that combined technical analysis with extensive stakeholder engagement. Key components of the project include:

1. Market Analysis (Appendix B): Provides a data-driven overview of countywide agricultural trends, including recent changes in farm numbers, acreage, operating costs, and overall profitability.
2. Gap Analysis (Appendix C): Examines crop-specific profitability for key commodities and identifies the primary cost drivers and financial challenges affecting local producers.
3. Strategic Action Plan (Appendix D): Outlines a set of actionable strategies, tools, and implementation pathways to support the long-term economic sustainability of agriculture in San Diego County.

SALC 2.0 confirms that the economic challenges facing San Diego County agriculture are structural rather than temporary. Stakeholder engagement reinforced the importance of regulatory clarity, infrastructure investment, market access, coordination across agencies, and continued producer involvement in policy development. The Strategic Action Plan provides a menu of scalable strategies focused on:

- Improving infrastructure and systems that support local producers.
- Growing consumer awareness and demand for San Diego-grown products.
- Cultivating a supportive and coordinated policy environment.
- Strengthening regional alignment and agricultural advocacy.

SALC 2.0 is intended to function as a living framework that supports incremental implementation by public agencies and other stakeholders over time. Near-term priorities include socializing the Strategic Action Plan across jurisdictions, advancing pilot projects such as the Centralized Agricultural Resource Platform (section 6), integrating strategies into ongoing planning and grant efforts, and maintaining ongoing stakeholder engagement.

02

Project Background



2.1 PROJECT BACKGROUND

San Diego County has one of the most diverse agricultural industries in the nation, with over 4,000 farms producing high-value crops such as nursery plants, avocados, citrus, and an assortment of vegetables. Small farms are an important part of the agricultural landscape, representing nearly 68% of all operations and spanning just 1 to 9 acres.¹ Often, farmers elect to grow more than one crop to diversify their operations, expand cost centers, and sustain soil characteristics. Despite limited water availability and high land costs, the region's mild climate and year-round growing season support a thriving agricultural economy valued at approximately \$1.6 billion annually.²

Recognizing both the economic importance of this industry and the mounting pressures it faces, the State of California established the Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation (SALC) Program in 2014 as a component of the California Strategic Growth Council. In May 2023, the San Diego County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) and Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego County completed the San Diego Agricultural Planning Program (otherwise referred to as SALC 1.0). The findings of this project draw on the expertise of public, private, and nonprofit organization partners with a collective focus on identifying effective methods to strengthen agricultural production and, where needed, achieve policy reform for the benefit of the agricultural industry specifically and the many co-benefits to the region.³

One of the 10 policy recommendations identified in SALC 1.0 was the need to quantitatively analyze trends and opportunities for different commodity markets to summarize the key costs required to operate a small agricultural business in the county.

¹ United States Department of Agriculture. (2022). Census of Agriculture County Profile. San Diego County California.

² Agricultural Impact Associates, LAFCO and County of San Diego. (2024). Trends, Expenses, and Profitability among San Diego County Agricultural Operations: Market Analysis.

³ Mumpower, P. & Peters, M. (2023). SD LAFCO Commission Agenda Report: Final Report on State Planning Grant – Ag Trends and Related Policy Opportunities.

Building on the work from SALC 1.0, LAFCO partnered with the County of San Diego (County) Planning & Development Services to complete a second planning grant of the SALC Program known as SALC 2.0. The project aimed to analyze the present and emerging market conditions in the local agriculture industry, identify the gaps between marginal and economically sustainable farms, and gather best practices for local governments and regional entities to consider and in doing so help support the economic sustainability of farming in the region. Long-term agricultural sustainability depends not only on protecting farmland, but on ensuring that farms remain economically viable. Improving farm profitability reduces pressure to sell land, discontinue operations, or convert agricultural properties to non-agricultural uses. Conservation tools such as easements play a critical role in preserving agricultural land, but conservation alone is not a sufficient long-term strategy. SALC 2.0 is grounded in the understanding that economic viability and land conservation are mutually beneficial, and that successful agricultural preservation requires pairing land protection with strategies that help farms remain competitive and resilient.

SALC 2.0 focuses on the sustainability and viability of local agriculture, defining sustainability as the integration of healthy environments, economic profitability, and social and economic equity.⁴ The objectives of SALC 2.0 are as follows:

- ▶ Provide quantitative data to farmers as recommended by SALC 1.0.
- ▶ Provide farmers with timely market information on key crops within the region.
- ▶ Focus on small-scale farming operations that otherwise have limited resources and support.
- ▶ Inform local agencies' decision-making to further aid, preserve, and maximize the vital contributions that small farms offer the county.

⁴ UC Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program. 2021. "What is Sustainable Agriculture?" UC Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Most agricultural operations depend on a host of cost parameters, which can assist in predicting or determining the viability of an agricultural operation. These cost parameters are defined in the Gap Analysis for SALC 2.0. For the purposes of SALC 2.0, local agricultural producers (producers⁵) were engaged as key partners who operate a variety of farms sizes that grow one or more of the selected four key crops: avocados, lemons, tomatoes, and strawberries. Market and Gap Analyses conducted for SALC 2.0 reveal that rising economic pressures faced by producers, primarily the costs of water and labor, limit profitability among local farms and likely contributed to the overall decrease in the number of farms in San Diego County in recent years. These economic challenges have significant production costs and fragmented market access further emphasizing the need for structured policies, financial strategies, and local support.

2.2 PROJECT PARTNERS

The SALC 2.0 project was led through a partnership between LAFCO and the County, with each entity serving a distinct and complementary role in the development of the analyses and Strategic Action Plan.

LAFCO served as the grant administrator and project coordinator, guiding the overall planning process and ensuring coordination across partners. LAFCO brought a countywide perspective on land use, governance, and interagency collaboration, supported development of the Market and Gap Analyses, and facilitated engagement with jurisdictions, agencies, and stakeholders to shape the Strategic Action Plan.

The County provided project support through the planning process by leading stakeholder and producer outreach and coordinating across County departments to integrate agricultural, land use, and policy considerations into the project's analyses and recommendations. This role helped ensure that the work was grounded in local context and aligned with existing County programs and priorities.

⁵ Producers are defined as individuals or businesses directly engaged in growing crops, raising livestock, or producing other agricultural goods.

Implementation of the SALC 2.0 Strategic Action Plan will rely on a broader network of partners. The County and LAFCO are expected to play ongoing roles in convening partners, coordinating efforts, and advancing priority actions, while local jurisdictions, including cities and special districts, will be critical to advancing land use policies, permitting processes, and infrastructure investments to promote the viability of agricultural operations. Regional and state agencies, resource conservation districts, nonprofit organizations, and agricultural industry groups are also expected to play a role in delivering technical assistance, administering programs, piloting strategies, and supporting producers directly.

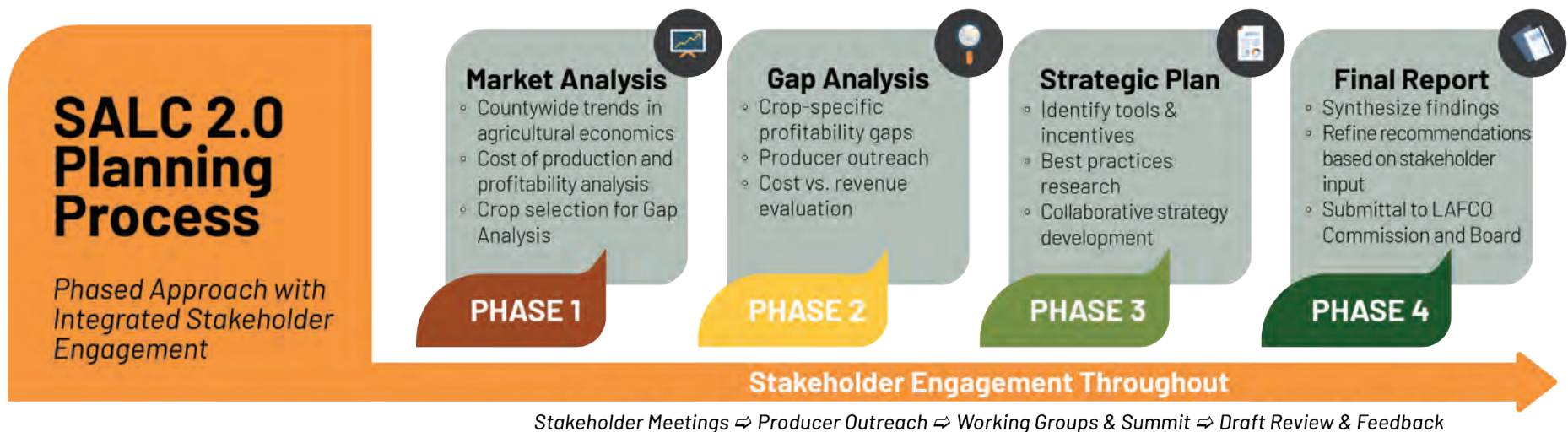
2.3 PLANNING PROCESS

The SALC 2.0 planning process was structured as a phased effort that combined technical analysis with ongoing stakeholder engagement to inform a practical, implementation-focused strategy. The assessment progressed from the fundamental understanding of countywide economic conditions, to identifying commodity-specific challenges, to collaboratively developing tools, and specific actions to support economic sustainability in agriculture.

The first phase of the project focused on a Market Analysis, which examined countywide trends in agricultural profitability and cost structures. This phase included data collection and crop selection to ensure the analysis reflected the diversity of agricultural operations in the county. Engagement during this phase included a virtual meeting and open house to validate assumptions, provide context for the data, and confirm priority issues from the perspective of agricultural producers and industry partners.

Building on this analysis, the Gap Analysis examined profitability challenges at the crop level for select commodities. This second phase combined quantitative analysis with targeted outreach with individual producers to better understand how costs, revenues, and operational constraints vary by crop. A public review period of the document allowed stakeholders to evaluate assumptions and provide feedback.

Phase three, the Strategic Action Plan, translated the findings from previous tasks into a series of specific actions that jurisdictions can use to promote the viability of agriculture in the region. Best practice research, County internal working group discussions, and a producer summit were used to evaluate potential



incentives, technical assistance programs, regulatory streamlining opportunities, and other mechanisms to address identified gaps. Engagement during this phase emphasized collaboration, allowing producers and partners to shape strategies that are both feasible and responsive to real-world conditions. A public review period allowed stakeholders to provide feedback on the proposed strategic actions.

The concluding phase four focused on synthesizing data and compiling input into this Final Report. Feedback from stakeholders and regional partners on the Draft Strategic Action Plan was incorporated to refine recommendations, ensure clarity, relevance, and usability. The Final Report phase concluded with a virtual workshop that allowed stakeholders to provide feedback on the Final Plan. The project concludes with a LAFCO commission hearing and submittal to the County Board of Supervisors via Board Memo.

Overall, the SALC 2.0 planning process reflects a deliberate progression from analysis to implementation, with community engagement integrated throughout each phase to ensure that outcomes are informed by both data and lived experience.

2.4 COMMUNITY INPUT

Community and stakeholder input played a central role in shaping the deliverables of the SALC 2.0 project. The outreach and engagement approach was intentionally designed to be inclusive, ensuring meaningful participation throughout each stage of the project while aligning with the objectives of the SALC Program.

Engagement activities were structured to reach a broad range of stakeholders, including agricultural producers, public agencies, industry representatives, and partner organizations, with a particular emphasis on priority populations. These included

disadvantaged and underrepresented communities, as well as historically underserved farmers and ranchers, who often face disproportionate barriers to participation in planning processes. Outreach methods were tailored to reduce barriers related to language, literacy, scheduling, accessibility, and technology, and incorporated both in-person and virtual opportunities to encourage participation across diverse audiences.

Input was gathered through a series of targeted engagement efforts aligned with each project phase, including workshops, interviews, working group meetings, open houses, and public review periods. This phased approach allowed stakeholders to inform early project direction, validate analytical findings, and contribute directly to the development of strategies and actions. Community input helped ground the technical analyses in lived experience, identify priority challenges, and shape practical, implementation-focused recommendations.

Across all engagement phases, producers emphasized that escalating operating costs, especially water, labor availability, and structural market disadvantages are driving long-term declines in farm viability. Participants repeatedly stressed that agricultural sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing economic feasibility as the foundational condition of success. Detailed summaries of input received through each engagement activity are provided in Appendix A.

2.4.1 VIRTUAL PROJECT KICKOFF WORKSHOP

The Virtual Project Kickoff Workshop introduced the purpose, scope, and structure of the SALC 2.0 project. Participants were invited to provide early input on project priorities, key economic challenges facing local agriculture, and criteria for selecting crops for the Gap Analysis. This workshop established a shared understanding of project goals and provided an early opportunity for stakeholders to shape the direction of subsequent analyses.

2.4.2 MARKET ANALYSIS OPEN HOUSE

The Market Analysis Open House provided an in-person forum for stakeholders to review and discuss preliminary findings related to countywide agricultural trends, cost structures, and profitability. Interactive stations allowed participants to share firsthand experiences, confirm key cost drivers, and identify economic pressures affecting their operations. Feedback from this event helped ground-truth analytical assumptions and to refine the Market Analysis findings.

2.4.3 GAP ANALYSIS PUBLIC REVIEW PERIOD

Following completion of the draft Gap Analysis, a public review period was held to solicit broader input on crop-specific profitability findings and the Agricultural Profitability Assessment Tool (AG-PAT). Stakeholders were encouraged to review materials, test assumptions, and provide comments on the clarity, usefulness, and applicability of the analysis.

2.4.4 INTERNAL WORKING GROUP MEETINGS

Internal Working Group Meetings were held with various County departments and regional partners to review interim findings, coordinate across departments, and discuss alignment with existing programs and policies. These meetings supported cross-agency collaboration and helped identify opportunities for integration, coordination, and shared implementation roles within the Strategic Action Plan.

2.4.5 FORUM FOR CULTIVATING SOLUTIONS

The Forum for Cultivating Solutions convened producers, technical experts, agency staff, and partner organizations in a solutions-oriented setting focused on translating analysis into action. Facilitated discussions, explored policy, infrastructure, market access, and coordination strategies to address identified gaps. Input from the Forum directly informed the development of the Seeds, Tools, and Field Actions presented in the Strategic Action Plan.

2.4.6 FINAL REPORT PRESENTATION

The Final Report Workshop presented an overview of the SALC 2.0 project, including key findings from the Market Analysis and Gap Analysis, and the draft Strategic Action Plan. The workshop included a formal presentation and facilitated discussion to ensure a shared understanding of the project outcomes and to gather input on the proposed strategies. Participants were invited to provide feedback through a combination of live polling, Q&A, and group discussion activities. This workshop served as the final opportunity for stakeholders to engage with the project findings and inform the refinement of the Final Report and Strategic Action Plan.

COMMUNITY & STAKEHOLDER INPUT

Shaping SALC 2.0 Outcomes



03

Market Analysis

3.1 MARKET ANALYSIS

To address key knowledge gaps identified in SALC 1.0, particularly the need for quantitative economic data on agricultural operations in San Diego County, the SALC 2.0 project included a dedicated Market Analysis (Appendix B). This analysis was conducted by Agricultural Impact Associates, LLC on behalf of LAFCO.

The Market Analysis was designed to fill critical data gaps about the economics of farming in the county and to provide a firm analytical foundation for SALC 2.0. The analysis addressed three overarching research questions:

TRENDS

How have the number of farms and agricultural acreage in San Diego County changed over time, and what do projections show if current trends continue unabated?



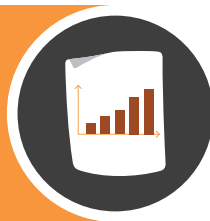
EXPENSES

What are the operating costs faced by agricultural producers, and how have these costs trended over recent decades?



PROFITABILITY

What are the patterns in operating profit margins for farms in the County, and how do they compare with benchmarks for financial health?



To answer these questions, the analysis leveraged detailed financial data from the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, which covered 4,031 farms in San Diego County, combined with historical trend data and inflation-adjusted cost metrics.

The Market Analysis revealed important insights about the current and future economic landscape for agriculture in San Diego County:

3.1.1 DECLINING FARMS AND ACREAGE

The county has experienced long-term declines in both the number of farms and the total acreage devoted to agriculture. If recent trends continue, the rate of loss could result in substantial reductions in active agricultural land and operations in the coming years.

3.1.2 RISING COSTS OF PRODUCTION

Operating expenses have increased across most categories over the past two decades. Labor expenses, in particular, represent the largest cost component for many farms, and several expense categories have grown faster than inflation.

3.1.3 PROFITABILITY MARGINS BELOW HEALTHY BENCHMARKS

While San Diego County farms produce a diverse range of commodities with significant economic value, average operating profit margins in 2022 were around 13 percent. This is roughly half of the 25 percent threshold commonly associated with financial health in agricultural enterprises, suggesting many producers may face challenges maintaining sustainable operations under current economic conditions.¹

By providing a rigorous, data-grounded view of trends, expenses, and profitability, the Market Analysis offers a much-needed empirical basis for understanding the economic realities of farming in San Diego County. These findings help move conversations about agricultural sustainability beyond generalizations, enabling policymakers, producers, and other stakeholders to make more informed decisions about where support and intervention may be most needed.

¹ USDA. (2023). Large Family Farms Faced Less Risk in 2021 Based on the Operating Profit Margin Ratio. Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture.

04

Gap Analysis



Source: Rob Bertholf

4.1 GAP ANALYSIS

As a core component of the SALC 2.0 planning process, the Gap Analysis (Appendix C) built on the previously described Market Analysis by examining profitability at the crop level for selected commodities. Whereas the Market Analysis established broad trends in farm costs, revenues, and profitability countywide, the Gap Analysis drilled deeper into how those dynamics vary by crop, production model, and operating conditions to reveal where financial pressures are most acute and where policy interventions could have the greatest impact.

The Gap Analysis focused on four key commodities that represent a cross-section of production types in San Diego County: avocados, lemons, strawberries, and tomatoes. These crops were selected early in the project based on data availability, their economic significance in the region, contribution to the regional food system, and direct input from producers and stakeholders during initial engagement activities.

To assess profitability gaps, the analysis combined multiple data sources, including University of California Davis cost and return studies, detailed financial records provided by local producers, and information gathered through interviews and farm-level observations. These sources were used to estimate costs, revenues, and net returns under various scenarios for each commodity, allowing the analysis to isolate how labor, water, yields, prices, and other key inputs affect financial outcomes.

The Gap Analysis identified several consistent findings across all four commodities, as well as important crop-specific differences:

- **Persistent Profitability Gaps.** Across all commodities analyzed, the Gap Analysis found that many farms operate with narrow or negative net margins, even when yields and production levels are relatively strong. In most scenarios, estimated net returns fell below thresholds typically associated with long-term economic sustainability. This indicates that productivity alone is often insufficient to offset rising costs and market pressures.
- **Labor and Water as Dominant Cost Drivers.** Labor and water emerged as the most significant and volatile cost components affecting profitability. Labor costs were particularly impactful for labor-intensive crops such as strawberries and tomatoes, while water costs disproportionately affected perennial crops such as avocados and lemons. In several scenarios, increases in water rates or labor expenses were enough to eliminate already-thin profit margins.
- **Crop-Specific Vulnerabilities.** The analysis revealed that profitability challenges vary meaningfully by crop:

 - Avocados were highly sensitive to water costs, yield variability, and market price fluctuations, with declining yields exacerbating cost pressures.
 - Lemons demonstrated relatively stable production costs but faced price volatility and limited flexibility to absorb rising input costs.
 - Strawberries showed high gross revenue potential but also the highest exposure to labor costs and market competition, resulting in thin net margins.
 - Tomatoes faced challenges related to labor intensity, price competition, and scale, with smaller operations particularly vulnerable.
- **Scale and Operational Differences Matter.** Profitability outcomes were not uniform across farms growing the same crop. Differences in scale, access to water sources, production practices, and market channels led to wide variation in net returns. Smaller operations consistently faced greater challenges achieving sustainable margins due to limited economies of scale and reduced ability to absorb cost shocks.
- **Limited Resilience to External Shocks.** Across commodities, the analysis showed that many operations lack financial buffers to withstand external pressures such as drought, input price spikes, or market disruptions. This lack of resilience increases the risk of land being fallowed, operations downsizing, or agricultural land transitioning to non-agricultural uses.

Collectively, these results demonstrate that profitability challenges in San Diego County agriculture are structural rather than episodic. The Gap Analysis confirms that rising costs, particularly for labor and water, are outpacing revenue growth for many producers and that these pressures manifest differently across crops and operation types.

These findings directly informed the Strategic Action Plan by identifying where financial tools, incentives, regulatory streamlining, infrastructure investment, and coordination efforts could most effectively help close profitability gaps and strengthen long-term economic sustainability for agricultural producers in San Diego County.

4.2 AGRICULTURAL PROFITABILITY ASSESSMENT TOOL (AG-PAT)

As part of the SALC 2.0 analytical framework, the project team developed the Agricultural Profitability Assessment Tool (AG-PAT), an Excel-based model designed to help users estimate farm-level and countywide annual net returns per acre for key crops grown in San Diego County.

AG-PAT allows users to input crop-specific variables such as yields, prices, labor, water, and input costs to generate tailored estimates of net returns. By adjusting these inputs, users can explore how changes in key cost drivers or market conditions influence farm profitability under different scenarios. This capability makes the tool useful for producers evaluating business decisions, policymakers considering targeted interventions, and planners assessing the potential impact of policy changes and program design choices.

In addition to producing crop-level profitability estimates, AG-PAT can be used to:

- Compare profitability across crops and operational scales,
- Examine the sensitivity of net returns to changes in cost structures (e.g., labor or water rates),
- Inform discussions about where and how market support, technical assistance, or policy changes could help close observed profitability gaps.

AG-PAT complements the countywide Market Analysis and commodity-specific Gap Analysis by providing a user-driven, transparent modeling tool that makes financial dynamics more accessible and actionable. Together, these three SALC 2.0 products create a cohesive analytical foundation for the ensuing Strategic Plan phase, which explores potential mechanisms policymakers and partners can use to help close profitability gaps and sustain one of San Diego County's most important industries.

 [AG-Pat Tools Link](#)

05

Strategic Action Plan

5.1 STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

The Strategic Action Plan (Appendix D) represents the culminating phase of the SALC 2.0 project and translates the results from the Market Analysis and Gap Analysis into a set of actionable, implementation-oriented strategies. While earlier phases focused on understanding economic conditions and identifying profitability challenges facing small farms, the Strategic Action Plan is designed to help local governments, regional agencies, and partner organizations take informed steps to support the long-term economic sustainability of agriculture in San Diego County.

The Strategic Action Plan is intentionally flexible and non-prescriptive. Rather than mandating a single path forward, it provides a menu of strategies that jurisdictions and partners can adapt to their local context, capacity, and priorities. This approach reflects stakeholder input emphasizing the need for practical, scalable solutions that respond to real-world conditions while allowing for incremental implementation over time.

5.2 BEST PRACTICE REPORT

The Strategic Action Plan is informed by a Best Practices Report. This companion appendix evaluates programs, policies, and initiatives from other regions that have demonstrated success in strengthening agricultural economic sustainability. The Best Practices Report applies consistent criteria, including relevance, effectiveness, transferability, stakeholder involvement, and long-term viability, to identify approaches that may be adapted to San Diego County's unique agricultural landscape. Best practice examples were focused outside of San Diego County in an effort to assess how other jurisdictions are tackling similar challenges.

Best practice examples are organized into four thematic areas: Policy, Food Systems, Land, and Profitability. These themes reflect the interconnected nature of agricultural sustainability and align with the key challenges identified through stakeholder engagement, including water access, foreign competition, rising

costs, and fragmented communication. The Best Practices Report is not intended to prescribe specific solutions, but rather to provide tested examples that can inform local decision-making and strengthen implementation of the Strategic Action Plan.

5.3 ACTION PLAN FRAMEWORK

Drawing from stakeholder input, foundational analyses, and best practice research, the Strategic Action Plan is organized around a clear and accessible framework consisting of Seeds, Tools, and Field Actions.

The Seeds represent four long-term goals that anchor the Strategic Action Plan and reflect the most pressing barriers to agricultural sustainability in the region:

- Improving infrastructure and systems that support local producers.
- Growing consumer awareness and local market demand.
- Cultivating a supportive policy environment.
- Fostering regional alignment and agricultural advocacy.

Each Seed is advanced through a set of Tools, which are implementable strategies that public agencies, local governments, nonprofits, and regional partners can use to address specific challenges. The Tools are supported by Field Actions, which provide practical examples of how strategies may be operationalized through pilot projects, policy updates, partnerships, or program alignment.

Implementation timeframes are provided to help users understand relative levels of effort and sequencing, ranging from short-term actions that build on existing programs to longer-term initiatives that may require additional coordination, funding, or policy change. Together, this framework is designed to move SALC 2.0 from analysis to action, offering a practical roadmap to strengthen the economic sustainability of small farms while supporting a resilient regional agricultural economy.

TABLE 5-1: Summary of Strategic Actions

Number	Strategic Action Recommendations
Seed 1 – Improve Infrastructure and Systems that Support Local Producers	
Tool 1A	Increase access to direct-to-consumer models, such as farmers' markets, food hubs, farm stands, and co-ops, by addressing barriers, streamlining permitting processes, and strengthening regional coordination.
Tool 1B	Identify opportunities to streamline the establishment of farm employee housing and explore scalable, low-cost, and flexible farm worker housing models (temporary, shared facilities).
Tool 1C	Support the expansion and promotion of the CropSWAP Program and similar incentive programs.
Tool 1D	Support the development of regional food system infrastructure (i.e. cold storage, processing, distribution centers, and packaging facilities) to reduce costs for local producers.
Tool 1E	Support local food procurement by local institutions and distributors (e.g., Sysco, public schools, County institutions) by addressing barriers and creating local sourcing initiatives that track and assess product origin to strengthen local supply chain visibility.
Tool 1F	Work with regional partners to create a centralized, multilingual user-friendly online platform to help producers navigate local regulations, access resources such as funding opportunities, permitting information, and connect with relevant agency staff.
Seed 2 – Grow Consumer Awareness and Local Market Demand	
Tool 2A	Support and expand existing efforts to develop a regional branding campaign and consumer education campaign that promotes San Diego-grown products, strengthens community connections, and encourages local purchasing programs to intensify demands for locally grown agricultural products and support a resilient, sustainable food system.
Tool 2B	Develop a coordinated outreach strategy to increase producer awareness of available programs, funding opportunities, technical assistance, and regulatory resources.
Tool 2C	Strengthen pathways into future agriculture partnerships with educational programs to support heritage farming, and cultivate the next generation of producers.

TABLE 5-1: Summary of Strategic Actions (Cont.)

Number	Strategic Action Recommendations
Seed 3 – Cultivate a Supportive Policy Environment	
Tool 3A	Ensure regulations and development standards enable on-farm marketing and direct-to-consumer systems (e.g., agritourism, farm stands, Pick-Your-Own).
Tool 3B	Promote the adoption of climate-smart land management practices that enhance soil health, use water efficiently, improve long-term productivity, soil sustainability, and create diversified revenue streams for producers.
Tool 3C	Support the protection of high-risk agricultural lands by purchasing conservation easements.
Tool 3D	Explore expanded leasing opportunities on publicly owned lands, with a focus on underserved and/or emerging producers.
Tool 3E	Develop a formal grants policy to guide future grant applications that prioritizes, and benefits farmers directly and includes opportunities for agricultural stakeholder input prior to submittal.
Seed 4 – Foster Regional Alignment and Agricultural Advocacy	
Tool 4A	Coordinate with regional partners to establish an Agricultural Ombudsman position to serve as a centralized point of contact to support producers with navigating government systems, gaining access to capital and land, grant funding, and other incentive programs and to coordinate efforts across cities and agencies.
Tool 4B	Coordinate with regional partners to establish a Regional Agricultural Water Advisory Committee to assess the impacts of state and local water policies on agriculture, advise on regulatory changes, explore targeted subsidy programs, identify tiered rate schedules, and guide research on irrigation efficiency and crop-specific water use.
Tool 4C	Develop and implement a cross-sector training and coordination program for local agency staff, organizations, and community leaders to build shared understanding of agricultural operational issues, concerns, access, and improve service delivery to producers.
Tool 4D	Expand agriculture analysis in local government planning documents to recognize the economic contribution of the local agricultural industry.
Tool 4E	Develop an implementation plan/strategy and present an annual report on the progress and status of the Strategic Actions to the LAFCO Commission and stakeholders.

06

Implementation

6.1 STRATEGIC ACTION PLAN

The long-term success of this effort depends on translating analysis and strategy into coordinated, on-the-ground action. The Market Analysis, Gap Analysis, and Strategic Action Plan together establish a strong foundation for advancing the economic sustainability of agriculture in San Diego County. This section outlines how the Strategic Actions can move forward, identifies near-term priorities, and describes the mechanisms that will support continued coordination, transparency, and progress tracking.

6.2 NEXT STEPS

Advancing the SALC 2.0 Strategic Action Plan will require continued outreach and expansion for leadership, partnership, and coordination across jurisdictions and organizations. The following next steps provide a practical path forward for initiating implementation or partnerships:

■ **Socialize the Strategic Action Plan across the region.**

Share the Final Report and Strategic Action Plan with cities, special districts, regional agencies, and partner organizations throughout San Diego County to build awareness, alignment, and momentum around the recommended Tools and Field Actions.

■ **Identify lead and supporting entities for priority actions.**

The County and LAFCO are well-positioned to take leadership roles in convening partners, coordinating across agencies, and advancing regionally focused actions. Other Tools may be led by cities, special districts, nonprofit organizations, or collaborative partnerships depending on scope and capacity.

■ **Advance near-term, achievable actions.**

Jurisdictions and partners are encouraged to prioritize short-term Field Actions that build on existing programs, policies, and partnerships. Early implementation successes can help demonstrate value, refine approaches, and support future funding efforts.

■ **Launch and evaluate pilot projects.**

Pilot initiatives, such as the Centralized Agricultural Resource Platform under Tool 1F, provide an opportunity to test strategies, build collaboration, and generate measurable outcomes. Lessons learned from pilot projects can inform broader implementation and scaling over time.

■ **Integrate SALC 2.0 strategies into ongoing planning efforts.**

Where appropriate, Strategic Actions can be incorporated into policy implementation documents, climate action plans, food system initiatives, grant applications, and other local or regional planning efforts to reinforce alignment and sustainability.

■ **Maintain ongoing stakeholder engagement.**

Continued engagement with agricultural producers, industry representatives, and partner organizations will be essential to refining strategies, addressing emerging challenges, and ensuring implementation remains grounded in real-world conditions.

Together, these next steps position SALC 2.0 as a living framework that can evolve over time. By emphasizing collaboration, transparency, and practical implementation, the Final Report provides a clear pathway to strengthen the economic sustainability of agriculture in San Diego County while supporting long-term land conservation and regional resilience.

6.3 PILOT PROJECT: CENTRALIZED AGRICULTURAL RESOURCE PLATFORM (TOOL 1F)

The intent of this pilot project is to improve access, transparency, and coordination across the regulatory and resource landscape supporting agriculture in San Diego County. By working with regional partners, this effort will establish a centralized, multilingual, and user-friendly online platform that provides producers with clear pathways to navigate local regulations, access funding opportunities, obtain permitting information, and connect with relevant agency staff. This approach supports a more accessible and efficient system that reduces barriers and empowers producers to make informed decisions.

This pilot project represents an achievable first step toward implementing the Strategic Action Plan by creating a shared digital hub that streamlines information and strengthens coordination across agencies and support organizations. The platform will serve as a practical tool to improve day-to-day operations for producers while enhancing communication and alignment among public agencies, resource providers, and the agricultural community. This effort will be coordinated with the County of San Diego's upcoming website redesign to ensure alignment with broader digital improvements, maximize usability, and support long-term maintenance. Over time, it will function as a scalable model for improving service delivery and supporting the long-term sustainability of the region's agricultural economy.



Source: County of San Diego

6.3.1 LEAD PARTNERS

- ▶ County of San Diego
- ▶ San Diego LAFCO

6.3.2 SUPPORTING PARTNERS

- ▶ San Diego County Farm Bureau
- ▶ Resource Conservation District of Greater San Diego County

6.3.3 KEY ACTIONS

- ▶ Design and develop a centralized, multilingual online platform tailored to the needs of local producers.
- ▶ Compile and organize permitting requirements, regulatory guidance, and agency contacts into a clear, user-friendly interface.
- ▶ Integrate information on funding programs, technical assistance, and business support resources.
- ▶ Establish direct pathways for producers to connect with agency staff and support organizations.
- ▶ Conduct user testing with producers to ensure accessibility, clarity, and functionality.
- ▶ Develop outreach materials and training to support platform adoption and use.
- ▶ Conduct periodic evaluations to refine content, improve usability, and expand functionality.

In today's digital environment, this pilot project offers a practical and visible step toward improving how producers interact with regulatory systems and access critical resources. By consolidating information and support into a single platform, the initiative will reduce confusion, save time, and improve coordination across agencies. Over an initial implementation phase, the platform would be developed, tested, and refined based on user feedback, with future phases focused on expanding content, enhancing functionality, and increasing participation. As the platform evolves, it can serve as a reliable, scalable tool to support agricultural operations and strengthen long-term resilience across the region's food system.