Appendix A:
Community Input Summaries

Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program (SALC 2.0)

Community Input Summary

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1.0 Project Background

The Sustainable Agricultural Land Conservation Program (SALC) is a program funded through the California Climate Investments Program, a statewide program that provides cap-and-trade funds through agricultural conservation easement acquisitions, planning grants, and capacity grants for programs intended to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The first phase of the Project, SALC 1.0, was initiated in 2020. SALC 1.0 assessed the needs of producers in San Diego County and identified how local jurisdictions and non-profits can support local agriculture to address three key concerns: land access, water access and affordability, and workforce development. SALC 1.0 identified a need to build on the findings from the first phase of work through analysis of costs and benefits of small farms.

SALC 2.0 (the Project) is a collaboration between the San Diego County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) and the County of San Diego Planning & Development Services Department (County). LAFCO, supported by consultant Agricultural Impact Associates, is tasked with analyzing the present and emerging market conditions in the local agriculture industry and identifying the gaps between marginal and economically sustainable farms. The County, supported by consultant RICK, is responsible for engagement and education throughout the Project, gathering best practices for local governments and regional entities to consider, and compiling the final report.

2.0 Purpose of Engagement and Feedback Summary

The engagement efforts conducted throughout the Project were designed to gather feedback from agricultural producers, landowners, and stakeholders regarding the economic, regulatory, and operational conditions affecting the long-term viability of agriculture in San Diego County. Additionally, engagement efforts were intentionally phased to align with key milestones in the planning process. Early engagement focused on validating technical findings related to agricultural markets and cost structures, followed by engagement centered on identifying policy and programmatic gaps. A final forum emphasized solution-oriented discussion and implementation strategies. Together, these efforts provided qualitative, experience-based insights that complement technical analysis and data-driven findings prepared for the Strategic Plan.

The purpose of this Community Input Summary is to document the feedback received through multiple engagement efforts conducted as part of the SALC 2.0 Strategic Planning process. This summary consolidates all the feedback received to date and reflects shared themes, concerns, and priorities consistently raised by participants throughout the process.

2.1 Engagement Schedule and Events

Community Engagement Event	Date
Virtual Project Kickoff Workshop	November 2023
Market Analysis Open House	July 2024
Internal Working Group Meetings	December 2024 and February 2025
Gap Analysis Public Review Period	March and April 2025
Forum for Cultivating Solutions	May 2025
Strategic Plan Public Review Period	November 2025 and December 2025
Virtual Final Report Presentation	March 2026

3.0 Engagement Overview

Engagement for the Project occurred through a series of engagement efforts conducted between 2023 and 2026, each designed to gather targeted feedback at different stages of the planning process. These efforts included a Virtual Project Kickoff Workshop, Market Analysis Open House, Internal Working Group meetings, Gap Analysis public review period, a countywide Forum for Cultivating Solutions, Strategic Action Plan public review period, and a final presentation to share project outcomes and gather input prior to completion of the Final Report.

Virtual Project Kickoff Workshop

An initial virtual workshop was held on November 14, 2023, to introduce the SALC 2.0 Project, clarify its purpose relative to the prior SALC 1.0 effort, and gather early feedback to inform the scope of subsequent analyses. Participants emphasized the importance of crop selection criteria that reflect San Diego County's unique growing conditions, including the prevalence of hillside agriculture and perennial tree crops such as avocados and citrus. Participants were asked which four crops provide the greatest benefit to small farms in San Diego County, resulting in the selection of avocados, lemons, tomatoes, and strawberries being the focal crops for the market analysis.

The workshop included discussion of engagement and coordination strategies, with participants emphasizing the need to engage farmers directly, compensate them for their time, and conduct engagement at locations where producers already convene, such as farmers markets, cooperatives, and distribution centers. Participants also recommended coordination with related County initiatives, including regional water equity efforts and local recycled water programs, and highlighted opportunities to engage with commodity-specific organizations.

Market Analysis Workshop

The Market Analysis Workshop was held on July 24th, 2024, at the San Diego County Farm Bureau, and focused on validating assumptions and findings related to crop profitability, operating costs, market conditions, and competitive pressures facing agricultural producers in San Diego County. Attendees included local producers of avocados, dragon fruit, strawberries, nursery crops, and olives, with avocado producers making up the largest majority of producers. Prospective producers, local officials, and representatives from local non-profit groups were also in attendance.

Attendees were presented with the preliminary findings from the draft market analysis depicting operational expenses affecting farms in San Diego County, and were asked to review the findings and leave feedback regarding their own operational expenses. Attendees provided feedback on water and labor costs, foreign competition, crop-specific viability, profit margin, and the accuracy of market assumptions used in the analysis. Feedback from this workshop was used to refine the Market Analysis by validating crop selection, cost assumptions, and market conditions based on producer experience, and by identifying economic pressures that required deeper analysis. The feedback also helped highlight limitations of point-in-time profitability estimates and informed the scope and focus of the subsequent Gap Analysis and engagement efforts.

Internal Working Group Meetings

Two Internal Working Group (IWG) meetings were held to maintain consistency throughout the County's departments and avoid duplicative efforts. The first IWG meeting took place on January 14, 2025, which provided information on the prospective mechanisms to bridge the economic gaps identified in the Market Analysis and Gap Analysis as well as identified the County's existing and in development agricultural problems.

The second IWG meeting, held on February 10, 2025, provided an update on the Gap Analysis and solicited feedback from County staff regarding agricultural projects or programs within their departments related to policy, food systems, land access, and profitability.

Gap Analysis Public Comment Period

Comments on the Gap Analysis Report were collected during a public review period conducted in March and April 2025, during which the draft report was made available online and stakeholders were invited to submit written comments. The purpose of the public review was to gather feedback on preliminary findings related to policy, infrastructure, and programmatic gaps affecting agricultural viability in San Diego County. Commenters generally supported the intent of the analysis but emphasized the need for a more accurate reflection of real-world farming conditions.

Commenters consistently stressed that economic feasibility must be the foundation of agricultural sustainability, citing water and labor costs, market volatility, and regulatory pressures as the primary drivers of agricultural decline. Many requested that the analysis rely on multi-year profitability trends, fully account for indirect and management costs, and avoid reliance on single-year price assumptions, particularly for perennial crops such as avocados and citrus.

Several commenters expressed interest in the Agricultural Profitability Assessment Tool (Ag-PAT) as a potentially useful decision-support resource, provided it is grounded in realistic assumptions and long-term trends. Commenters emphasized the importance of pairing the tool with clear guidance and technical context to ensure results are not misinterpreted or used to overstate profitability. Commenters also called for the Gap Analysis to directly inform actionable strategies, including water cost relief, labor and farmworker housing solutions, streamlined permitting, and targeted incentives to keep land in agricultural production.

Forum for Cultivating Solutions

The Forum for Cultivating Solutions was held on May 27th, 2025, at the County Operations Center Hearing Chambers, and was designed to build upon earlier engagement efforts by identifying potential strategies, partnerships, and implementation actions. Attendees included local producers, industry experts, and County staff to share key findings from the Market and Gap Analyses, gather input to shape the Strategic Plan, and explore actionable strategies to improve the economic sustainability of small farms in San Diego County. The Forum featured an open house and a panel discussion followed by interactive breakout sessions focused on policy, land access and preservation, profitability, and food systems.

Feedback from the forum emphasized the need for coordinated policy action, targeted investment, and practical tools to support small-scale and mid-sized agricultural operations. Forum participants called for practical, implementable actions to address the primary drivers of agricultural decline, with water affordability identified as the highest priority. Attendees emphasized the need for streamlined permitting, labor and farmworker housing solutions, and coordinated County leadership to reduce regulatory and operational burdens. There was also strong support for investment in shared infrastructure, such as food hubs and distribution facilities, and incentives that tie land preservation efforts to long-term farm profitability.

Strategic Action Plan Public Review Period

The draft SALC 2.0 Strategic Action Plan was released for public review on November 10, 2025, to provide stakeholders and community members with an opportunity to review the proposed framework, strategies, and implementation tools, and to submit written comments by December 10, 2025 to be incorporated into the Final Report.

Comments received during the public review period generally supported the Strategic Action Plan's emphasis on economic sustainability and practical implementation, while reinforcing concerns about rising costs related to land, water, labor, and regulatory compliance. Stakeholders also highlighted the need for clearer regulatory frameworks, stronger regional coordination and technical assistance, and expanded education, outreach, and marketing efforts to support both producers and consumer awareness of San Diego–grown products.

Virtual Final Report Presentation

The Virtual Final Report Presentation was held on March 25, 2026 to present the final findings of the SALC 2.0 project, including the Market Analysis, Gap Analysis, Strategic Action Plan, and Implementation Framework. The event included a virtual open house, a formal presentation, and facilitated discussion. Approximately 25 participants attended, representing a mix of agricultural producers, industry representatives, nonprofit organizations, and public agency staff. The purpose of the presentation was to provide a comprehensive overview of project outcomes, ensure a shared understanding of the findings and recommended strategies, and offer a final opportunity for stakeholders to engage prior to finalization of the report.

Participants provided feedback through live polling, Q&A, and facilitated discussion. Input focused on reactions to the overall direction of the Strategic Action Plan, implementation priorities, and the feasibility of proposed tools. Feedback received during this presentation was documented and considered in final refinements to the Strategic Action Plan and Final Report.

4.0 Engagement Structure

Engagement events conducted as part of the SALC 2.0 planning process were designed as interactive, in-person and virtual engagements that combined information sharing with facilitated discussion. While the format of individual events varied slightly based on Project phase and objectives, each engagement effort followed a consistent structure intended to support transparency, shared understanding, and meaningful stakeholder feedback.

Across all workshops and forums, engagement activities typically included an opportunity for participants to review background materials, presentations summarizing key technical findings, and facilitated discussion focused on priority themes. This approach allowed participants to engage with Project information at their own pace, respond to findings based on experience, and contribute ideas in a collaborative setting. Through the engagement process, four key priority themes consistently emerged across events and public review period(s): policy, land, profitability, and food systems.

4.1 Project Presentations

The Virtual Project Workshop Kickoff, Virtual Final Report Presentation, in-person engagement events, and IWG meetings included a presentation by the Project team to provide context, establish a shared baseline of information, and connect engagement activities to the broader goals of the SALC 2.0 effort. Presentations typically included an overview of the SALC program, the objectives of the current planning phase, and how stakeholder feedback would be used to inform the Strategic Plan.

Presentations also summarized relevant findings from the Market Analysis and Gap Analysis, including trends related to farmland loss, rising input costs, labor challenges, and crop-specific profitability and risk. As the Project progressed, presentations introduced tools and frameworks, such as the Agricultural Profitability Assessment Tool (Ag-PAT), intended to support future decision-making and policy development. Feedback from earlier engagement efforts was revisited throughout the process to ensure that participant concerns were acknowledged and meaningfully incorporated into ongoing discussions.

4.2 Facilitated Discussion Sessions

Discussion sessions were a central part of each engagement event and were designed to encourage open, participant-driven conversation. Discussions were generally organized across poster boards or other engagement materials**,** allowing participants to focus on individual stations most relevant to their experience and interests. Depending on the event, discussions took place in small groups or as guided larger group conversations.

Each session was guided by a facilitator who helped frame the topic and keep the conversation focused. Participant ideas, concerns, and suggested strategies were captured through discussion summaries and shared reporting, and feedback collected helped shape the targeted, implementable strategies included in the SALC 2.0 Strategic Action Plan.

5.0 Feedback Summary

Community feedback collected throughout the planning process revealed consistent and reinforcing themes regarding the challenges facing small-scale agriculture in San Diego County. Across all engagement phases, producers emphasized that escalating operating costs, limited labor availability, and structural market disadvantages are driving long-term declines in farm viability, crop abandonment, and land-use transitions. Participants repeatedly stressed that agricultural sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing economic feasibility as the foundational condition for success.

The following summary reflects integrated feedback across all engagement efforts and public review period(s) and is organized around four overarching themes: policy and governance, land, profitability, and food systems.

Policy

Water Access, Affordability, and Governance

Water access and cost emerged as the most urgent and persistent concern across all engagement activities. Producers consistently emphasized that water rates vary widely by location and water district and are often prohibitively expensive, particularly for avocado growers reliant on municipal supplies. Fixed monthly charges alone were cited as a major financial burden, even before usage costs are incurred. Participants noted that increases in water rates disproportionately impact agricultural users and directly contribute to grove removal, land fallowing, and permanent crop conversion.

Stakeholders expressed frustration with inconsistent local policies related to recycled water use and conflicting signals between state conservation mandates and regional water investments. Participants called for coordinated regional action, including the formation of an Agriculture Water Committee, to better align policy, share best practices, and address crop-specific water needs. Several participants emphasized that prior analyses did not fully capture real-world water costs experienced by producers, underscoring the need for locally informed data and ongoing technical oversight.

Permitting and Regulatory Streamlining

Across all engagement phases, producers identified regulatory complexity and inconsistent policy interpretation as major barriers to farm viability. Stakeholders called for streamlined, ministerial permitting processes for farm stands, agritourism, on-site sales, and agricultural structures. Specific recommendations included allowing farm stands in all zones, increasing allowable structure sizes, simplifying signage standards, and modernizing ordinance provisions that restrict agricultural uses.

Participants also emphasized the need to reduce regulatory barriers to re-farming historically cultivated land, clearing and grading on previously farmed sites, and allowing broader agricultural uses without triggering discretionary review. Consistency across County departments and jurisdictions was identified as essential to reducing uncertainty and compliance risk.

Labor and Farmworker Housing

Labor availability and affordability were cited as critical constraints across crop types and farm sizes. Producers reported difficulty securing qualified workers and emphasized that labor shortages persist even after transitioning to less water-intensive crops. Stakeholders expressed

strong support for centralized and flexible farmworker housing models, including shared housing for H-2A workers located on County or publicly controlled land.

Governance and Coordination

Stakeholders repeatedly emphasized the need for improved coordination and technical assistance. A full-time County Agricultural Liaison or Ombudsman was widely supported to help producers navigate permitting, secure funding, access programs, and coordinate across agencies. Participants noted that many farmers lack the time or capacity to engage in planning processes or pursue grant opportunities without dedicated support.

Land

Access to Agricultural Land and Preservation

Participants consistently identified rising land values and competition from residential development as barriers to accessing and maintaining farmland. While land preservation tools such as conservation easements were supported, stakeholders emphasized that preservation alone is insufficient if farming is not economically viable. Participants called for clearer communication about allowable agricultural uses and stronger promotion of programs such as PACE to support long-term land security.

Several producers expressed concern that agricultural land classifications and mapping practices may inadvertently restrict flexibility or trigger additional regulatory burdens. Others noted that recognizing agriculture's environmental benefits could help justify public investment and targeted subsidies.

Fallow Land and Crop Transitions

Interest was expressed in reactivating fallow land using drought-tolerant or alternative crops, particularly in North County. However, participants acknowledged that some areas may no longer be viable for traditional orchard crops due to water costs, climate conditions, and labor constraints. Crop transitions were often described as a necessity rather than a strategic choice.

Supportive Infrastructure

Participants expressed strong interest in shared infrastructure solutions, including food hubs, aggregation facilities, and cooperative or producer-led distribution models. While co-ops were viewed cautiously due to operational challenges, stakeholders emphasized the need for locally controlled infrastructure to reduce costs and improve market access.

Profitability

Cost Pressures and Financial Risk

Across all engagement efforts, producers emphasized that water and labor costs are the dominant drivers of declining profitability. Participants consistently stated that operating margins are far thinner than commonly assumed and that many farms operate at or below break-

even levels. Several producers challenged the use of single-year or point-in-time profitability estimates, particularly for perennial crops, noting that price volatility, pest outbreaks, and climate impacts significantly affect long-term returns.

Stakeholders stressed that true profitability assessments must account for land costs, management time, indirect expenses, establishment costs, and risk exposure. Many producers noted that small growers often subsidize farming through off-farm employment, masking the true economic condition of operations.

Foreign Competition and Market Volatility

Foreign imports were repeatedly cited as a major factor depressing commodity prices and increasing volatility. Participants expressed concern that offshore producers are not subject to the same regulatory, labor, and environmental standards, placing local farmers at a structural disadvantage. Several producers emphasized that small-scale operations have limited ability to absorb price shocks or delayed payments from buyers.

Crop-Specific Viability

Participants emphasized that crop profitability varies widely by location, water source, and market access. Avocados were identified as particularly vulnerable due to water costs and price volatility, while strawberries were viewed as high-risk except in niche direct-to-consumer models. Lemons and tomatoes were perceived as more viable under certain conditions, though stakeholders cautioned that assumptions regarding pricing, yields, and labor availability must be carefully contextualized.

Tools and Technical Assistance

The Agricultural Profitability Assessment Tool (Ag-PAT) was viewed as a valuable resource, provided it is paired with technical assistance to ensure accurate interpretation and application. Participants expressed interest in using the tool to evaluate crop transitions, operational changes, and financing decisions.

Food Systems

Marketing, Branding, and Consumer Awareness

Participants consistently emphasized the need for stronger branding and marketing of locally grown products. Weak labeling practices and limited visibility of California-grown produce in grocery stores were cited as barriers to competing with imports. Stakeholders expressed interest in truth-in-advertising measures, improved point-of-sale signage, and coordinated marketing campaigns.

Infrastructure and Distribution

There was strong support for developing local food hubs, packing facilities, and distribution networks to retain value locally and reduce reliance on distant or financially unstable packers.

Nonprofit-led facilities were viewed as promising models for attracting public investment and supporting small producers.

Institutional and Urban Markets

Participants identified opportunities to expand local sourcing through partnerships with food banks, schools, hospitals, and County institutions. However, stakeholders emphasized that consistent supply, aggregation infrastructure, and public subsidies are necessary to make these markets accessible to small-scale producers.

Producer Engagement and Education

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of meeting farmers where they are through on-farm engagement, peer learning, and tailored technical assistance. Bridging gaps between small and mid-sized producers was identified as critical to ensuring equitable access to programs and market opportunities.

6.0 Key Takeaways

Across all engagement phases, participants conveyed a shared urgency to address the economic realities facing small-scale agriculture in San Diego County. Feedback consistently emphasized that agricultural sustainability depends first and foremost on profitability and manageable risk. Without meaningful interventions to reduce operating costs, namely water and labor, many producers will continue to abandon crops, transition land uses, or exit farming altogether.

Key priorities identified include affordable water access, streamlined and consistent permitting, flexible labor and housing solutions, and investment in local food system infrastructure. Stakeholders emphasized the need for both physical infrastructure, such as food hubs and distribution facilities, and institutional infrastructure, including an agricultural liaison to support navigation of regulations, funding, and programs.

Participants stressed that successful strategies must be farmer-centered, grounded in real-world cost structures, inclusive of diverse farm scales and business models, and designed to produce practical, implementable outcomes.