

Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Program (SALC 2.0)

Community Input Summary for Forum of Cultivating Solutions

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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. 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 availability, 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 a quantitative 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 outreach and education throughout the Project, gathering best practices for local governments and regional entities to consider. The resulting final report will be a collaborative effort between LAFCO and the County.

1.1 Project Outreach Schedule

Outreach Phase	Timing	Outreach Events
Project Kickoff/Crop Selection	Fall 2023	Project Introduction Virtual Workshop
Market Analysis	Summer 2024	Market Analysis Open House
Gap Analysis	Spring 2025	Gap Analysis Report - Public Review Period
Strategic Plan	Winter 2024/2025	Internal Working Group Meetings
	Spring 2025	Forum for Cultivating Solutions
	Fall 2025	Strategic Plan Outreach
Final Report	Fall 2025	Final Report Workshop

2.0 Forum for Cultivating Solutions

The Forum for Cultivating Solutions was held on May 27, 2025, from 9:00am to 12:00pm at the County Operations Center Hearing Chambers (5520 Overland, San Diego, CA 92123). The Forum convened 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, a panel discussion, and interactive breakout sessions focused on policy, land access, profitability, and food systems.

The Forum objectives were as follows:

- Share the results of the Market and Gap Analyses.
- Provide information about existing programs and policies available to local producers.
- Gather input to frame the Strategic Plan.
- Develop actionable strategies that can support the long-term economic sustainability of small-scale farms in San Diego County.

2.1 Notification

Producers were notified of the meeting through LAFCO and County websites, email invites, and a Farm Bureau meeting. The Forum flyer is featured in Appendix A of this document. Forum registration was managed through Eventbrite.

3.0 Workshop Overview

The Forum for Cultivating Solutions was designed as an interactive, in-person workshop that combined information sharing with group discussion. The forum featured an informational open house with posters and interactive prompts, a presentation highlighting key findings from the Market and Gap Analyses, and a panel discussion with industry experts. Participants then joined breakout discussions focused on four key themes: policy, land, profitability, and food systems. Each session was facilitated by a subject matter expert and supported by guided questions and materials to encourage collaborative idea generation.

3.1 Open House

The open house featured several poster boards towards the back of the room allowing attendees to browse the information at their own pace. Poster board content focused on project background and previous phases of work. The poster boards are included in Appendix B.

3.2 Opening Presentation

The opening presentations provided an overview of the SALC program including how staff incorporated what it means to be agriculturally sustainable into the approach for SALC 2.0. The project team outlined the purpose of the current planning effort—to support the long-term

economic sustainability of small farms through data-driven strategies and stakeholder-informed recommendations.

Key findings from the Market Analysis highlighted troubling trends, including the ongoing loss of farmland and farms in San Diego County, rising input costs (especially property taxes and labor), and declining profitability, with the average operating margin well below recommended thresholds.

The Gap Analysis explored the financial viability of four focal crops, avocados, lemons, strawberries, and tomatoes, assessing their economic, social, and environmental significance. Results showed mixed profitability, with strawberries posing the highest financial risk and tomatoes and lemons demonstrating positive returns under current conditions.

The presentation also introduced the Agricultural Profitability Assessment Tool (Ag-PAT), which is designed to be a useful tool for farmers to assist them in identifying operational bottom-line costs and will be used to inform future planning efforts. Concerns voiced by farmers in prior engagement efforts were outlined in the presentation, particularly related to water availability, marketing support, product access, and the need for targeted technical and policy assistance. The presentation concluded by introducing guiding questions for the breakout sessions across four thematic areas: policy, land, profitability, and food systems. Participants were encouraged to contribute ideas for actionable strategies. A panel of experts was also introduced to help ground the discussion in practical experiences and technical expertise.

3.3 Panel of Experts

The panel discussion was moderated by Heather Conklin, (Add her title) from the County of San Diego, who promoted thoughtful discussion on the challenges and opportunities facing small-scale agriculture in the region. The panel featured four subject matter experts representing diverse sectors of the agricultural system, each bringing a unique perspective to the discussion. The experts were as follows:

Jordan Key is the Deputy Agricultural Commissioner with the County of San Diego. He oversees county-level agricultural regulations and supports local producers by ensuring product safety and compliance. With a strong regulatory and outreach background, Jordan helps guide producers through market access challenges, especially at community events and farmers markets

Joel Kramer is the Agriculture Program Director for the Resources Conservation District (RCD) of Greater San Diego County.

Ramiro Lobo is the County Co-Director and Farms Advisor with the UC Cooperative Extension in San Diego County. Ramiro specializes in farm management, marketing, agricultural economics,

specialty crops, and agritourism. He leads outreach to support small-scale growers especially in marketing, risk management, direct sales, and crop diversification.

Chuck Samuelson is the founder and CEO of Heal the Earth. He previously launched Kitchens for Good in 2013 and served as an executive chef at establishments like Jake's Del Mar. His organization operates a food hub and value-added processing facility on Wild Acres Farm in Bonsall/Vista, focusing on supporting farmers, reducing food waste, launching food-maker enterprises, and promoting equity.

3.4 Breakout Sessions

The breakout sessions were designed to foster focused, participant-driven dialogue on four key themes: policy, land, profitability, and food systems. Participants selected a session aligned with their interests but were encouraged to rotate between rooms to engage with multiple topics. Each room was supported by a dedicated facilitator, subject matter expert, and notetaker, ensuring smooth facilitation and thorough documentation. Sessions began with a brief overview of the topic to provide context and ground the conversation in the day's findings. This structure enabled informed discussions that will be used to inform the next steps and strategic actions.

4.0 Input Summary

The Forum provided a platform for participants to share their experiences, challenges, and ideas related to the future of small-scale farming in San Diego County with the goal of informing the forthcoming Strategic Plan. Through structured discussions attendees identified recurring themes and proposed actionable strategies across the four key themes: policy, land, profitability, and food systems. The input gathered reflects the diverse needs and perspectives of producers, technical experts, and advocates, and will directly inform the development of the SALC 2.0 Strategic Plan. Key takeaways from each topic area are summarized below.

Policy

Water Access and Policy Reform

- Participants emphasized the need for affordable water rates and equitable access to various water sources (retail, well, reclaimed, mixed).
- Some cities allow recycled water use while others do not—suggestions included convening jurisdictions to align practices with state regulations.
- State mandates to reduce water use conflict with San Diego's diversified water investments, leading to frustration over mixed signals.
- Participants called for more targeted subsidies, research into crop-specific water use (e.g., sub-tropical fruit), and an agriculture water committee to guide regional coordination.

- Suggestions included leveraging local experts and creating marketing strategies around water-smart agriculture.
- The provision of subsidies to farmers should be explored to support growers in the short-term and prevent the prevention of farmland in the coming years. The County of San Diego and local government agencies should be responsible for their provision.
- SD County to help organize/support an Agriculture Water Committee. It was recommended to bring in independent experts to help organize the project and potential subsidy programs. Craig Kolodge could serve as a consultant to help advise on the committee. This can also help capture the nuance of the various water rates and supply issues that farmers face in their particular region.
- It was mentioned that the SALC analysis didn't accurately capture water rates experienced by farmers. This committee can also help gather and share promising programs such as Escondido's AgWater program.

Permitting and Regulatory Streamlining

- Stakeholders requested a simplified, more flexible process for permitting farm stands, including:
 - Allowing them in all zones
 - Over-the-counter permitting
 - Larger structure size allowances
 - Better signage and container standardization
- Zoning code updates were also suggested to allow agricultural use more broadly, allow farmworker housing on a per-acre basis, and support activities like on-site sales and agritourism without triggering excessive regulatory review. It was also recommended to allow for clearing and grading on previously farmed lands and limit regulations on re-farming historical agricultural land.
 - Update Ordinance Section 6157 to better promote local Farming along with Section 6162. Farm Stands are currently limited to 300 sq.ft. and typical Sea Containers are 320 sq.ft.
 - Allow sale of commodities grown off site (if grown in SD County) at farm stands.

Farmworker Housing and Labor

- There was strong support for centralized, flexible farmworker housing, especially to serve multiple growers on an as-needed basis. A collaborative system was proposed to allow H2A visa workers to be housed on county land and shared with multiple small farmers.
- Participants acknowledged the need for policies that support labor sustainability while adapting to the unique seasonal nature of agriculture.

- The County can help get the message out to the public that buying locally is good for the community in that the food is locally sourced, sustainably farmed with ethical treatment and fair wages paid to workers.
- The County can promote the positive impact of immigration on the County as immigration supports farms and promotes job creation and innovation.

Role of Local Jurisdictions

- Local governments were encouraged to:
 - Reduce barriers to farming and simplify the permitting process (with help from Agriculture Liaison staff).
 - Provide financial incentives, such as property tax reductions or fee waivers.
 - Allow more land uses through ministerial (automatic) approval processes.

Long-Term Land Use Policy and Classification

- Some stakeholders expressed concern about policies that classify agriculture as an environmental resource rather than as land use. They noted that this approach may trigger additional layers of environmental review, limit flexibility in farm operations, or restrict the ability to adapt land management practices in response to economic or environmental conditions. Other stakeholders argue in favor of the classification of agriculture as an environmental resource should this result in subsidies and other programs being provided to protect agricultural lands. They emphasized that recognizing agriculture's environmental benefits, such as carbon sequestration, habitat value, and groundwater recharge, could strengthen the case for public investment in farmland preservation and sustainability programs.
- Calls to rethink farmland mapping and monitoring, including how ag lands are tracked and how they are designated in planning documents like MSCP (Multiple Species Conservation Program), which can treat ag lands as “developed” rather than protected.

Governance and Coordination

- Participants emphasized the need for consistent interpretation of policies across departments (e.g., wineries, agritourism, code compliance).
- A full-time Agriculture Liaison was recommended to help producers navigate the system, secure grants, and coordinate efforts across cities and agencies.
- Stakeholders noted that farmers often lack the time or capacity to engage in forums or access grant opportunities without technical support.
- Convene a County funded and supported educational event for policy makers and public officials to educate them on the needs of SDC based producers. Consider partnerships with SDFS, CAFF, UCANR, and local stakeholders.

Land

Access to Land and Capital

- Farmland competition with housing development is driving up land values and limiting access.
- There's a need for clearer County and LAFCO tools to support land preservation, including better promotion of programs like PACE (Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easements).
- Participants called for a shift in messaging to emphasize what farmers can do with their land, rather than restrictions.

Fallow Land and Crop Suitability

- Interest in reviving fallow groves in North County using drought-tolerant crops.
- Concerns that certain areas may no longer be viable for orchards due to water costs and climate conditions.

Supportive Infrastructure

- Strong interest in food hubs or local aggregation models to reduce distribution costs and improve market access.
- Suggestions included cooperatives or producer-led middleman models, though participants noted uncertainties about the feasibility of co-ops.

Profitability

Cost Pressures and Market Competition

- Foreign imports (especially from Latin America) and rising water/labor costs are significantly reducing margins.
- Local producers struggle to compete on price and expressed frustration with being tied to volatile commodity markets.

Labor Shortages

- Aging workforce and lack of flexible, as-needed labor options are major concerns.
- Desire for greater state-level labor organization support and seasonal staffing solutions.

Marketing and Consumer Education

- Need to increase consumer awareness about the quality and value of local products.

- Participants pointed to difficulties with labeling and traceability in grocery stores (e.g., obscure country-of-origin info).
- Direct-to-consumer models like farm stands, restaurants, and farmers markets were seen as more profitable but not accessible to all producers.

Regulatory and Program Improvements

- Calls for simplified regulations and clearer guidance on direct sales (e.g., what permits are needed for on-site farm stands).
- Reimbursement-based grants preferred over front-loaded systems, with concern that many programs are overly restrictive or misaligned with actual farm needs.

Crop Support and Innovation

- Support for expanded programs like CropSWAP, with more flexibility for crop types and labor demands.
- Interest in new technologies such as improved rootstocks and irrigation systems, though capital costs remain a barrier.

Food Systems

Marketing, Branding, and Certification

- Producers expressed a strong need for more effective branding of local products, especially California-grown avocados.
- Participants highlighted the challenge of weak labeling practices and inconsistent or lack of identification or promotion of local produce in grocery stores.
- Efforts like *San Diego Grown 360* have struggled due to limited marketing capacity within the Farm Bureau; participants suggested partnering with specialized agricultural marketing agencies.
- Truth-in-advertising ordinances and clearer signage at the point of sale could help consumers more easily identify locally grown produce.

Infrastructure and Distribution

- There is interest in developing locally owned food hubs, packing houses, and distribution networks to aggregate and move produce efficiently.
- Chuck Samuelson shared plans to convert a large facility in Escondido into a multi-use site with cold storage, food packaging, and a farmstand to reduce dependency on conventional/regional packing houses.
- Nonprofit-run facilities were seen as viable models for attracting public investment.

- Co-op and vertically integrated models were discussed as ways to reduce middlemen costs and retain more value on-farm.

Institutional and Urban Markets

- Partnerships with food banks (e.g., Second Harvest) were seen as promising for distributing surplus or “imperfect” produce.
- Participants encouraged block grants and public subsidies to support these relationships.
- Opportunities to expand local sourcing through large buyers (e.g., Sysco, public schools, County institutions) are emerging but require coordination and consistent supply.

Policy and Coordination

- Attendees called for stronger County support for farmers’ markets, including promotional materials and streamlined vendor outreach.
- There was interest in consolidating Southern California Farm Bureaus to improve communication and advocacy.
- The role of an Ag Liaison or Ombudsman was emphasized as critical for helping producers navigate regulations, funding opportunities, and market connections.

Producer Engagement and Education

- Participants emphasized the importance of meeting farmers where they are, such as visiting farms, engaging in conversations, and tailoring support to individual needs.
- Peer learning, marketing education, and clear economic incentives could increase participation in local food system initiatives.
- There’s a need to bridge the gap between small-scale and mid-sized producers, who may not benefit equally from current programs or market models.

5.0 Strategic Planning Takeaways

The input gathered across all breakout sessions highlighted a shared urgency to reduce barriers, improve coordination, and strengthen support systems for small-scale agriculture in San Diego County. Participants consistently called for affordable (ag lands break) and diversified water access, streamlined permitting processes, and clear, consistent policy interpretation across jurisdictions. There is a need for both physical infrastructures, such as food hubs and localized distribution networks, and institutional systems, including an agricultural liaison to help producers navigate regulations, access funding or existing programs. Protecting farmland from development pressures, enabling flexible labor and housing models, and improving access to fallow land emerged as priorities for long-term AG land security. Enhancing profitability will

require expanded technical assistance, marketing strategies focused on consumer education and local branding, and more accessible direct-to-consumer sales pathways. Finally, stakeholders emphasized that efforts must be farmer-centered: responsive to on-the-ground realities, inclusive of diverse farm scales and business models, and designed with practical, actionable solutions in mind. These themes will directly inform the development of targeted, implementable strategies in the SALC 2.0 Strategic Plan.

Appendix A – Workshop Flyer

Appendix B – Poster Boards