

2026 North Carolina State VAD Conference

*Hosted by the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and
Consumer Services — Farmland Preservation Division*

Day One: Wednesday, July 22, 2026

8:00 AM – 8:30 AM: Grab 'n-Go Breakfast & Attendee Check-In

8:30 AM – 8:45 AM: Welcome: *Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler & Assistant Commissioner for WNC Kaleb Rathbone*

8:45 AM – 9:30 AM: VAD 101: *Farmland Preservation Director Evan Davis*

High level discussion of the North Carolina Voluntary Agricultural District (VAD) Program. We will discuss the basics, including benefits and components of a VAD program. Bring your questions!

9:30 AM – 10:00 AM: Introductions and Overview of Participants

10:00 AM – 10:15 AM: Break

10:15 AM – 11:30 AM: Lecture Session — Mock Public Hearing

Diane Wilson, retired NCDOT now with Bolton & Menk, Inc.

Lisa Childers, Director, Cumberland Cooperative Extension

An interactive mock public hearing illustrating the procedures that occur after formal requests involving zoning changes, condemnation actions, right-of-way acquisitions, or roadway expansions.

11:45 AM – 12:45 PM: Lunch, with Facilitated Panel on Marketing and Outreach for Increasing VAD Participation

Greg Walker and Annette Adams, Johnston Soil and Water Conservation District

Blake Szilvay Extension Agent, Agriculture - Field Crops/Forestry, Randolph County

1:00 PM – 2:15 PM: VAD Ordinance Update

Jon Lanier, General Counsel, NCDA&CS Legal Affairs

Steve Woodson, Associate General Counsel, N.C. Farm Bureau

A discussion of recent 2025 statute updates and the impacts to current VAD ordinance and county policies.

2:15 PM – 2:30 PM: Break

2:30 PM – 4:00 PM: Breakout Sessions

Session A: Community Mapping and Other Land Use Planning Tools	Discover how local government entities can effectively incorporate working lands into land use and strategic planning initiatives. Explore tools that help districts create comprehensive, diversified working land use plans—tools that not only identify working lands but also evaluate potential threats to agricultural use.	<i>Teresa Furr, Director, Wake SWCD</i> <i>Loren Hendrickson, Farmland Preservation Coordinator, Wake SWCD</i> <i>Noah Rannells, Director, NC Farmlink/NC State Cooperative Extension</i>
Session B: Utilizing NCDOT GIS Data	NCDOT staff and contractors gather VAD data from NC counties, compiling resources to be used by NCDOT in project planning. NCDOT is required to identify VADs that may be impacted by a proposed project. Learn how the data is collected and utilized to ensure your county's data is on the map.	<i>Emily Richards, Senior Public Involvement Officer, NC DOT</i> <i>Leilani Paugh, Mitigation & Modeling Group Leader, NC DOT</i>

4:15 PM – 5:15 PM: Program Best Practices

April Hoyt, Conservationist/Education Coordinator, Henderson SWCD;

Angela Price, Farmland Preservation Coordinator, Henderson SWCD;

Jonathan Wallin, District Director/Conservationist Henderson SWCD

Andrew Waters, Farmland Preservation Coordinator, Chatham SWCD

Discover success stories from North Carolina counties with robust Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VADs) and other active farmland preservation programs. This session highlights the insights and experiences of local county professionals leading VAD initiatives and other farmland preservation efforts.

5:30 PM: Facilitated Meet Up – Trust for Public Lands

6:00 PM: Dinner on Your Own/Day One Concludes

Day Two: Thursday, July 23, 2026

Breakfast on Your Own

8:00 AM – 9:15 AM: Legal Panel

Jon Lanier, General Counsel, NCDA&CS Legal Affairs

Steve Woodson, Associate General Counsel, N.C. Farm Bureau

Leslie Vanden Herik, Southeast Senior Program Manager, American Farmland Trust

Panel of legal experts to explore the key legal considerations for ordinance changes, Voluntary Agricultural Districts, Enhanced VADs, and farmland preservation agreements. Questions submitted in advance will guide the discussion, giving panelists time to provide clear, practical answers. This session will help counties, landowners, and partners better understand liability protections, ordinance requirements, and how VADs interact with conservation easements and ADFPTF eligibility.

9:30 AM – 10:45 AM: Breakout Session – VAD Law & Land Threats

Session A: Eminent Domain	This session will provide an in-depth look at how eminent domain impacts agricultural lands within Voluntary Agricultural Districts (VADs). The session will focus on the legal process of condemnation, including when and how eminent domain may be exercised, landowner rights, compensation considerations, and recent legal trends or case examples affecting farmland. Emphasis will be placed on helping participants better understand the legal landscape and implications for VAD-enrolled properties.	<i>Jon Lanier, General Counsel, NCDA&CS Legal Affairs</i> <i>Steve Woodson, Associate General Counsel, N.C. Farm Bureau</i> <i>Mark Pfanstiehl, Paralegal, NCDA&CS Legal Affairs</i> <i>Janine McLawhorn, Easement Acquisition Paralegal III, NCDA&CS Farmland Preservation</i>
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<p>Session B: Planning and Zoning</p>	<p>This session explores how local planning and zoning decisions affect the long-term viability of agricultural lands. Through case-based examples, participants will examine how land-use policies and development regulations work in practice—and where they fall short.</p> <p>Participants will learn about the roles of planners, local officials, and agricultural advocates and how zoning changes can impact farmland. Discussion will focus on policy trade-offs, unintended consequences, and opportunities to strengthen protections for working lands.</p> <p>The session will also highlight practical advocacy strategies to help agricultural stakeholders engage in planning processes and influence zoning decisions that support long-term agricultural use.</p>	<p><i>Jesse Day, Regional Planning Director, Piedmont Triad Regional Council</i></p> <p><i>Jason Davis, Henderson County Planning Board and North River Farms</i></p> <p><i>Gillian Phillips, Long Range Planning Development Manager, Buncombe Planning Department</i></p>
<p>Session C: Agricultural Land Threats</p>	<p>Agricultural land faces critical threats, primarily from rapid urban sprawl, low-density residential development, and land degradation, which are fragmenting farms and reducing food production capacity.</p> <p>Please join the discussion of specific threats to working lands. We will also explore potential solutions and tools for addressing threats.</p>	<p><i>Leslie Vanden Herik, AFT Southeast Senior Program Manager, American Farmland Trust</i></p> <p><i>Eva Caison, Carolina Farms Fund Program Manager, The Conservation Fund</i></p>

10:45 AM – 11:00 AM: Break

11:00 AM – 12:00 PM: Farmland Transition Workshop

Stephen Bishop, Western Director, NC Farmlink

Jess Laggis, Farmland Protection Director, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy

Bob Holbert, Mediation Director, NC Agricultural Mediation Program

Farmland succession planning involves developing a comprehensive strategy to transfer farm ownership, management, and assets to the next generation, ensuring the farm’s long-term sustainability while minimizing family conflict. With an aging farmer population and

increasing development pressures, North Carolina farmers face an urgent need for well-structured succession plans to safeguard their land and resources for the future. This experienced panel will share practical insights and guidance to help landowners take the first steps in this important process.

12:00 PM – 12:30 PM: Transition to Darnell Farm

12:30 PM: Family Fun Afternoon – Farm to Table Lunch & Hayride Adventure at Darnell Farm

Lunch provided by WNC From the Ground Up (<https://wncfromthegroundup.org/>) and Darnell Farm.