

Request for Applications

Wells Fargo Cultivating Innovation in SC Agribusiness Grant Program

The Wells Fargo Cultivating Innovation in SC Agribusiness: Making Small Farms Big Business Program is a strategic initiative designed to **foster innovation and accelerate growth** within small-to-medium sized agribusinesses across South Carolina. This program, sponsored by Wells Fargo and produced by the SC Research Authority (SCRA), SC Small Business Development Centers (SBDC) and other key collaborators, will provide intensive training, mentorship, and significant financial awards to enable agribusinesses to develop and implement innovative solutions.

Program Overview & Components

The program will select **competitively chosen small-to-medium agribusinesses** to take part in an agribusiness innovation cohort. One-time grants are awarded in the amounts of **\$15,000-\$30,000 +, with an average grant award of \$30,000** and the size of the award corresponding to the scope and impact of the project.

Application & Selection

- **Application Launch:** December 1, 2025
- **Application Deadline:** February 2, 2026
- **Cohort Notification:** February 5, 2026
- **Program Start:** February 12, 2026

Applicants submit an **online form, a detailed innovation proposal, business needs and goals, a financial snapshot, letters of commitment, and a crucial 5-minute video**. This video serves as a virtual pitch, demonstrating the agribusiness facility, proposed product/process, and the applicant's passion.

Program Support & Development

The program offers comprehensive support:

- A **Launch Event: "Igniting Innovation"** on November 24, 2025 at the South Carolina State Museum will kick off the program application opening, engaging stakeholders and generating significant awareness around the program.
- A virtual **Application Training Webinar** taking place on December 4, 2025 introduces applicants to the program and how to apply.
- The application portal **closes on February 2, 2026**
- The selected applicants will be notified on February 5, 2025.

- Cohort members participate in **Five Webinars** that cover critical topics: Innovation Landscape & Utilizing AI Tools, Validating Your Innovation & Market Fit, Building a Business Case & Financial Projections, Protecting Your Innovation & Navigating Regulations, and Scaling, Strategic Partnerships & Sharpening Your Vision.
- Each agribusiness receives support from **SC SBDC consultants** and an **Expert Mentorship Pool**.
- **Peer-to-peer learning** opportunities foster collaboration among cohort members.
- The program culminates in a **Capstone Innovation Showcase & Awards event**, where participants display their refined Innovation Plans and receive their **awards**. This in-person event provides significant networking opportunities and showcases participant achievements to partners and industry leaders.

This program represents a targeted, high-impact investment in South Carolina's agribusiness future, aligning Wells Fargo's philanthropic goals with the critical needs of a vital state industry. By accelerating innovation, building capacity, and fostering collaboration, this initiative will bolster individual businesses and significantly contribute to the long-term economic health and resilience of the entire state.

Eligibility Criteria

- Must be a for-profit business operating in the agricultural industry and falling into one of these categories:
 - Agricultural Producer
 - Agribusiness: Processing
 - Agribusiness: Distribution and Marketing
 - Agribusiness: Support Industries (including farm equipment, seed companies, producers of fertilizers and pesticides, ag-technology.)
- Must be currently operating in the state of South Carolina for at least one tax year.
- Business size restriction: must have recorded less than \$5,000,000 in annual gross revenues in the most recent tax year.

Ineligible Projects

The following activities are not eligible for funding:

- Acquiring real property (including land purchases), or any interest therein;.
- Land acquisition
- Debt Payoff
- Projects which have already received funding from another federal grant or subaward program may not receive funding for the same activities

Definition of Innovation

For the Cultivating Innovation in SC Agribusiness Program, "innovation" is defined as the **successful development and implementation of a novel or significantly improved idea**

that creates tangible value for a South Carolina agribusiness and/or the broader agricultural ecosystem. This goes beyond just invention and focuses on the practical application of new approaches. This definition seeks to create an inclusive environment for small and limited resource farmers and agribusinesses.

Innovation for this program may encompass, but is not limited to, the following categories:

- **Product Innovation:** The creation or significant improvement of new agricultural products (e.g., a new specialty crop, value-added food product, bio-based material, or animal breed).
- **Service Innovation:** The development of new or enhanced services offered by agribusinesses (e.g., ag-tourism experience, direct-to-consumer delivery models, specialized consulting for other farmers, or new equipment rental services).
- **Process Innovation:** Improvements to the methods and workflows used in agricultural production, processing, or distribution that lead to increased efficiency, reduced costs, enhanced quality, or improved sustainability. Examples include implementing precision agriculture technologies (drones, sensors, AI for crop management), optimizing supply chain logistics, or automating aspects of farming operations.
- **Practice Innovation:** The adoption of new or significantly altered farming or business practices that deliver novel benefits. This could include transitioning from conventional to sustainable, regenerative, or organic agricultural techniques, implementing experimental plots to test multiple variables for optimal methods, or adopting new animal welfare protocols.
- **Technology Adoption Innovation:** The innovative integration and application of existing or emerging technologies (e.g., IoT devices, blockchain for traceability, data analytics, renewable energy solutions) into an agribusiness's operations to solve problems or create new opportunities.

Priority Areas for the Grant

The Wells Fargo *Cultivating Innovation in SC Agribusiness Program* seeks to fund projects that advance innovation, resilience, and inclusivity across South Carolina's agricultural landscape. While all eligible applications will be considered, priority will be given to proposals that demonstrate the highest potential for impact in one or more of the following areas:

1. Advancing Innovation in Small and Medium Agribusinesses

Projects that introduce novel products, services, processes, or business models with the potential to increase competitiveness, efficiency, and profitability among South Carolina's small-to-medium-sized farms and agribusinesses.

2. Supporting Historically Underserved Farmers

Initiatives that directly involve or benefit historically underserved producers—including beginning, socially disadvantaged, limited-resource, and veteran farmers—as defined by USDA.

3. Leveraging Technology for Agricultural Transformation

Proposals that apply technology—such as data analytics, precision agriculture tools, automation, or digital platforms—to improve productivity, decision-making, or traceability within agribusiness operations.

4. Generating Broad Impact Across Multiple South Carolina Farms

Projects that demonstrate clear benefits extending beyond a single operation—such as shared infrastructure, cooperative models, pilot programs, or scalable innovations that can be replicated or adopted by other South Carolina farms. Proposals that create ripple effects across regions or farmer networks, improving efficiency, profitability, or sustainability for multiple producers.

5. Ensuring Financial Sustainability and Long-Term Viability

Projects that present a clear and realistic plan for financial sustainability beyond the program period. Priority will be given to innovations with strong business fundamentals—those that demonstrate market demand, sound financial projections, and a credible path to continued revenue or investment. Proposals that show how the project will generate measurable returns, maintain operations without ongoing grant support, and strengthen the long-term resilience of the agribusiness will be viewed favorably.

These priority areas reflect the program's commitment to building a more innovative and sustainable agribusiness sector for South Carolina.

Application Components:

Part I: Online Application Form – Business Profile and Background

This section provides reviewers with a foundational understanding of your agribusiness—who you are, what you do, and how your operation contributes to South Carolina’s agricultural economy. Applicants should use this section to clearly describe the structure, scale, and focus of their business, establishing credibility and readiness to implement an innovation project.

Be concise but thorough. Use factual information and avoid jargon so reviewers unfamiliar with your specific industry can easily understand your business. When completing this section, focus on the following:

- **Business Profile:** Provide complete and accurate details about your legal structure, ownership, years in operation, number of employees, and primary location of activities in South Carolina.
- **Agribusiness Category:** Identify your applicant category, specifically your sector (e.g., specialty crops, livestock, aquaculture, food processing, ag-tech, etc.) and briefly describe your primary products or services.
- **Background and Summary of Business Operations (300 words):** Summarize your company’s history, mission, and core activities. Highlight what makes your operation distinctive—such as innovations you’ve already adopted, partnerships, or markets you serve. Describe your current scale, annual revenue range (under \$5M), and any recent growth or milestones.

Part II: Innovation Proposal (750-word limit)

This section is the heart of your application. It should clearly explain the innovative project idea you want to pursue, why it matters, and how it will make a difference for your business and South Carolina agriculture. Reviewers are looking for originality, practicality, and clear potential for measurable impact.

Your proposal should tell the story of your innovation—what problem you’re solving, what your solution is, and why it has strong potential to succeed. Avoid technical jargon when possible and focus on clarity, evidence, and results. In addition to describing your innovative idea, outline a specific **project you propose** to carry out with the program’s support that will advance or validate this innovation.

When completing this section, address each of the following areas:

- **Problem Identification:** Describe the challenge or opportunity you are addressing within your business or the wider agricultural sector. Explain why this issue matters and how it

affects your operation or community.

- **Proposed Innovation:** Present your idea clearly. What makes it innovative or significantly improved compared to existing practices? Describe your concept, product, process, or business model and how it works.
- **Project Implementation Plan:** In addition to describing your innovative idea, outline a specific project you propose to carry out with the program's support that will advance or validate this innovation. This project should represent a concrete step toward making your idea operational — such as developing a prototype, testing a new process, piloting a service, or implementing an on-farm improvement — and demonstrate how the \$30,000 award will help you achieve measurable progress.
- **Expected Impact:** Explain how this innovation will benefit your business and others in the agricultural community. Describe the potential outcomes—such as improved efficiency, cost savings, new revenue, environmental gains, or job creation. Indicate the benefits to the agribusiness, sector, and SC economy.
- **Alignment with Program Goals:** Connect your innovation to the *Cultivating Innovation* Program's mission of fostering growth and sustainability in South Carolina agribusiness.

Your Innovation Proposal should demonstrate creativity, feasibility, and a strong connection between your idea and the real-world challenges facing South Carolina farmers and agribusinesses.

Part III: Business Viability & Capacity (1000-word limit)

This section helps reviewers understand your readiness to carry out the proposed innovation and sustain it beyond the program. It should demonstrate that your agribusiness has the operational capacity, financial stability, and market awareness needed to successfully implement your project and translate it into real impact.

Use this section to show that your team, resources, and business fundamentals position you for success. Be transparent and specific—reviewers are not looking for perfection, but for a clear, realistic picture of your strengths, preparedness, and ability to grow through the *Cultivating Innovation* Program.

When completing this section, address the following areas:

- **Operational Capacity:** Demonstrate that your business has the staff, facilities, systems, and time to carry out the proposed innovation project effectively.
- **Market Viability:** Provide an indication of your market opportunity. Even preliminary information about your target customers, market size, or competitive landscape helps reviewers assess the innovation's potential success.
- **Team Capability:** Briefly describe the experience and roles of your core team members. Explain why they are well-suited to execute the proposed project.
- **Financial Overview:** Summarize your current revenue, profitability, and funding sources to show a solid foundation. Highlight any financial practices or partnerships that support long-term sustainability.

Your goal in this section is to give reviewers confidence that your agribusiness has both the **capacity and commitment** to turn an innovative idea into a viable, lasting success.

Part IV: Program Alignment & Need (750-word limit)

This section allows you to explain how participation in the *Cultivating Innovation* Agribusiness Program—and the accompanying \$30,000 award—will directly help you achieve your innovation and business growth goals. Reviewers will use this information to assess whether your project is a strong fit for the program's objectives and resources.

Be clear and practical. Show that you understand how to apply the program's training, mentorship, and funding to move your idea forward. A well-defined plan that connects your needs, goals, and the program's support will strengthen your application significantly.

When completing this section, address the following:

- **Use of Award Funds:** Provide a clear and reasonable plan for how the award will be used to advance your innovation.
- **Project Budget:** Include a simple, realistic budget that outlines how the award will be used to carry out your proposed project — highlighting key expenses such as materials, equipment, testing, labor, or other costs directly tied to advancing your innovation. Provide a brief justification for each item, explaining how it directly supports the successful implementation and advancement of your innovation. Reviewers will be looking for thoughtful, well-justified spending plans that demonstrate a clear link between

costs and project outcomes

- **Growth Goals:** Outline your short- and medium-term goals for the next 1–3 years related to your innovation. Explain how the award and program participation will help you achieve measurable business results such as expanded production, new markets, or increased efficiency.
- **Program Fit:** Describe what you hope to gain from the cohort—specific knowledge, skills, connections, or mentorship—and how these align with your innovation and long-term vision.
- **Strategic Alignment:** Demonstrate how your project supports the broader mission of the *Cultivating Innovation* Program: fostering sustainable and growth-oriented agribusiness innovation across South Carolina.

Your goal in this section is to help reviewers clearly see the **connection between your needs, your innovation goals, and the program’s ability to accelerate your success.**

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Part V: Letter of Commitment

This section confirms your dedication to fully engaging in the *Cultivating Innovation* Agribusiness Program and seeing your proposed project through to completion. The Letter of Commitment helps reviewers assess your level of seriousness, accountability, and readiness to make the most of this opportunity.

Your letter should be signed by the business owner or CEO and written on company letterhead if available. It should communicate your willingness to commit the time, effort, and resources necessary to actively participate in the program and successfully implement your innovation project.

When completing this section, include the following:

- **Program Participation:** A clear statement confirming your full participation in all aspects of the program—webinars, mentorship sessions, peer learning opportunities, and the in-person Capstone Innovation Showcase & Awards event.
- **Acknowledgement of Award Terms:** Confirmation that you understand and accept the award conditions, reporting requirements, and expectations for deliverables (such as submission of your final Innovation Plan).
- **Commitment to Project Success:** A brief statement expressing your dedication to implementing your innovation and using the award responsibly to achieve measurable

results.

- **Letters of Support:** You may include one or more letters from partners, collaborators, or community organizations that reinforce your project's credibility, feasibility, and potential impact.

Your Letter of Commitment is your opportunity to demonstrate leadership, reliability, and enthusiasm—qualities that strongly influence reviewers' confidence in your ability to execute and sustain your innovation.

Part VI: 5-Minute Video

The video component is your opportunity to bring your innovation to life. It allows reviewers to see your operation, understand your passion, and visualize your idea in action. The goal is not professional production quality—it's clarity, authenticity, and enthusiasm.

Your video should help reviewers connect your written proposal to the real-world context of your agribusiness. It should clearly show who you are, what you do, and how your innovation will make a difference.

When preparing your video, include the following elements:

- **Overview and Introduction:** Briefly introduce yourself, your business, and the problem or opportunity your innovation addresses.
- **Show Your Operation:** Give reviewers a quick tour of your facilities, equipment, or production space to demonstrate your capacity to carry out the project.
- **Demonstrate or Describe the Innovation:** Clearly explain or show the product, process, or idea you are proposing. Highlight what makes it innovative and how it will create value.
- **Impact and Vision:** Conclude by describing the impact you hope your innovation will have on your business, your community, and South Carolina agriculture overall.

Keep the tone conversational and genuine. The best videos show your excitement, commitment, and practical understanding of your innovation's potential. Simple smartphone or tablet recordings are completely acceptable—focus on **content, clarity, and authenticity**, not polish.

Optional: Supporting Materials (e.g., product photos, website link, media mentions, brief bios of key team members).

Scoring Rubric for Initial Application Review (Weighted):		
Criteria	Max Points	Description
I. Innovation Proposal: Potential & Clarity	35 pts	
Problem Identified	5	Clear, well-defined problem/opportunity. Relevant to SC agriculture.
Proposed Innovation	20	The idea is novel, specific, and addresses the identified problem effectively. Demonstrates creative thinking.
Innovation Stage & Feasibility	5	Realistic stage of development. Innovation seems technically and operationally feasible for a small-medium agribusiness.
Expected Impact	5	Clear benefits to the agribusiness, sector, and SC economy. Potential for positive impact (economic, environmental, social).
II. Business Viability & Capacity	25 pts	
Current Business Health	10	Demonstrated financial stability and operational capacity to undertake the innovation project. (Based on Financial Snapshot).
Market Potential	10	Indication of a viable market for the innovation (even if preliminary). Understanding of potential customers.
Team Capability	5	The existing team appears capable of pursuing the innovation. (Based on implied experience/brief bios).
III. Program Alignment & Need	25 pts	
Utilization of Award	20	Clear and reasonable plan for using the award to advance the innovation. (Basic budget outline).
Expressed Needs & Goals	5	Applicant clearly articulates what they hope to gain from the cohort (skills, knowledge,

		mentorship) and how it aligns with their innovation goals.
IV. Commitment & Communication	15 pts	
Letter of Commitment	5	Strong, clear commitment to full program participation.
Video	5	Clearly communicates ideas and overview of project
Bonus Points	5	Applications demonstrating significant leadership or impact within historically underserved farming communities
TOTAL SCORE	100 pts	