

Close loopholes, but preserve farms

By HUGH E. WEATHERS
Guest columnist

As a farmer, as a taxpayer and as S.C. commissioner of agriculture, I appreciate The State for recognizing the importance of a balanced property tax structure. From a recent editorial ("Close loopholes in agricultural tax system," March 29), it is apparent that the editors understand the need to keep farmland in production and also to preserve undeveloped land.

The tax structure for agricultural land was designed to create a level playing field for farmers. Without this tax structure, farmers would be taxed at a level greater than the profit earned from the production on their land. In too many cases, it has become more lucrative to sell the land than continue to farm it. But we need to remember that maintaining South Carolina farms means maintaining South Carolina-grown products, both of which are vital to our state's economic well-being and to our citizens' health.

Farms provide open places and green spaces that are basic to the quality of life we all enjoy. If farmland is taxed to the point that agriculture cannot be profitable, we all lose when the land is converted to other uses. Land shifting into urban and industrial uses rarely shifts back. According to American Farmland Trust, about 1.2 million acres of land are converted out of agricultural use every year in America. In the past 25 years, more than 1.5 million acres of farmland in South Carolina has shifted from agricultural purposes to other uses. Many more acres would have been shifted had the agricultural property tax structure not been in place.

Defining what a "real farm" is can be very difficult. A farm in the Lowcountry might consist of several thousand acres producing such row crops as corn and soybeans. Or an operation in the Upstate might consist of only one or two acres growing high-value crops such as strawberries, greenhouse products or herbs.

Testifying before the House Property Tax Study Committee last fall, I clearly saw that members of the Legislature recognize the need to maintain a system that supports farming in South Carolina. But it was also clear that the areas of obvious abuse of the system must be addressed. As commissioner of agriculture, I believe a common-sense approach will help us reach both of these goals.

Achieving these goals is worthy of a concerted effort by both farm and non-farm leaders. It's understood that the agricultural property tax structure exists to help farmers survive. But what may not be as well understood is the fact that agriculture helps balance out South Carolina's revenue picture. A 2001 study by the American Farmland Trust of 83 communities in the United States concluded that agricultural lands pay nearly \$3 of revenue for every dollar of infrastructure and public services costs.

For the benefit of everyone in South Carolina, let's work to close the loopholes in the tax system, and let's keep our farming operations — from the smallest to the largest — open for business.

Mr. Weathers, of Bowman, is the S.C. commissioner of agriculture.