

# WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

## United States Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship

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April 27, 2026

### INTRODUCTION

South Carolina's entrepreneurial history stretches back more than 250 years -- predating the republic itself. This written statement supplements the oral testimony presented before the Committee and provides a more detailed account of that heritage through the lens of specific industries, crafts, and businesses that have defined the state's economic character from the colonial era to the present day.

South Carolina is home to approximately 430,000 small businesses, which employ roughly 45 percent of the state's private-sector workforce. But numbers alone fail to capture what is most distinctive about South Carolina entrepreneurship: its rootedness in place, its continuity across generations, and its remarkable capacity to blend cultural heritage with commercial vitality.

### A LEGACY OF HANDCRAFT AND HERITAGE INDUSTRY

**SWEETGRASS BASKETRY** -- The oldest continuous entrepreneurial tradition in South Carolina is almost certainly the sweetgrass basket weaving of the Gullah Geechee people. Rooted in West African coiled basketry techniques brought to the Carolina coast in the 17th and 18th centuries, sweetgrass basket weaving evolved from utilitarian agricultural use -- specifically the "fanner baskets" used in rice cultivation -- into a distinctive art form with significant commercial value.

For generations, Gullah Geechee women have sold their baskets along the roadsides of the Lowcountry, particularly along Highway 17 north of Charleston. This represents one of the longest-running continuous small business traditions in American history. Today, master weavers sell their work for several hundred dollars per basket. The tradition faces economic pressure from imported imitations, and its practitioners represent an entrepreneurial heritage that merits federal recognition and protection.

**EDGEFIELD POTTERY** -- The Edgefield District of South Carolina was home to one of the most distinctive American pottery traditions of the 19th century. The region's alkaline-glazed stoneware, produced roughly from the 1810s onward, was characterized by a distinctive glaze achieved using wood ash and local clays. The tradition involved both free and enslaved potters and produced work ranging from everyday storage vessels to ambitious sculptural pieces.

Among the most remarkable figures in American ceramic history is the enslaved potter known as Dave Drake (also called Dave the Potter), who worked at several Edgefield potteries and inscribed verse on his pots -- a profound act of self-expression under conditions of bondage. His work now commands prices exceeding one million dollars at auction. Edgefield pottery is collected by major art museums and continues to inspire contemporary potters working in the region today.

## **FOOD AND BEVERAGE ENTREPRENEURSHIP**

**BLLENHEIM GINGER ALE** -- In 1903, pharmacist A.J. Matheson began bottling the naturally spicy mineral spring water of Blenheim, South Carolina, adding ginger to create what would become one of the most distinctive regional soft drinks in the United States. Known for its sharp, almost aggressive ginger character, Blenheim Ginger Ale has developed a fiercely loyal following across more than a century of continuous production. Blenheim, South Carolina, remains a destination for enthusiasts. This is a case study in the enduring commercial power of authentic regional identity.

**MARSH HEN MILL** -- Located on Edisto Island, Marsh Hen Mill represents a revival of pre-industrial grain milling traditions. Using stone-ground techniques and heirloom grain varieties, the mill produces grits, cornmeal, and flour with depth of flavor that commodity milling eliminated from the American food supply. Marsh Hen Mill exemplifies a growing category of South Carolina food entrepreneurs who have found a market precisely by resisting industrialization -- meeting consumer demand for authentic, traceable, traditionally produced food.

**WHITE BLOSSOM COFFEE** -- South Carolina's artisan coffee sector has expanded significantly in recent years. Producers like White Blossom Coffee bring craft roasting practices and direct trade relationships to the state, connecting South Carolina consumers to global agricultural networks while building local economic value through roasting, retail, and hospitality operations.

**96 PECANS** -- Named for the historic Revolutionary War site of Ninety Six, South Carolina, 96 Pecans markets the state's native pecan harvest with an emphasis on place of origin and traditional variety. The brand exemplifies the growing market for regionally identified agricultural products -- a category in which South Carolina producers have significant untapped commercial potential. Products like these not only generate revenue; they act as ambassadors for the state's agricultural identity.

## **CRAFT AND ARTISAN MANUFACTURING**

**PAWLEYS ISLAND ROPE HAMMOCK** -- In the 1880s, a riverboat captain named Joshua John Ward grew weary of the hot, mildew-prone mattresses common to maritime life and began weaving a simple cotton rope hammock that allowed air to circulate freely. His design was so functional and so perfectly suited to the South Carolina coast that it has been made in Pawleys Island ever since -- virtually unchanged. Today, the Original Pawleys Island Hammock is among the oldest continuously manufactured consumer products in the United States, still handwoven by local craftspeople. It stands as a testament to a foundational truth of South Carolina entrepreneurship: identify a genuine problem, solve it with skill and simplicity, and the market will sustain you for generations. What began as a practical solution for one river captain has become a global symbol of Lowcountry craftsmanship, exported to customers in every state and dozens of countries.

**KUDZU KRAFTS** -- Perhaps no enterprise better captures South Carolina's entrepreneurial resourcefulness than a business built on kudzu -- the invasive vine that has blanketed millions of Southern acres since the late 19th century. Kudzu Krafts turns this persistent nuisance into handcrafted goods, embodying a tradition of extraction-based entrepreneurship: identifying a locally abundant resource and converting it into marketable value. This tradition is as old as South Carolina itself.

**MENNONITE CRAFTSPEOPLE OF THE AIKEN AREA** -- The Mennonite community in and around Aiken County represents a distinct tradition of craft entrepreneurship rooted in religious heritage and generational skill transmission. Mennonite woodworkers, furniture makers, and agricultural producers bring extraordinary craftsmanship standards to the local economy. Their enterprises often operate

outside conventional retail channels, relying on reputation, word of mouth, and community relationships -- a form of commerce that predates modern marketing by centuries and remains remarkably durable.

## **OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

South Carolina's entrepreneurial heritage reveals several persistent themes directly relevant to the Committee's work:

First, heritage is a competitive advantage. South Carolina's most distinctive entrepreneurs succeed precisely because they are rooted in place -- in specific geographies, traditions, and communities. Federal policy should support geographic indication protections, heritage craft designations, and marketing infrastructure that allows these producers to reach national and international markets without surrendering the local identity that makes them valuable.

Second, craft entrepreneurship is economic development. The sweetgrass basket weavers of the Lowcountry, the potters of Edgefield, and the grain millers of Edisto Island are not hobbyists -- they are economic engines for communities with limited alternatives. Programs supporting craft entrepreneurship, apprenticeship, and market access deliver economic development where it is most needed.

Third, small producers face disproportionate regulatory burdens. Food entrepreneurs in particular face federal and state regulatory frameworks designed for large-scale processors. The Committee should examine opportunities to create tiered compliance pathways for micro-scale food producers that protect public safety without extinguishing the small operators who give American food culture its character.

Fourth, cultural heritage requires active stewardship. Traditions like sweetgrass basketry and Edgefield pottery are endangered not by lack of interest but by economic pressure on the communities that sustain them. Federal investment in heritage craft preservation -- through the NEA, the Smithsonian, and USDA rural development programs -- yields returns far exceeding their cost.

## **CONCLUSION**

Two hundred and fifty years of South Carolina entrepreneurship is not a museum exhibit. It is a living economy, built by people who take what the land, the water, and the community around them provide -- and make something worth selling, worth keeping, worth passing down.

The Senate Commerce Committee has the opportunity to be a steward of that tradition. This testimony respectfully urges the Committee to see in America's regional entrepreneurs not a quaint remnant of an earlier economy, but its most durable and authentic core.

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