

Agritourism: Cultivating Tourists on the Farm

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Agritourism: Cultivating Tourists on the Farm

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Part 1: INTRODUCTION to AGRITOURISM

The huge, dynamic industry of tourism

Tourism is now the largest industry in the world, and one of the fastest growing. Two billion tourists worldwide spend trillions of dollars every year in the places they visit. In 2006, 846 million international tourists generated \$733 billion in tourism receipts (World Tourism Organization, 2007). In the United States, domestic travel combined with international tourism is a \$1.3 trillion industry, with a direct payroll of \$162 billion representing 1 out of 8 jobs [Travel Industry Association of America (TIA), 2005]. In Washington, tourism ranks as the state's third largest industry, with 2007 revenues from tourism estimated at \$14.8 billion. Since 2002, tourism spending in Washington has increased an average of 7.4% annually, considerably above the rate of inflation over that same period (Dean Runyan Associates, 2007).

Struggling agriculture

In contrast, the agricultural economy over most of the past three decades has been relatively stagnant. With the exception of increased commodity prices in the last few years (2004–2007), farm income in general has risen little since the mid-1970s. And, small to medium-sized family farm incomes are not benefiting from the higher commodity prices to the extent that large farms are due to the economics of scale. In fact, two-thirds of all U.S. farms—most of which are small (i.e., less than \$250,000 in gross farm sales annually)—had negative net farm incomes in 2004 (Hoppe et al., 2007). With the costs of farm inputs such as fuel, machinery, labor, and fertilizer rising faster than farm revenues, most smaller family farms continue to struggle.

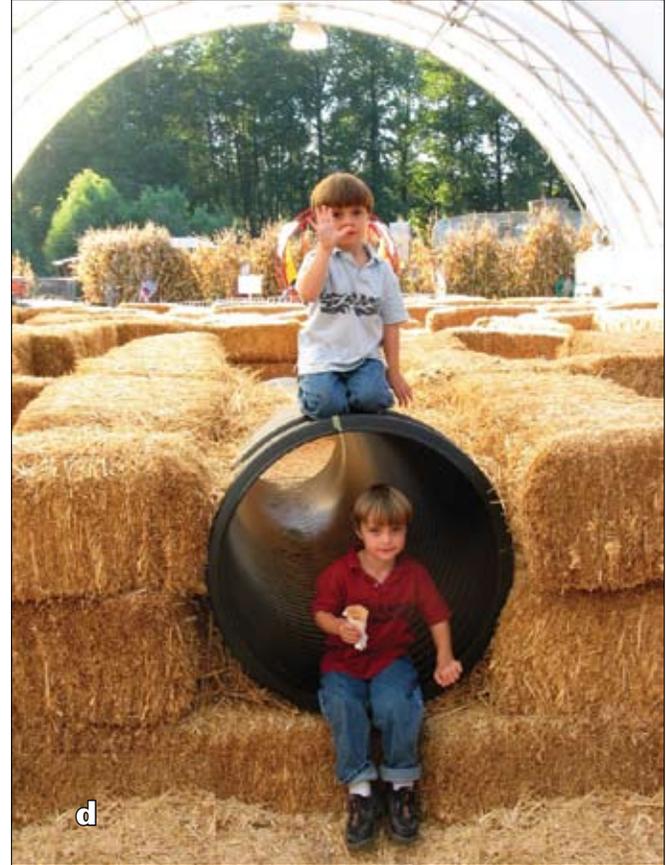
In areas such as western Washington and western

Oregon where development pressures are high, land is rapidly being converted from agriculture to residential and commercial development. Many farm families in these high development areas want to keep farming, and many non-farm residents increasingly value farms for maintaining beautiful open spaces and the rural character of the countryside. Washington's Growth Management Act, Oregon's Urban Growth Boundaries, local zoning laws, "right-to-farm" laws, preferred use agricultural property tax policies, and other pro-farm land use policies have had some success in stemming the tide of farmland loss. Nevertheless, many areas continue to lose farms at an alarming rate. One reason for this continued decline in agriculture is the lack of viable and profitable agricultural options in many areas because land prices and associated production costs have climbed so high. Even with favorable tax policies, zoning protection, and other regulatory safeguards, farmers cannot stay in agriculture if their farming businesses are not profitable.

Agritourism as a possible diversification strategy

For many farmers, the only way to stay in agriculture is to find ways to diversify and expand their incomes, either through new enterprises on the farm or off-farm employment. One diversification strategy some U.S. farmers are beginning to explore is the "cultivation" of tourists in addition to crops (Figs. 1a–d). Referred to as "agriturismo" in Italy, "sleeping in the straw" in Switzerland, "farmstays" in New Zealand, and "farm holidays" in England, agritourism is well-established throughout Europe and in many other countries (Rilla, 1999a).

Agritourism in many countries consists primarily of lodging and meals on the farm. Farm families often remodel farm buildings into rustic lodging facilities, and then operate them as a type of bed and breakfast (B&B) inn. Some farms, especially



Figures 1a–d. Farms that have mazes, tee-pees, wagon rides, and straw bale mountains and caves are great sites to bring out school, church, or other youth groups.

in Switzerland, do little more than clean out a barn and spread straw on the floor, upon which people roll out sleeping bags. Others provide fairly upscale accommodations. Visitors are often also able to tour the farms, help out with farm chores, have meals with the farm family, and genuinely experience life on the farm. What distinguishes many of these European farmstay lodging facilities from other rural B&Bs is that most countries require they be real, working farms that derive a certain percentage of the families' income from

agriculture.

In England, 23% of farms provide some type of commercial leisure service enterprise such as fishing, nature trails, picnic sites, etc., while 24% of English farms provide overnight accommodation and/or catering (Turner and Winter, 2003). In France, hikers and cyclists can follow a network of trails around the country that leads from farm to farm. The Netherlands and some other European countries have centralized

Sidebar 1. Potential agritourism activities

Use this list to generate ideas for unique, fun, feasible, and profitable activities you can develop and market for your agritourism farm.

- Bird watching
- Birthday parties
- Blacksmithing
- Bonfires
- Cider pressing
- Cooking demonstrations/lessons
- Cutting flowers
- Farm antiques—display and for sale
- Farm demonstrations—wool spinning, quilting, wreath making, ice cream making, butter churning, canning, cheesemaking
- Farm museum
- Farm tours—interpretive, self-guided
- Fee fishing
- Festivals
- Gourd golf, pumpkin bowling
- Haunted house, barn, forest
- Hiking, biking
- Horseback riding
- Mazes—corn, straw bales, bamboo
- Nature tours
- Old farm equipment displays/demonstrations
- Pedal-powered tractors for kids
- Petting pens/zoos
- Picnics/picnic areas
- Pumpkin carving/decorating
- Pumpkin patch
- Softball, volleyball, horseshoes
- Storytelling
- Swimming
- U-cut Christmas trees
- U-pick fruit
- Wagon/hay rides

clearinghouses for contacting and booking stays on working farms.

Defining agritourism

Just as no two farms are alike, agritourism enterprises are equally diverse. Thus, it is difficult to describe the “typical” agritourism business. Generally speaking, however, “an agritourism enterprise is a business conducted by a farm operator for the enjoyment and education of the public, and to promote the products of the farm, and thereby generate additional farm income” (Hilchey, 1993:4). Some farms even offer extended vacations where visitors get up at dawn and help with the farm work. A growing number of people are willing to spend \$500 per person or more per week to experience life on the farm through a farm vacation.

Agritourism, while new to many types of American agriculture, has been a major part of the development of the American wine industry for decades. Many wineries are part of organized regional wine tours, and some put on special events such as concerts, festivals, and weddings. Another form of agritourism that has been around for decades are “dude ranches,” which offer lodging, hospitality, and outdoor activities.

Sidebar 2. Overnight lodging/ farmstays

Bed and Breakfast/Bunk and Brunch—Convert an old farmhouse into a quaint B&B, or put some bunks in that old tool shed and provide the more adventuresome with a rustic “bunk and brunch.”

Campgrounds—Do you have some nice woods on your farm? Perhaps managing a campground would fit into your farm and your daily routine.

Farm vacations—Rent out cabins, rooms, or even tents and yurts to individuals and families by the day, weekend, or week. Let them help with chores, fix a fence, or prune a tree if they want.

“Sleep in the Straw”—Do like the Swiss and some other Europeans: clean out that unused old barn, put down some clean straw, and have overnighters sleep on the straw in their sleeping bags!

There are plenty of regulations that apply to the lodging business, so work with local officials if you have an idea.

However, for most other types of U.S. farms, cultivating tourists as a source of farm income is a relatively novel phenomenon.

Potential benefits

Agritourism enterprises can be small part-time means to supplement farm operations, or main features and income generators on the farm. They often provide a means to add value to farm products through processing and direct marketing right on the farm. Adding agritourism can also provide a means for a farm spouse to work at home and make a financial contribution to the farm and family without having to take a job in town, as well as help to employ children, relatives, friends, and others in the community.

If planned carefully, agritourism can provide a valuable educational tool to help the public gain a greater understanding and appreciation of what agriculture is about. It can build bridges between farmers and consumers, and between rural and urban citizens.

Potential drawbacks

But there is a down side to agritourism as well. Adding tourism to an already stressed farm and family unit can cause serious problems. Much additional work is required to keep a farm clean, safe, and ready for the public, and this can sometimes detrimentally impact the primary farm operations (especially when time is critical, such as planting and harvest). Maintaining privacy is almost impossible during peak tourism season. Having hundreds or even thousands of strangers visit the farm dramatically increases the farmer's regulatory and liability risks. These and other potential problems must be kept in mind when considering whether or not to develop an agritourism business.

The pros and cons of agritourism enterprises will be addressed in greater detail later. What needs to be stated initially is that agritourism is not a panacea for agriculture, but rather a special niche that some farmers may want to develop if they have the needed skills, resources, and desire to operate this type of business.

Trends that bode well for agritourism

Agritourism is closely related to “nature tourism” and “heritage tourism,” which experienced an

Sidebar 3. Special events

Many groups love to find unique places to hold their special events. Why not your farm? A number of farms around the country are cashing in by hosting special events such as the following:

Birthday parties—Especially for kids, but even some adults want to have a birthday “down on the farm.”

Church picnics—A real nostalgia creator. Brings back images of “The Waltons.”

Corporate retreats—Many corporations are looking for the perfect opportunity to shed their suits for some unconventional and creative fun. A retreat on the farm may be just their ticket!

Family reunions—Why not provide the perfect relaxing and memorable place for families to come together on the farm?

Summer camps—Do you have a place on your farm for camping? A pond for swimming? A trail for nature hikes? Why not rent out the farm to a group for a summer camp?

Weddings—Many brides dream about having a country wedding. If you have a beautiful spot on your farm, put up a pavilion, gazebo, or simply use portable shelters for picture-perfect weddings.

Beware, however, that people can be picky about special events, especially weddings (which are often stressful). Special events take a lot of planning, experience, and money, so you need to make sure you charge enough to make it worthwhile.

annual gain of between 20 and 34% in the 1990s, compared to around 7% for conventional tourism (International Ecotourism Society, 2006). Day and weekend trips to nearby rural areas that offer an alternative to the rapid pace of urban living are also gaining popularity.

Connecting with nature, culture, and history

While many people are content to view nature from the window of their vehicles or learn about culture and history from books or television, a growing number desire more. Because most people spend their lives in urban settings, far removed from the natural world and small towns that are the sources of our natural and cultural heritage, many seek to fill this void by getting closer to nature and their historical and cultural roots in

their leisure time. Similarly, as our increasingly urban population becomes more removed in both time and space from agriculture, there is a growing desire to make a connection with our food and sustenance, and experience country living. Today, few people have relatives who farm, and thus can't go visit "Grandpa Jones" or "Uncle Frank's" farm during the summer as many could only a few generations ago.

Nature tourism (also known as ecotourism) encompasses traditional hiking and camping, but also includes photographing wildlife, studying rare ecosystems or species, wilderness survival, bird watching, kayaking, rafting, mountain biking, and much more. In a nationwide survey, 48% of Americans reported taking part in nature-based activities during their last vacation (Bruskin Goldring Research, 1998).

Heritage tourists seek out historic places, buildings, and trails; they want to learn about native cultures, early settlers, and unique ways of life that contribute to the richness of landscapes and communities (Natural Resources Conservation Service, 2001). Agritourism bridges these two types of tourism because agriculture is one of the few industries that tap our connections with the

natural world as well as our cultural past. Farms are unique repositories of biological, historical, and cultural wealth, and thus hold a fascination for many people. Agritourism provides an opportunity for people to experience a real change of pace, get closer to nature, learn how food is produced and farmers live, and have a good time and memorable experience while doing it (Fig. 2).

Escaping from the city

The "get-ahead-at-any-cost" attitude that characterized many baby-boomers in the 1980s and 1990s is giving way to a realization that there is more to life than the urban grind. For decades most Americans rated their work as more important than what they did during their leisure time, but in 1991, this reversed. However, studies also show that the amount of leisure time people have is shrinking, while the amount of stress they feel on a regular basis is increasing (Whelan, 1991). Free time is becoming more precious, and people are looking for relaxing, stress-relieving ways to take best advantage of their limited leisure time. Consequently, people are taking shorter, but more frequent vacations than they once did.

Sidebar 4. Farm demonstrations

One of the best ways to educate and entertain agritourists is to provide a demonstration of the typical activities needed to run your farm, which are anything but routine to many visitors.

Cattle roundup—Turn your annual roundup and branding into an event for the community. Have an announcer tell folks what's going on.

Cheesemaking—For farmstead cheesemakers this is a natural, and people are fascinated by it.

Draft horse farming—Do you have draft horses? Have a friend or neighbor who does? Horse farming is making a bit of a comeback, and people love to watch it.

Feeding animals—Let people help, and tell them about what you're feeding and why.

Hay making—Mowing, raking, baling, stacking: it's all interesting for many folks.

Horseshoeing, blacksmithing—Seeing an expert farrier or blacksmith work is always a show.

Milking—You'll probably need to put in a viewing window and do a bit of modification of the milking parlor for this one to work.

Plowing, planting—Not the easiest to demonstrate, but people want to know about how the land is worked.

Pruning—This is always a mystery to people, and may help them with their own fruit trees at home.

Sheep herding—In addition to being a critical part of working large sheep flocks, herding is also a growing sport. People love to watch the dogs work with an expert handler.

Sheep shearing—Have a professional shearer in for a special event. People are absolutely fascinated at how fast they work, and how "skinny" the sheep are after the wool comes off.

Weeding—The bane of every farmer's existence, but newcomers might even want to help!



Figure 2. Shelburne Farms in Vermont is a 1,400-acre working farm, national historic landmark, and nonprofit environmental and agricultural education center that features architecturally unique barns and buildings, a luxury country inn, a dairy and farmstead cheese business, concerts, festivals, miles of nature trails, and many unique educational programs.

In 1986, weekend trips accounted for 42% of all trips taken. Ten years later, that figure had grown to 52% (TIA, 2001). In 2005, 30% of Americans said they took five or more weekend trips per year, and fewer and fewer Americans report taking trips lasting a week or more (TIA, 2005). Increasingly, people are taking more weekend and day trips, exploring the sites, activities, entertainment, and enrichment options available near where they live. Recent escalations in gasoline prices are strengthening this trend. Agritourism enterprises should thus be well-positioned to capitalize on the changing tourism market.

Governmental support for agritourism

The success of agritourism in Europe is due in large part to active government participation. Most of the farms getting involved in agritourism are doing so out of economic necessity, but many acknowledge that it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to make the transition without governmental assistance (Rilla, 1999a). All European Community (EC) countries have government organizations that promote agritourism and often provide financial support and incentives to participating farmers (Rilla, 1999a). EC nations actively encourage agritourism as a means to keep farmers on farms, maintain a viable rural economy, and protect the beauty and integrity of their rural countryside.

Britain's agritourism programs

During a tour of British agritourism operations

in 1997, Rilla (1999a) found that most were located in or near the nation's 11 national parks (which are made up almost entirely of private land). Most of these farms received grants and/or low interest loans to make the necessary conversions of buildings and other improvements for overnight accommodations. The British government also formed the Farm Holiday Bureau (FHB), which is made up of 95 different Farm Holiday Groups (FHG) totaling over 1,000 farms in England, Scotland, and Wales. The primary purpose of the FHB is to assist member farms with marketing, promotion, and booking of visitors. Most participating British farmers readily credit the FHB with much of the success and growth in the nation's agritourism industry (Rilla, 1999a). The British government recognizes that an attractive, open countryside is critical to the nation's overall tourism success. Thus, keeping farmers on the land by supporting agritourism has a much broader impact on the nation's overall tourism industry, as well as promoting wildlife habitat, preserving historic areas, and maintaining woodlands and open space.

Applying European agritourism ideas in the United States

Nothing like the British or other European governmental support for agritourism exists in the United States, with the possible exception of Vermont. In 2000, Vermont's Congressman Bernie Sanders was successful in getting \$2 million appropriated for agritourism development, with \$750,000 of that money going to his home state. That same year the Vermont Agritourism Initiative formed a public-private partnership between the Vermont Farms! Association, Vermont Department of Agriculture, Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing, Vermont Community Loan Fund, Vermont and Regional Chambers of Commerce, Congressman Bernie Sander's Office, and the Northern Vermont and George D. Aiken Resource Conservation and Development Councils (Fig. 3).

This program assisted hundreds of Vermont farmers with training, marketing, networking, technical assistance, and a low-interest revolving loan fund to provide startup capital to new agritourism ventures. Although the federally funded Vermont Agritourism Initiative officially ended in August 2003, the Vermont Farms! Association (<http://www.vtfarms.org>) continues to actively promote agritourism in Vermont.



Figure 3. Lodging on the farm is one of the oldest and most common forms of agritourism, especially in Europe.

The Vermont Agritourism Initiative was created for almost precisely the same reasons that the European agritourism programs got started: to find ways to keep many of the state's remaining farmers viable and on the land, to preserve the landscape and the state's rural heritage, and to assure that Vermont's tourism industry and its image as a beautiful place to visit could be maintained.

More recently the state of Kentucky began a new agritourism initiative, which includes a Web site at <http://www.kentuckyfarmsarefun.com>. The initiative states that "the State of Kentucky has recognized the opportunity for those in agriculture to open their farms to the public by establishing both the Office of Agritourism and the Agritourism Advisory Council. Agritourism provides diversification opportunities and new revenue sources for the farmer as well as both educational and recreational opportunities for visitors." The partnership behind this initiative includes the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy, Kentucky Department of Tourism, Kentucky Department of Agriculture, Kentucky Farm Bureau, Commodity Growers Cooperative, Kentucky Cattleman Association and Beef Council, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, Kentucky Pork Products, and Kentucky Poultry Federation.

While individual entrepreneurs can and do start successful agritourism enterprises on their own, these types of statewide programs offer significant advantages to assist agritourism operators with marketing, publicity, and sharing of information. If family farms continue to

struggle, and if the loss of farmlands and open space in agricultural areas near urban centers continues, it is possible that agritourism may get more governmental attention and assistance in the future. Federal, state, and local governmental institutions may look increasingly at agritourism as a means to assist and support family farmers, especially in areas where agricultural resources and landscapes are increasingly threatened.

The economic impacts of agritourism

Agritourism is as yet a small, localized economic activity that has not received much formal research or analysis as to its economic impacts. However, a 2003 survey of farms in Vermont revealed that one third (2,200) received an average of \$8,900 from agritourism activities in 2002. The total agritourism income for all farms in Vermont was \$19.5 million in 2002, up 86% from 2000 (New England Agricultural Statistics Service, 2004). A survey of agritourism operations in New York estimated that there were nearly 2,100 farms in the state in 1999 with agritourism components that brought in \$211 million in gross revenues, with an estimated net profit of over \$25 million (Kuehn and Hilchey, 2001).

A Rutgers University research study of New Jersey farmers who market directly off the farm and/or conduct agritourism activities found that both direct marketing and agritourism activities brought in more farm income compared to farms of the same size that did not engage in these activities (Govindasamy et al., 1998).

Other regional studies conducted in San Diego County, California and Cochise County, Arizona indicate that agritourism can have significant seasonal impacts on local economies. For every dollar spent at the farms people visit, many additional dollars are spent in the local area supporting other businesses. In San Diego County, 150,000 visitors to the Flower Fields (a large flower-growing and agritourism operation) spent over \$600,000 at this farm in 1998, but more than \$7 million countywide as a result of their trip (Lobo et al., 1999). A survey of over 81,000 non-local visitors to Cochise County, Arizona agritourism enterprises found that they had an economic impact of nearly \$2 million (Leones et al., 1994). And a study done in 2000 of the 17-day Skagit Tulip Festival in Washington State found that this festival brought in over \$14 million from outside visitors (money spent by

local county residents was not included) (Dean Runyan Associates, 2000). These three studies clearly confirm what Europeans have found, that as people come into an area to visit local agritourism attractions, they also spend money and support many other local businesses. U.S. agritourism therefore not only has the potential to benefit specific farms, but also significantly contribute to the broader local economy (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. The latest research indicates that the Sequim Lavender Festival, located on Washington's Olympic Peninsula in Clallam County, generates more than \$3.65 million annually (Birchhill Enterprises, 2005).

Part 2: BEGINNING and OPERATING an AGRITOURISM ENTERPRISE

The decision to start an agritourism operation is a big one. Agritourism is not a magic cure for struggling farmers, and has significant tradeoffs that must be considered. However, if a person or family has the necessary qualities, and if the farm and location lend themselves to this type of enterprise, agritourism can be an exciting and rewarding way to supplement the farm's income. The section that follows discusses many of the issues involved with beginning an agritourism enterprise, and provides some pointers for those who have already started.

The importance of homework

Before you jump into an agritourism enterprise, it is highly advisable to thoroughly research the type of business you anticipate. Key word searches on the Internet are a good way to start.

Many agritourism operations now have Web sites, and you can learn a good deal about them by studying what they have posted. (A list of Internet addresses for some agritourism business and related government and university resources is provided at the end of this bulletin.) If you find some operations that intrigue you, and about which you'd like to know more, give them a call, or better yet, go visit them. It is a good idea to identify a number of agritourism businesses around the region, across the nation, or even in a foreign nation, that are similar to what you think you might like to do. Take the time to visit them, ask questions, take notes, and shoot plenty of photographs. Of course you'll want to get the permission of your host before you glean too much information, but most people are happy to help.

Spend some time imagining what this business would be like to operate. Think about the hectic times, the mundane times, the stressful times, as well as the fun and rewarding times. Put yourself in the position of operating the business, and ask yourself and your family members if this type of lifestyle is for you. If you think it is, put as much down on paper as you possibly can. Develop a business plan. Even though you will undoubtedly deviate from your plan (as virtually all agritourism operations do), this exercise will help you focus and avoid numerous mistakes. There are several good sets of resources to assist in developing an agritourism business plan (e.g., Kuehn et al., 1998; Jolly, 2001, 2006; George and Rilla, 2005).

Finally, while avoiding mistakes is a good idea, don't be afraid to innovate and try new things. A successful agritourism operator gave this advice: "Take time to evolve; for every ten silly ideas that don't succeed, the 11th might; there is no recipe or magic formula for success that you can purchase; you need to be ready for the challenge of the journey" (Rilla, 1999a:26).

Assessing the market for agritourism

As with any business, knowing your market is a key component to success in the tourism industry. The market for agritourism activities depends largely on the type of business involved. Activities such as petting zoos obviously must be geared toward small children, families, schools, etc. Farm tours, festivals, restaurants, and farm stores attract a much broader audience, but can also be targeted. For instance, if farm tours feature demonstrations of old-time farmstead practices

such as wool spinning or blacksmithing, or if the primary feature of an agritourism operation is a farm museum that displays and possibly demonstrates the use of antique farm equipment, it is likely to be more attractive to older tourists, many of whom travel by tour bus.

Families

Families are a primary agritourism market sector. Hilchey and Kuehn (2001) found that 72% of visitors to agritourism operations in New York came with family members. Families are looking for experiences that are both fun and educational. Agritourism farms that cater to families need to make sure that activities and attractions for all ages are included in their operations. In general, families, senior citizens, and children's groups tend to be the primary markets for agritourism activities, while teenagers, young adults, and young couples tend to be less likely to visit agritourism sites, but should not be ignored.

Nearby urbanites

Since agritourism customers come primarily from nearby cities, it is best to focus most promotional efforts toward this audience. However, guest registries at many agritourism destinations indicate that visitors from across the United States and around the world are not uncommon. These people do not usually visit agritourism sites as their primary destinations, but rather tend to find out about them while in the area, and add them to their travel itineraries. This means that agritourism enterprises in areas that already generate considerable tourism traffic are much more likely to benefit from some of this spillover effect.

Capturing the tourism market that already exists in an area requires inquiry into who is visiting the area, when they're coming, and how they can be effectively reached. This will vary from area to area. Local visitors and convention bureaus (VCB) are a great source of information about tourist numbers, peak seasons, modes of tourist travel, and areas tourists are traveling from. If you don't have a VCB, many local chambers of commerce can often provide some of this information.

Out-of-towners

In general, citizens from nearby rural areas tend not to visit local agritourism sites. However, there are two exceptions to this rule. When local

Sidebar 5. Music, art, and education on the farm

For many families and music and art enthusiasts, this approach may be a real attraction. The Olympic Music Festival near Chimacum, Washington, draws thousands each summer to hear world-class chamber music in an old barn.

Art shows—If you have the right connections, bring in a group of artists to display their latest creations on the farm.

Classes and seminars—You can give classes on gardening, mushroom identification, organic farming, or just about anything you (or someone you know) have the talent and imagination for.

Concerts—Good folk, classical, or bluegrass music in a beautiful, wholesome setting like a farm is a natural.

Craft fairs—Invite craftspeople to the farm for a festival or some other special event.

Dances—Consider hosting regular square dancing, folk dancing, or clogging on your farm.

Outdoor plays on the farm—The farm's a great place for a little Tom Sawyer, or a play about a local legend.

Theater in the barn—How about some Shakespeare in the hay?

Take a look at the facilities on your farm and think about how they mesh with your interests, talents, and connections.

residents are hosting family or friends from out of town, they are inevitably faced with the question, "What is there to do around here?" For this reason it is critical that agritourism operators maintain a high local profile. The goal should be to make your farm into a "must see" that locals can't help but tell visitors about.

Locals

The other way that locals can be enticed to participate in agritourism activities is by holding festivals or tours specifically targeted at them. Beginning in 1996, several western Washington counties began holding Harvest Celebration Day on the first Saturday of October, featuring interpretive tours of farms, hayrides, kids' events, food, and music. These harvest celebrations are

Sidebar 6. Farm festivals

With the right theme, festivals can provide an opportunity to work with other local farms, area organizations, and tourist attractions.

Crop/product theme—Boysenberry Bash, Rhubarb Renaissance Fair, Dahlia Days

Historic theme—Living History Farm Festivals (e.g., demonstrate a period of agriculture with period dress, old-time technology)

Holiday theme—4th on the Farm, Halloween Hoe-Down, Farm “Labor” Day

Livestock theme—Lambing festival (celebrate the newborn lambs), Round-up Time

Seasonal theme—Solstice SunFest, Harvest Celebration, Oktoberfest, Spring Fling on the Farm



Figure 5. The annual Harvest Celebration Day held in many Washington counties is specifically aimed at bringing local citizens out to working farms in their communities.

primarily advertised locally, and were developed as a way to reconnect local non-farm citizens with their farm neighbors—to build stronger relationships between the farm and non-farm communities in the region. This event grew from one western Washington county in 1996 with 2,000 visitors, to 13 counties in 2007 with over 20,000 people visiting local farms (Fig. 5).

Social skills

Agritourism operators, their family members, and/or employees need to be able to stay calm and pleasant through children throwing rocks at animals or climbing trees, people complaining about smells or wandering off into buildings or places that are posted off limits, or tourists showing up and demanding service on days or at times when the farm is closed to visitors. People in this type of business must be able to smile even when they're tired and stressed out, communicate clearly and with enthusiasm, handle problem guests in a tactful and professional manner, as well as have a sense of humor, patience, and willingness to answer the same question for the hundredth time (Fig. 6).

The demeanor and quality of service provided by tour guides, store clerks, and others who deal with the public are keys to the success or failure of agritourism enterprises. In a survey of New York agritourists, Hilchey and Kuehn (2001) report that the number one factor people seek (72% of respondents) in choosing an agritourism site to visit is the “friendliness of the staff.” Service,

Sidebar 7. Farm contests

Try advertising or inviting people out to the farm to see who can outdo one another at outrageous farm-fun contests.

Apple bobbing—An old-fashioned favorite that's always a hit.

Blind pea shelling—See who can shell the most peas blind-folded.

Cherry pit spitting—Find out who has the most pucker power for launching cherry pits; you can also see who can spit the most pits into a milk pail, or any number of variations.

Corn shucking—A manly man's contest where whoever can shuck the biggest pile of ears is the winner—always followed by a fantastic corn roast, of course.

Cow/goat milking—A real test of the grip; the first one to fill the bucket or bottle wins. To make it really interesting, have them fill a pop bottle!

Cow pie throwing—Not for the dainty; see who can chuck a cow pie (dry ones, of course!) the farthest.

Egg tossing—Which duo can toss an egg the farthest without breaking it?

Gourd golf—Break the stems off some small, round gourds, use some spare 2x4s for clubs, and you have perfect tools for a round of gourd golf.

Melon/strawberry/grape eating—Pick a juicy, messy fruit and then see who can stuff the most into their face in a minute or two.

Rooster crowing—See who can get his/her rooster to crow the most times in 10 minutes. People can bring their own roosters if they have them, and you can supply the birds for those who don't. The antics people go through trying to get a rooster to crow can be hysterical!



Figure 6. Farm operators and employees need to enjoy interacting with the public and sharing their knowledge and experiences with farm visitors.

courtesy, sincerity, and pleasantness are critical. It is also important that those who deal with the public have adequate knowledge about the operation so they can answer common questions and provide interesting facts and trivia. These factors make the difference in how visitors portray their experience to others, and whether they will come again.

Location

While location may not be “everything” when it comes to agritourism enterprises, it is nevertheless very important. One of the most successful agritourism operations in the nation, the Apple Barn and Cider Mill, is located just off the highway leading to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Gatlinburg, Tennessee—both major tourism destinations. It is also just a few miles from the Dollywood theme park and the urban center of Knoxville, in a beautiful valley that provides a great setting for the operation. Although the growth of this business has undoubtedly benefited from good management, the hundreds of thousands visiting the Apple Barn each year clearly come in large part due to its location (Fig. 7).

Proximity to population centers, existence of other major tourism attractions, overall traffic flows in the area, distance from major highways, relative ease or difficulty in finding the location, and the natural beauty of the site are all important factors when considering an agritourism enterprise (Fig. 8). However, it is not



Figure 7. The Apple Barn and Cider Mill in Tennessee is one of the most commercially successful agritourism enterprises in the United States.

necessary to have an ideal location if the farm is clean and attractive, well-run by friendly and courteous people, offers something unique and of value, and the marketing plan is effective. Many small, out-of-the-way agritourism enterprises are successful, but require extra effort. However, certain locations may be so remote and/or unattractive that agritourism should not be considered.

Aesthetics

People are far more likely to visit a quaint, attractive farm in a beautiful natural setting than they are a run-down farm next to a gravel pit. When asked what factors influenced them to visit agritourism sites, 71% of surveyed agritourists in New York responded that the “scenic appearance of the farm” was very important—second only to the “friendliness of the staff” (Hilchey and Kuehn, 2001; Fig. 9).

While a farm’s aesthetics are determined to a large degree by the natural setting, you can do a lot to make your farm more attractive and pleasing to visitors. This means keeping the area considerably cleaner, neater, safer, and more attractive than is required of the average farm by maintaining walkways, painting, more frequent cleaning of pens, control of flies and other insects, reducing or eliminating unpleasant odors, and elimination of junk, old equipment, and other eyesores. For livestock operations, odors are a particular problem. Manure may “smell like money” to the farmer, but to city people it just smells like....well, you know. People complaining about odors can ruin the experience for everyone.

In addition to the cleanliness and maintenance of the farm, it may be worthwhile to develop signs, picnic areas, landscaping, toilet facilities, and trails to meet the needs of visitors and make the site unique and memorable. It is not necessarily



Figure 8. Smallwood's Harvest, near Peshastin, Washington, is in a beautiful valley setting, just off a major state highway, with excellent visibility and access to parking—all attributes of a good agritourism location.

advisable, however, that agritourism operators put up expensive new buildings, fences, or other improvements that add considerable cost to the start-up of the operation. Until the new venture proves itself, it is generally unwise to invest large sums of money on capital improvements. A lot of “elbow grease,” paint, and ingenuity can usually make a farm attractive enough to open up to the public without major expenses being incurred. However, if an agritourism business is to grow and attract repeat customers, it is important to periodically improve the appearance, facilities, and attractions of the site (Fig. 10).

Insurance and safety

In today's “litigation-happy” world, taking on increased liability by inviting the public onto one's farm should not be taken lightly. Farm operators can be held liable for accidents or other mishaps that occur on their premises, whether or not disclaimer signs are posted, instructions are followed, or even if people are there without the consent of the owner. You should not assume that an existing farm insurance policy covers agritourism activities. It is crucial that you consult an insurance agent with experience in both agricultural and recreational insurance early in the process of planning and designing an agritourism enterprise. Each feature added to the business, such as a petting zoo, farm store, hayrides, farm tours, B&B, or festival, may need to be treated as a separate insurance risk, and add to the overall cost of the insurance. Some of the factors that determine the cost of insurance for adequately covering an agritourism enterprise are the number of visitors anticipated, types of activities to be



Figure 9. Green freshly mown grass, neat stacks of pumpkins, wheelbarrows at the ready for visits to the pumpkin patch, readily accessible portable toilets, and a tower from which to view the pumpkin patch, corn maze, straw bale maze, and other activities all indicate that Sunny Farms Pumpkin Patch near Sequim, Washington, pays attention to aesthetics, details, and the needs of its visitors.



Figure 10. Attractive signs, a water cooler filled with ice water, picket fences, a red wagon for kids to use or ride in, and paved walkways all add to the experience for those visiting Smallwood's Farm Park near Peshastin, Washington.

included, and amount of revenue to be generated (Fig. 11).

When asked about their top three concerns, 26% of agritourism operators in New York listed liability and liability insurance as their top issue (followed by marketing/promotion/advertising at 17%, labor issues at 16%, and government regulations at 14%; Kuehn and Hilchey, 2001).



Figure 11. Pony rides are one of the popular attractions at Remlinger Farms in Carnation, Washington. However, activities like this may significantly increase insurance costs, or even make insurance harder to obtain.

Some agritourism operators have decided that certain activities are just too costly and risky to be allowed. A Texas agritourism operator with a beautiful farm pond wanted to allow people to swim in it. She figured that since she employed more workers than sometimes needed to handle tours and farmwork, someone would be available to manage the swimming, and accidents could be avoided. However, after consulting with her insurance agent, she decided that allowing swimming would increase her liability exposure and insurance costs too much. Consequently, swimming is not allowed on this farm.

In determining insurance needs and liability exposure, it is often helpful to consult with an attorney in addition to an insurance agent. An attorney can provide insights into relevant laws, responsibilities, and legal obligations that an insurance agent may not be aware of. The amount and type of insurance needed, who and what should be covered, and numerous other insurance and liability questions can only be answered by a qualified insurance agent and attorney. In addition to having adequate insurance, it is equally important that you constantly monitor your farm facilities and services to make sure they are neat, clean, safe, and as risk-free as possible.

In her interviews with dozens of agritourism operators in Britain and the northeast United States, Rilla (1999a) found more claims for injury among the American agritourism operations than among the English. However, none of them were aware of operations that had been forced out of business due to liability claims, nor had any insurance been terminated. Beus (1994) similarly found that while concerned about liability, none of the Texas agritourism operations he visited had experienced a serious lawsuit, nor did they have trouble obtaining adequate insurance coverage.

Government regulations

This section briefly reviews some of the regulatory issues and requirements that may affect agritourism operations in Washington. Please note, however, that local regulations vary from county to county, and it is therefore critical that potential agritourism operators check with local officials to find out about specific policies and regulations that may affect them. Likewise, this section may not apply directly to residents of states other than Washington. However, the issues raised and examples given provide general guidance, including what types of state and local agencies to contact for regulatory information. Lastly, remember that policies and regulations change frequently, and therefore the information provided in this section may soon be outdated. It is always a good idea to check with the appropriate agencies to get the most current information available.

In addition to increasing your liability exposure, bringing in large numbers of people to your farm also increases the number of regulations that you have to deal with. In Washington, no permit or license is required if only unprocessed products produced on your own farm are sold to the public. To sell produce or other agricultural products obtained from off the farm to the public, you may need to obtain a special license under the Washington State Department of Agriculture's (WSDA) Commission Merchant Program. Information about the Commission Merchant Program, including special licenses needed, can be obtained by calling 360-902-1854 or consulting <http://agr.wa.gov/Inspection/CommissionMerchants>.

Almost all agritourism operations need a business license from the Washington State Department of Licensing, as this is required of any Washington

State business that collects taxes or employs people. Washington State's Master License Service (MLS) is a program whereby prospective new businesses can fill out one master application and receive a single Unified Business Identifier (UBI) number that can be used by all other state agencies involved in business regulation, taxation, and registration. You can get a master application packet by calling 360-664-1400, stopping by the nearest UBI service location, or downloading from <http://www.dol.wa.gov/forms/700028.htm>. The MLS will notify you of what other state licenses, fees, and regulations apply to you based on your completed application, but you may need to specifically request information about federal and local laws.

Selling processed food

Selling processed farm products such as jams, jellies, syrups, honey, sauces, and cheese involves specific regulations that your local county environmental health office can detail for you. Local county health departments work closely with WSDA and other regulatory agencies in overseeing local food processing, and can inform you of what permits, licenses, inspections, and regulations you will need to manufacture and

sell processed food products. You can obtain further information about food processing and food safety regulations from the WSDA by calling 360-902-1876 or visiting <http://agr.wa.gov/FoodAnimal/FoodProcessors>.

Serving food

Selling or providing food for direct consumption to the public also requires contact with your local county environmental health office. Even if you only plan to serve food for a one-day event, you will need to obtain a food service permit, and one or more people will likely need a food handler's card. This process can take several weeks, so you should get started well in advance of any event where you anticipate selling or serving food. A seasonal or year-round food service enterprise such as a restaurant, café, or snack bar on the farm must also meet local zoning codes.

Petting zoos

If you plan a petting zoo as part of your agritourism operation, you may need a special license (Fig. 12). Exhibiting animals for commercial purposes requires a license from the Animal Care Division of the Animal and

Sidebar 8. Food on the farm

Studies and experience show that when people come to the farm, they want to eat. Food service can be a profitable way to add revenues to your agritourism operation.

Bakery—Pies, farm-fresh breads, muffins...you name it. Bake them on the farm, sell them in the farm store, and market them in town and online.

Barbecues—Ribs, burgers, steaks, chops, and kabobs: an old-fashioned BBQ on the farm is always a hit.

Caramel apples—An all-time fall favorite.

Catering—Some farms have gotten in the business of not only catering onsite events, but also taking good old-fashioned farm food to activities off the farm.

Chuckwagons—Recapture the old West by serving your guests out of a genuine old chuckwagon.

Corn-on-the-cob—Fresh-roasted corn just tastes better on the farm.

Farmstead cheese—A great opportunity for the small dairy that needs to add value to their milk.

Farm restaurants/cafes/snack bars—May or may not be allowed in your area.

Hotdog and marshmallow roasts—There's something about roasting a weenie over hot coals and biting into a golden brown marshmallow.

Jams, jellies, syrups, salsas, sauces, chutneys—Many a farm entrepreneur has gotten his or her start by developing that "secret" recipe, and then marketing the heck out of it!

Some of these ideas are more difficult to pull off than others, and if you don't want the hassle, then just keep it simple, such as chili, sandwiches, and strawberry shortcake. But remember, people have to eat, and visiting a farm seems to increase many people's appetites.

Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. If, however, the animals in your petting zoo or pens are for sale as part of your regular farming operations, you do not need to obtain a license through APHIS. The western regional Animal Care APHIS office is located in Fort Collins, Colorado, and can be reached at 970-494-7478 or acwest@aphis.usda.gov. The cost of these licenses depends on the number of animals involved. APHIS inspectors may make unannounced visits to petting zoo sites once or twice a year. Operators of petting zoos must comply with minimum standards for animal care as set forth in the Animal Welfare Act. Copies of this act and information about how it applies to you are available from APHIS by calling 970-494-7478, while fact sheets about compliance are at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_welfare.

Retail goods and services

Selling retail goods or services requires collection of sales tax. Farm tours that charge a fee, B&Bs, farm stores, and farm restaurants must include Washington sales tax (Fig. 13). Selling produce or processed food items other than for immediate consumption does not require collection of sales tax. For more information on sales taxes in Washington, contact the Washington State Department of Revenue at 1-800-647-7706 or consult <http://dor.wa.gov/content/home>. Please note that when you fill out your master application and receive a UBI number from Washington State, the information about your new business is automatically sent to the Department of Revenue.

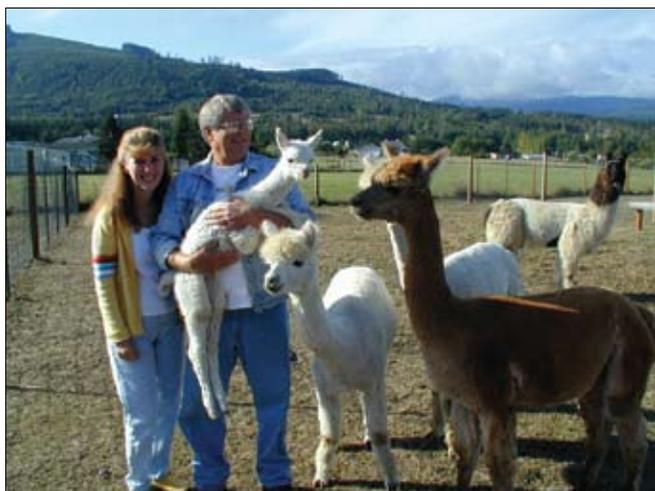


Figure 12. Having animals on the farm is a big draw. Who could resist these alpacas at Happy Valley Alpaca Farm in Sequim, Washington?

You do not need to contact them directly, as they will send or direct you to the applicable forms and explanations for collecting and remitting any required taxes pertaining to your new agritourism business.

Construction

If you plan to remodel a house, barn, or other structure for lodging, or build a farm store or other building where the public will visit, you will need to work closely with your local county building department. Some of the major considerations when undertaking any of these types of construction are building permits, inspections, and possible modifications for fire safety and other purposes.

Zoning

Zoning is a very important issue that applies to many agritourism enterprises. Counties vary considerably as to their zoning requirements and “allowed uses” in various zoning designations. Some activities you plan for your agritourism operation will probably be automatically allowed under existing agricultural or other rural zoning. However, if you want to start a farm store, roadside stand, B&B, commercial farm tours, campsites, farm festivals, or other commercial venture not explicitly allowed under your existing zoning, you will need to consult with county officials (Fig. 14). It is strongly encouraged



Figure 13. The farm cafe and gift shop at Blueberry Hills Farm in Manson, Washington, near Lake Chelan is an example of an agritourism enterprise that can be popular, but requires compliance with many regulations. This type of agritourism activity may not be allowed in some areas.

that you do considerable research on this topic by getting a copy of the allowed uses for your particular zoning designation and talking with your local county planning staff. Make sure you understand what is and is not allowed under existing zoning regulations.

It is not uncommon for local officials (or even neighbors) to challenge new ventures on the grounds that they are not within the allowed uses for a particular zone. This can be an expensive and frustrating experience—one that can potentially put an agritourism enterprise out of business. If what you are proposing is not allowed under existing regulations, you will need to go through the process of obtaining a variance or conditional use permit, or work with local officials to adapt zoning policies to allow your proposed agritourism activities. Maintaining good relations with your neighbors and local officials will go a long way toward increasing your odds of getting the needed policy changes or permit. If, however, there are concerns about increased traffic, noise, or other nuisance issues, the process will be much more difficult. Anything you can do to assure those concerned that your enterprise will not cause any serious problems and be an asset to the community will help your chances of getting the venture approved.

Rilla (1999a) notes that Sonoma County zoning ordinances were revised to address food service, retail sales, and special events related to agritourism enterprises. Rilla (1999b) also



Figure 14. People love to shop at unique farm stores offering farm-fresh produce, such as this one at Remlinger Farms in Carnation, Washington. Local zoning laws will determine if a farm store or retailing off the farm is allowed and if so, what permits are required.

describes how one ranch family worked with the California Farm Bureau and Community Alliance with Family Farmers to draft special state legislation (AB 1258, the California Agricultural Homestay Bill) to exempt farmers and ranchers from some of the regulations aimed at restaurants and hotels. This bill was specifically drafted to allow farms and ranches to serve lunch and dinner as part of an overnight farmstay business, which were prohibited under prior California law.

Neighbor relations

As was alluded to in the previous section, neighbors can have a big influence on agritourism enterprises. Operators must therefore remain very sensitive to how their neighbors feel about having an agritourism enterprise next door, which means listening and responding to concerns, and trying to accommodate them to the extent possible. As the discussion on regulations explained, you must also make sure to follow all local ordinances and laws on zoning, building, rights-of-way, and signing. Otherwise, disgruntled neighbors may have what they need to seriously affect the operation, or even put it out of business. It is possible that what starts out as a reasonable farm-oriented agritourism business can outgrow its original context so that it no longer fits in a farming area, or even in a rural neighborhood. The question of when an agritourism enterprise ceases to be a farm and becomes an amusement park is a difficult one to answer. Agritourism operators need to be cognizant of this issue, and aware that as their operations evolve, neighbors and other local residents may take issue with that growth.

“Real” vs. “entertainment” farmers

In the Green Bluff area just north of Spokane, Washington, agritourism entrepreneurs have purchased many farms over the past two decades from farmers no longer able to make a living simply growing crops. This has resulted in tension between the agritourism farmers and the remaining farmers not involved in agritourism. The agritourism operations in the area have formed the Green Bluff Growers Direct Marketing Association (<http://www.greenbluffgrowers.com>) that promotes farm festivals and other special events to bring in people to not only buy fruit, but also take hot air balloon rides, ride ponies, get their faces painted, and sip cider while listening to a country band. Some long-time residents in the

area worry that the clogged country roads on weekends are ruining their quiet, country haven, along with the livelihood of “serious” orchardists and other local farmers. Referring to a “circus-like” atmosphere created by the concentration of Green Bluff agritourism enterprises, one long-time local fruit grower complained that “we’re in the fruit business, not the entertainment business. I think we’ve just about overdone this dog-and-pony show” (Jones, 1993).

This case highlights the importance of adequate ingress and egress for traffic and buffer space from neighbors and people in the area who oppose the idea of an agritourism business. It also suggests that agritourism farmers may need to reach out to neighboring farms by offering to sell their farm products, promote their farms, and listen to their concerns to reduce tensions. For all neighbors—farm or non-farm—do whatever is possible to build solid relationships and even partnerships when appropriate. It is highly advisable to keep such issues in mind as you consider undertaking an agritourism enterprise and later as the business develops. Keeping the neighbors happy can go a long way toward one’s own happiness, and the success of the business.

Labor management

Agritourism enterprises are generally labor-intensive. Selling directly to the public, guiding tours, processing farm products, monitoring and responding to visitors, and many other agritourism activities require heavy commitments of time. Such needs for labor are often seasonal, and sometimes conflict with demands for farm work during peak periods such as planting or harvest.

Employing family members

Typically, operators of agritourism enterprises attempt to utilize existing family labor as much as possible. In fact, agritourism activities are often begun as a way to better utilize family labor. Existing non-family farm workers can also often be used when starting an agritourism business. Families should analyze their labor situation carefully before hiring additional workers for the development of a new agritourism business. Just as it is often unwise to take on large capital expenses when starting up an agritourism enterprise, it is also unwise in many cases to hire new staff until the operation requires it and can pay for it.

It is very important that family members or trusted employees who know and care about the operation devote considerable time to it. Most newly hired employees have neither the experience nor commitment to handle the stresses and challenges of an agritourism operation. One of the biggest challenges for many agritourism operators is instilling enthusiasm and interest in the workers they hire, which is critical to the success of the business. Many people choose farming because they like solitude and are uncomfortable with crowds, noise, and the pace of other walks of life. For an agritourism business to succeed, however, not only must the farm family like to interact with the public and be trained in effective hospitality skills, but so must any outside employees.

Seasonal work

Since agritourism is typically a seasonal business, most of the jobs it generates are also seasonal. This creates problems in attracting and retaining good employees. High school and college students can sometimes be found for the summer months, but they often need to return to school before Labor Day, which is a very big tourism weekend. Farm women from the local area frequently work out very well as agritourism employees; they have knowledge of agriculture and the local area, and are typically responsible and conscientious. However, unless what they’re looking for is seasonal or part-time work, they often pursue other full-time employment once business slows.

In many cases there is no solution to the problems associated with seasonal employment, but one strategy that some agritourism farms use successfully is to diversify their operations such that work is spread out through the year. By processing more value-added products on the farm, developing a mail-order business (typically geared toward November and December holiday gift-giving), and starting a fall cider festival, one Pacific Northwest agritourism operator lengthened the work year considerably for their farm employees. Such careful planning of events, activities, and business opportunities may enable you to maintain year-round (or nearly so) employment. People who are flexible, self-starters, and adaptable are needed for these types of positions where they may be leading tours one month, making jelly the next, and filling telephone orders the next.

Animal welfare and public contact with farm animals

The American public is becoming increasingly sensitive to issues related to the care, treatment, and use of animals. This is not the place to discuss whether or not the criticisms and claims of animal rights advocates are valid. The important point here is that if you open your farm to the general public, you will undoubtedly encounter people who view the proper treatment of animals differently than you do. As a result, you need to pay careful attention to the health, housing, and conditions in which you keep your animals. It may even be advisable to have someone from the local Humane Society come out to review your animal facilities and help sensitize you to the concerns that non-farm people have about the care and handling of farm animals (Fig. 15).

While it is not necessary to take extreme measures when modifying your animal handling and housing facilities to make them more comfortable for the animals, it is important that you give it some serious thought and attention. It is also important that your practices be defensible so you are able to adequately explain why certain livestock farming practices are necessary and even beneficial to the animals in spite of first appearing otherwise to some visitors. Having the knowledge and skill to calmly discuss and explain your methods to agritourists, even to rather strident animal rights advocates, is critical. In no case should you engage in heated debate or name-calling, as this will only alienate the recipient and upset other visitors. It may be helpful to take the distressed person aside to deal with the issue. The keys are to treat your animals well and respond promptly, simply, and credibly to individuals who express concern about what they see on your farm. In this way agritourism operators can be important educators and ambassadors for agriculture during a time when fewer and fewer people understand what it takes to farm or raise livestock.

One final caveat on farm animals and the public involves the numerous recent cases of infections due to the bacteria *E. coli* 0157:H7 and salmonella, which are microorganisms that can cause diseases when transferred from farm animals to people. If people are allowed to have direct contact with animals or areas contaminated with animal manure, it is important to provide hand washing facilities and post information about the



Figure 15. Working farms with animals are wonderful places for families and children to visit, providing fun, memorable experiences and helping to educate non-farmers about what it takes to raise livestock. However, it is very important to pay attention to animal welfare issues and make sure your animals are well cared for.

importance of hand washing to avoid diseases that can be transmitted from farm animals to humans. This will not only help reduce the likelihood of illness, but also significantly reduce your liability should someone contract a disease they claim is due to contact with your farm animals.

Financial management

Whether adding an agritourism component to an existing farm or starting up a new agritourism-based farm, the primary reason for doing so, in almost all cases, is to generate income (Rilla, 1999a; Kuehn and Hilchey, 2001). Agritourism income is from two sources: (1) additional sales of farm products by drawing more customers onto the farm, and (2) charging for lodging, tours, events, and other activities. You will need to decide whether to charge visitors for admission to the farm and any farm-based activities, or whether the attractions you develop are primarily to draw in prospective buyers of farm products. In many cases, however, agritourism operations generate income from both sources.

The business plan

Deciding whether or not to charge, or how much to charge for agritourism activities, depends on your goals and analysis of the operation. In most cases it is advisable to prepare a business plan to help think through how the new focus of your farm will generate revenue most effectively.

Developing realistic enterprise budgets, income statements, cash flow budgets, and estimates of capital requirements will provide specific numbers you can use to determine if you need to charge, how much to charge, or even if you should begin an agritourism enterprise. A good place to start in getting information on business plans is your nearest Small Business Development Center.

Profitability

As with other farm enterprises, it is often difficult to clearly evaluate the profitability of an agritourism operation because income and expense records from various transactions are mixed together. However, objectively evaluating the profitability of an agritourism enterprise requires that you separate out and track as many of the costs and revenues as possible. This is especially important if you try to make money directly from agritourism activities such as tours and events. If the goal is to increase farm sales by attracting more customer traffic, the key is to have a good understanding of farm sales and profitability prior to initiating agritourism, and then track increases in sales and expenses and evaluate them in relation to changes in the flow of customers to the farm.

One early analyst of agritourism operations argued that most of these enterprises are sidelines to a farm, and as such can't make money (Dice, 1974). He argued that the only way to make agritourism profitable is to attract massive numbers of visitors, and that by doing so the real business must be tourism, and the farm becomes the sideline, or even irrelevant. Dice suggested most agritourism operations are unprofitable, and many farmers who continue to run such a business do so simply because it is "fun," and don't realize their extra efforts are not generating a profit.

Work done much more recently by Rilla (1999a), Govindasamy et al. (1998), and Kuehn and Hilchey (2001) indicates that agritourism activities can and do generate additional, needed profits for many farmers. Kuehn and Hilchey (2001) report that 82% of the New York farms they studied decided to open an agritourism enterprise to increase farm profitability. They also found that the agritourism operations they studied generated an additional average annual profit of \$12,347 over and above other farm income.

The profitability of agritourism enterprises is

a subject that deserves more study. However, it is highly unlikely that the thousands of U.S. farmers who have started and maintained agritourism businesses over the past several decades are doing so primarily because they find it fun. Undoubtedly, many make money at their ventures, while some do not. This is a function of operator skills, the resources they bring to the situation, and the community—and even government—support they receive.

Marketing and advertising strategies

Marketing is fundamental to the success of agritourism, but it is generally unwise for a new business to spend large amounts on marketing and advertising. Beginning agritourism operations should cultivate free media coverage, circulate brochures or flyers (and sometimes gifts from the farm and discount coupons) to visitor centers, travel bureaus, chambers of commerce, and other influential local people and places involved in tourism. Generating goodwill and word-of-mouth recommendations is critical, and difficult to reclaim if you don't start out by building a positive public image.

Word of mouth

In surveys of both agritourism operators and customers in New York, Hilchey and Kuehn (2001) found that word of mouth is by far the most effective and common way that people find out about agritourism attractions. Generating and maintaining effective word-of-mouth promotion of an agritourism enterprise requires that the farm provide memorable experiences that exceed visitor expectations—experiences that people are likely to share with friends and acquaintances. It also requires the farm operator to be proactive in networking and publicizing the farm among key individuals and organizations in the community and region. In other words, effective word-of-mouth promotion is often initiated and enhanced by other types of marketing efforts.

Publicity

One means of marketing that many successful agritourism operators have mastered is the publicity from public interest stories printed in newspapers and magazines and broadcast on radio and television. This goes hand-in-hand with the word-of-mouth advertising that is crucial to building an agritourism business. Since

agritourism operations are often highly novel, a little ingenuity should yield all kinds of ways to get free media attention. This is especially easy (and important) when the agritourism operation is new. After the novelty of an agritourism attraction wears off, it is increasingly difficult to get this type of publicity. Media outlets resent being used for “free advertising.” Therefore, it is critical that you maintain good relations with local reporters, editors, and managers of newspapers and radio stations. This includes taking out paid ads from time to time to increase your odds of being able to get that next public interest story when the trumpeter swans come to visit your farm pond or after you’ve grown that 500-pound award-winning giant pumpkin.

Collaborative marketing

In areas where there is considerable existing tourism traffic, it is often advantageous for agritourism operators to cooperate with other tourist attractions, especially if an effective area-wide marketing effort is in place (e.g., catalogs and videos at travel bureaus). Cooperating and becoming known as one of many interesting local attractions in almost all cases generates more agritourism traffic for individual operators than does attempting to undertake marketing on your

own. It is particularly effective if you can develop a cooperative marketing campaign with businesses that are complementary to yours. People who live in a city two or three hours away want to know what they can do for an entire weekend. Providing them with several options for their visit will increase the odds that they will make the trip.

It is often very effective to display colorful, attractive brochures or “rack cards” in areas with high tourism traffic such as visitor centers, chambers of commerce, motels, and restaurants. Make sure to include easy-to-read maps, phone numbers, and directions for finding your farm.

School tours

Another highly effective way to not only market the farm, but also build immediate visitor traffic and cash flow, is to make special invitations to school groups (usually children in grades K–4) from nearby cities. You can offer special educational tours, hayrides, petting pens, pumpkin picking, fresh-baked cookies, and hot-mulled cider. Also give them a special brochure to take home that explains what is happening on the farm. These brochures are often the inspiration for a return visit a week or two later with parents and siblings. Charges for school tours are typically between \$3 and \$5 per child,

Sidebar 9. Direct marketing

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)—Also known as subscription farming, this is a way to get people to pre-pay for regular deliveries of fresh farm produce “shares.” Agritourism farms, with their regular traffic of visitors, are a great way to promote the sales of CSA shares.

Farm Web sites—Rapidly becoming a must for both promoting your farm and selling your farm products. Once you get a following, a good Web site may be more effective than a printed catalog of farm products—and you never need to mail it out!

Farmers’ markets—A growing phenomenon, with more popping up every day around the country. They not only allow you to get started selling produce at retail prices, but are a superb way to get your farm, its products, and even its agritourism activities known in the community. Put up displays, talk to folks, and distribute brochures and schedules of farm events.

Mail order/catalogs—If you are diligent in developing a good database of customers and farm visitors, this can be a great way to sell value-added farm products, especially during the holidays.

On-farm stores—Whether a simple shack or an elaborate store, there’s no better way to generate sales and revenue than selling people products from the farm they’ve just toured. You can sell other local farm and farm craft goods if the products and your methods meet with local laws and zoning codes.

Roadside stands—The original agritourism direct-marketing method. This play on seasons still works, but people are now more sophisticated shoppers, so make sure your stand is neat, attractive, well-signed, and accessible.

U-pick fruits, vegetables, flowers—An old favorite, and still very feasible, although some people today don’t want to work that hard. Make sure to have plenty of fresh, ready-picked produce and flowers available at the U-pick stand.

which does not make them highly profitable in themselves, but they generate repeat business, and in the long run plant the seeds for future business (Figs. 16 and 17).

Mailing lists

Some successful agritourism operations maintain mailing lists and rely heavily on direct mailings of announcements, promotions, and catalogs. This is especially true of those with on-farm stores and mail-order farm goods. Hilchey and Kuehn (2001) found that newsletters and direct mail were rated as highly effective marketing tools, but also fairly expensive to maintain and use. For direct mailing to be useful and cost-effective it is important that it be carefully targeted and maintained. “Stale” entries (i.e., those who have not purchased or come back to the farm for two or more years) in mail order databases should be deleted.

Media

Various media may be good advertising methods depending on your budget, specific message (i.e., product or service), and audience. For example, a remote radio broadcast directly from your farm can be especially effective in building traffic and excitement for farm festivals and grand openings. It is a good idea to specifically target both the audience and season when using radio advertising. So if you plan a pumpkin festival and haunted house at your farm during Halloween,



Figure 16. The growth in popularity of corn mazes is phenomenal. Hundreds of communities around the country now have annual corn mazes, many of which approach works of art. These mazes are especially popular with teens.

try focusing radio ads around this theme, and air the ads on radio stations that cater to younger clientele and families.

Advertising in regional travel magazines can be highly effective if the readership fits the target market for your operation. Television ads are typically beyond the marketing budget for most agritourism operations. Television stations can, however, sometimes be convinced to do a public interest story for the local news if you come up with something interesting enough. As discussed earlier, this type of coverage can be invaluable to a new start-up venture that needs to get noticed.

Maps

Farm trail maps and lists of local farms can be useful for both agritourism operations and farms that directly market their products. Maps can also assist visitors and potential customers by including a seasonal calendar indicating when local fruits and vegetables are ripe and what farms feature what crops. The layout, attractiveness, readability, ease of use, and distribution of these farm trail maps are critical if they are to be effective.

Web sites

People are increasingly relying on the Internet to plan vacations, find information, and purchase items. A successful agritourism Web site is eye-catching, easily navigated, functional, and maintained regularly. There is a lot of competition



Figure 17. Families, elementary school children, pre-schoolers, and other youth groups love to visit pumpkin patches. Kids who tour farms with their school or group often bring Mom and Dad back later for another visit.

Sidebar 10. Farm tours

As an agritourism operator, you need to think carefully about what visitors would want to see and do on a tour of your farm. They need to be interesting, fun, educational, and unique experiences that people will remember and tell others about. Most people genuinely want to know about farm life, including agricultural production, farm animals, local history, native wildlife, and any number of other associated features. They probably don't want to hear about your problems, however, so be careful not to bore or preach on interpretive tours. Keep it fun and positive!

By reservation—A common way to arrange farm tours is to ask groups to call ahead to schedule the tour. This helps in timing and planning of labor, and allows you the opportunity to find out a bit about the group that is coming out so you can provide them with a tour tailored to their needs and interests.

Bus tours—Busses provide transportation appropriate for older citizens. Keep those tours relatively short, but packed with interesting trivia, humor, and information. When dealing with older people, remember that many may be disabled or have limited mobility.

Civic groups (chamber of commerce, local rotary club, county and city officials)—Roll out the red carpet for these local leaders. This is a great chance to build goodwill and understanding for your farm and its activities.

School groups—Short, fun tours featuring animals, pumpkins, hayrides, cookies, and cider/punch work well. Keep the educational component appropriate for the age of the school group.

Youth groups (church, 4-H, scouts)—Find out what the leaders of the youth group want their kids to experience; give them what they need.

for Web traffic, so it often pays to work with a reputable professional Web site developer and marketing specialist to design and maintain your Web site and make sure it appears on the first page or two of browser responses to relevant key word searches. Links to your Web site from complementary Web sites can also steer more traffic your way. Another critical issue in this context is being able to quickly and professionally deal with orders or inquiries posted to your Web site. Never promise more than you can deliver. Having a well-designed, well-maintained Web site for your agritourism enterprise is important today, and will become even more important in the future.

Signage

Finally, attractive signs directing people to your agritourism site are critical, especially if it is somewhat difficult to find. In New York, a survey revealed that 18% of agritourists found their destination from business signs (Hilchey and Kuehn, 2001). Keep in mind that you will need to design and place signs in accordance with local, state, and federal regulations.

Marketing impacts

It is easy to waste money by over-advertising with one method or using too many different forms of

advertising. It is also sometimes difficult to know whether or not the advertising is having much effect. Direct mailers, coupons, and flyers with discounts or other traceable special offers can make it easier to determine impact. Conducting a quick survey of customers to determine how they found out about the farm is a good idea so that advertising and marketing dollars can be spent as wisely and efficiently as possible.

Attitude and enjoyment

Most agritourism operations are begun as a means to increase family income. However, if this is the only reason for the enterprise, it is less likely to be successful than if the farm family enjoys interacting with the public, educating people about agriculture, sharing their farm—and to some extent their lives, with others. Visitors can readily discern whether or not they are welcome at the farm.

The most successful agritourism operations are run by people who genuinely like being around people, get involved with telling their story, and are enthusiastic about their farm and agritourism enterprise. This is important, because dealing with the public, especially on a daily basis at one's home, can severely test even the most committed and patient of people.

Sidebar 11. Farm promotional items

Many tourists who visit your farm will want something to remember it by. Common mementos such as T-shirts, caps, aprons, belt buckles, mugs, and refrigerator magnets with your farm name and logo are good, but unique items tailored to your farm and its products are even better. How about a crock with your farm's logo on it full of local honey? Perhaps it could even be made by a local artisan on your farm as people watch. Visitors will take that crock home, enjoy the honey, refill the crock over and over again, and be reminded of your farm every time they put honey on their morning muffin. Any number of other innovative products can be developed with a little imagination.

There is no doubt that agritourism increases stress on farm families, especially during peak tourism season. Everybody involved in the operation needs to be able to laugh at themselves and with their customers when things get a little crazy. If they can't, and find themselves always stressed out and resenting the visitors who come to the farm, this type of business is probably not for them. Enjoying the business may be one of the most important determinants of success in an agritourism enterprise.

CONCLUSION

Farms and tourism may seem like a bit of strange marriage at first, but this combination is becoming more and more common around the world and across the nation as our increasingly

urban population seeks more natural, peaceful, meaningful, and unique avenues to fill their leisure time. We will undoubtedly continue to lose more farms, farmers, and farmland in the Pacific Northwest. The future looks particularly gloomy in urban areas where development, together with high production costs, loss of agricultural infrastructure, and growing regulatory pressures combine to make traditional agricultural enterprises increasingly difficult to operate profitably. In response to similar conditions in many eastern states and Europe where agriculture has been declining for decades, some farms are now moving beyond production of commodities to become places of recreation, retainers of rural beauty and open space, and providers of wildlife habitat. Many areas have the scenic beauty, population density, and natural and cultural resources needed to develop a significant agritourism industry. All that is missing are agricultural entrepreneurs with the vision and will to step up and make it happen, as it has in other parts of the world.

Developing agritourism enterprises will not solve all of the problems facing Northwest agriculture, and some might say that bringing tourists onto working farms demeans farmers and their traditional way of life. However, a long-term perspective suggests that whatever can be done to keep land in agriculture and people on farms helps to preserve future options. Furthermore, agritourism-oriented farms can serve an important function by helping to educate people about the critical roles that farms and farmers play in our society. For those who have the right combination of skills, resources, desire, and determination, agritourism can be an exciting and rewarding venture.

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Agritourism Web site examples

These Internet addresses are provided merely to illustrate the diversity of agritourism businesses and services being offered in the region and around the nation. No endorsement of any of these businesses or services is intended.

National

<http://www.agritourismworld.com>

<http://www.agmrc.org/agmrc/commodity/agritourism/agritourism>

California

<http://www.calagtour.org>

<http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/agritourism/agritour.html>

<http://www.daytrippen.com/california-agri-tourism.html>

<http://lakecountyag.com/directory.asp>

Kentucky

<http://www.kentuckyfarmsarefun.com>

Michigan

<http://www.mi-fmat.org>

New Jersey

<http://www.state.nj.us/jerseyfresh/agritourism-home.htm>

Oklahoma

<http://www.oklahomaagritourism.com>

Oregon

<http://comeplayyourway.com/Play/Farm.aspx>

<http://www.mthoodterritory.com/countrypleasures.jsp>

<http://www.plumperpumpkins.com>

<http://www.woodenshoe.com>

<http://www.smithberrybarn.com>

<http://www.firpointfarms.com>

<http://www.flowerfarmer.com>

<http://www.wenzelfarm.com>

Pennsylvania

<http://www.pafarmstay.com>

Tennessee

<http://www.visittnfarms.com>

<http://www.applebarncidermill.com>

Vermont

<http://www.vtfarms.org>

<http://www.shelburnefarms.org>

Washington

<http://www.visitwashingtonfarms.com>

<http://www.greenbluffgrowers.com>

<http://www.remlingerfarms.com>

<http://www.smallwoodsharvest.com>

<http://www.wildaboutberries.com>

<http://quillisascut.com/>

<http://www.stockerfarms.com>

<http://www.biringerfarm.com>

<http://www.fosterscornmaze.com/>

<http://www.tulipfestival.org>

<http://www.lavenderfestival.com>

Licensing

Operating a business that collects taxes and/or employs people: Washington State Department of Licensing, Master License Service, 360-664-1400, <http://www.dol.wa.gov/forms/700028.htm>

Selling agricultural products to the public: Washington State Department of Agriculture, Commission Merchant Program, 360-902-1854, <http://agr.wa.gov/Inspection/CommissionMerchants>

Food processing and food safety regulations: Washington State Department of Agriculture, 360-902-1876, <http://agr.wa.gov/FoodAnimal/FoodProcessors>

Petting zoos: Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, 970-494-7478, acwest@aphis.usda.gov, http://www.aphis.usda.gov/publications/animal_welfare

Sales taxes in Washington: Washington State Department of Revenue, 1-800-647-7706, <http://dor.wa.gov/content/taxes/sales/default.aspx>

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