



Successes and Challenges in Agritourism

Agritourism can be a useful way to expand and diversify a farm or ranch, but it doesn't work well in every situation. Below are examples of successful agritourism experiences and a discussion of common challenges, which may help you decide whether agritourism is right for your farm or ranch.

Success Stories

La Mota Ranch--Hebbronville, Texas

The La Mota Ranch just outside of Hebbronville, Texas is a cattle ranch, founded in the 1890s, and still owned and managed today by the descendents of the original owners. La Mota's primary business is its purebred and commercial cattle herds. Being amateur historians, La Mota's owners, the Hellen family, saw the value in promoting the unique mixture of Mexican and Texan ranching history along the South Texas border. They were further encouraged by the state legislature's recent recognition of the area's historical significance, so La Mota's owners capitalized on their natural amenities, historic buildings and local color to create a successful agritourism business. Owner/operator Bill Hellen attributes his success to identifying a market niche. In recent years La Mota Ranch received multiple busloads of tourists per week and charged around \$60 per person. The added income from running tours has allowed the Hellen family to keep the ranch working, and the involvement of the entire Hellen family in the tourist enterprise has made the business what it is. The La Mota owners became agritourism leaders in their region and helped develop other businesses through a regional agritourism collaboration known as the Llanos Mesteños South Texas Heritage Trail. www.lamotaranch.com

Doepkens Farm--Gambrills, Maryland

Doepkens Farm in rural Anne Arundel County, Maryland began many years ago as a tobacco farm. In 1992, owner and operator Bill Doepkens began making the transition from tobacco to ornamental flowers, gourds and fresh eggs. Today, Doepkens is a working family farm that specializes in chrysanthemums and has gained wide attention for its stunning giant murals made of flowering mums. Each year around Halloween, tourists from Maryland and beyond come to see the living mural which measures just less than half an acre. Other agritourism activities at Doepkens Farm include make-your-own flower arrangements and pumpkin picking. In addition, they cultivate and sell on wholesale and retail levels a wide variety of agricultural and finished food products including jams, jellies, corn, soy, wheat, squash, gourds and flowers. A diverse offering of products and services as well as creative, unique marketing techniques can help farms succeed in the marketplace. www.somarylandsgood.com/pdf/ttc.pdf

Shuster's Playtime Farm--Deerfield, Wisconsin

Fourteen years ago Don Schuster planted 1/3 acre of pumpkins. Six years later he had seven acres of pumpkins, and customers from all over the region came to pick pumpkins at Schuster's. Based on requests from customers for other agritourism services, Don and his wife Theresa developed additional agritourism activities as a way to increase farm visits, and thus increase pumpkin sales. The Schusters offer good advice to potential agritourism businesses. They say, "To get to our size takes time. We have seen many farms try to skip steps and before they know it they are out of business. There is a huge learning curve in this business. Anyone can grow a crop, but to harvest customers is a new venture for almost all farmers." Also, they add, "make sure to get good insurance." Lastly, the Schusters recommend that potential businesses join associations made of up other people in the business to "learn and grow from each other's experiences." www.schustersplaytimefarm.com

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Challenges of Agritourism

For every agritourism success story, there is a counter-story of a farmer/rancher who got out of the agritourism because it wasn't profitable. Most surveys of farmers/ranchers find that the business is full of challenges and hardships...and that's just the folks who are still in the business. One study in California identified "dealing with visitors" as the biggest challenge agritourism businesses faced (Holland and Wolfe). A study of Pennsylvanian businesses listed property tax problems, high insurance and liability costs, and the limits of seasonality and weather as the most significant of the many problems operators faced (Ryan et al 2006). Similarly, a New Jersey study found that marketing the business was the biggest problem, with liability concerns and dealing with customers a close second and third (Schilling et al 2006).

In sum, agritourism has great potential for farmers and ranchers seeking to generate additional revenue, capitalize on underused assets, and educate the public. However, it is not a "magic bullet" and not all agritourism ventures have succeeded.

Additional Resources

More Success Stories

<http://www.farmcreditmaine.com/notebook/L3/agritourism.htm>
http://www.oklahomaagritourism.com/index.php?/news/success_stories
<http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Technical/RESS/altenterprise/success.html>
http://www.swmarketingnetwork.org/success_stories.htm
<http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/ricpubs/stories.htm>

Heritage Trails Examples and Resources

Green Routes A site for tourists to find heritage trails in Minnesota.

<http://www.greenroutes.org/>

Trails-R-Us A resource for trail enthusiasts and entrepreneurs in Kentucky and beyond.

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

Missouri Regional Cuisine Project Mississippi River Hills Pilot Region.

<http://www.showme.net/MRH>

Southern Maryland Trails <http://www.somdtrails.com>.

Glossary of Terms

Heritage Trail: Collaboration between multiple enterprises in a single region that capitalize on the unique culture, history and amenities of the region to encourage tourism and buying locally.

Market Niche: A specific subset of consumers who desire a product or service not provided through mainstream channels. Small businesses stay solvent by identifying and catering to a specific market niche.

References

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