

NEW GROWTH INDUSTRY: AGRITOURISM IN MINNESOTA

THE PARTNERS

- > Agricultural Innovation Center
Olivia, MN
- > Cities and counties in the Minnesota
River Valley Scenic Byway
- > Farms, cooperatives, and other
agricultural operations in southwestern
Minnesota
- > Federal Highway Administration,
National Scenic Byways Program
Washington, DC
www.byways.org
- > Gilfillan Estate, Redwood County
Historical Society
www.rrcnet.org/~historic/gillfill.html
- > Minnesota's Machinery Museum
Hanley Falls, MN
- > Prairie Waters Tourism Coalition
www.prairiewaters.com
- > Swensson Farm Museum,
Chippewa County Historical Society
Montevideo, MN
www.montechamber.com/cchs/swensson.htm
- > Tourism Center at the University
of Minnesota Extension Service
Minneapolis, MN
www.tourism.umn.edu
- > Upper Minnesota Valley Regional
Development Commission
Appleton, MN
www.umvrdc.org

"My children didn't grow up on a farm as I did. It's important that my children and grandchildren have opportunities to experience what farming is all about. It's a proud part of our American heritage."

— Russell C. Andrews, former Chippewa County farm boy and lifelong Minnesota resident



The Setting

AGRITOURISM ISN'T A NEW IDEA. FOR AS LONG AS PEOPLE HAVE TOURED, THEY HAVE STOPPED AT AGRICULTURAL PRODUCERS TO SAMPLE THE WARES. WINERY TOURS, DUDE RANCHES, HAYRIDES, CORN MAZES, PICK-



YOUR-OWN FARMS—THEY'RE ALL AGRITOURISM. WHAT IS NEW IS THE IDEA THAT AGRITOURISM CAN BE MARKETED AS A DESTINATION ACTIVITY. DISPARATE RURAL SITES OFFERING AN ARRAY OF ATTRACTIONS FROM FARMING TO FISHING TO FESTIVALS CAN BE WOVEN INTO A COHESIVE PACKAGE THAT HAS MARKETING WEIGHT TO DRAW TOURISTS. THIS FLEDGLING EFFORT IN SOUTHWEST MINNESOTA IS A GOOD EXAMPLE OF HOW.

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The farming communities of southwestern Minnesota—in the 287-mile-long Minnesota River Valley that stretches from the South Dakota border to the edge of the Twin Cities metro region—have thrived off the land for hundreds of years. Crops and livestock that feed the region and the country have helped sustain a viable rural economy locally and statewide. But in the last half century, agricultural technology changed the face of farming to specialized crop production on larger farms. Combined with weakened commodity prices and rising overhead costs, these changes began to take economic tolls on farmers and made the traditional farm pattern less suitable. Farms were consolidated, leaving unused homes and barns to deteriorate.



June Lynne, director of the Chippewa County Historical Society, believes in preserving the dying tradition of family-owned farmsteads. Here she stands before the Olaf Swenson barn, part of a farm museum dedicated to a nearly forgotten way of life.

The abandonment of traditional farmsteads prompted several county historical societies to become active in preserving this segment of the valley's heritage and some farmers began to bequeath their farms to local preservation groups. Such individual efforts at saving a disappearing agricultural past are evident at the Olaf Swenson Farm museum, the Minnesota Machinery Museum in Hanley Falls, and the Gilfillan Estate in Redwood County with its popular annual FarmFest. Preservation of agricultural history also filtered into corporate thinking. In LeSueur, the history of the Minnesota Valley Canning Company and its transition into the Green Giant food-processing company has been protected and is now offered at the company's visitor center.

In Olivia, Minnesota's Corn Capital, the largest collection of agricultural cooperatives in the Midwest came together in the 1990s to organize group tours of their facilities. From those efforts has grown the Corn Capital Trust, a fund-raising entity to develop the concepts, designs and capital to construct the Minnesota Center for Agricultural Innovation. Plans for this facility include an exhibition hall, interactive education center, international conference room, presentation theater, educational crop plots and other facilities to serve not only the agricultural community but all the performance arts and business communities by supplying performing and meeting spaces.

Thanks to community pride in rural agricultural heritage, the region gradually created a web of farm heritage attractions, including museums, historic farms, working farm tours, processor tours, history centers, and educational facilities. But this was not an area with a highly established tourism reputation, and these attractions have never been coordinated. Agritourism activities needed to be organized so that people would travel longer distances more frequently and stay in the area for more than a couple of hours, thereby strengthening the Minnesota River Valley economy. But the movement needed structure and organization.

"No one organization in our area can effectively impact agritourism by operating on its individual small budget. By joining efforts, we will be able to focus on promoting all the communities and thereby help our rural areas survive."

— Dawn Hegland, Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission Division Director



The historic farm known as the Gilfillan Estate hosts the annual FarmFest to showcase agriculture's future—the latest in farm technology.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT



In the late 1980s, a group of museum managers, business owners, and economic development coordinators from a

five-county area in the valley came together to find ways to promote their communities through farm and natural heritage products and experiences. They created the Western Minnesota Prairie Waters Tourism Coalition. As an all-volunteer organization, funded exclusively with small contributions, the group sought staffing assistance from the Upper Minnesota Valley Regional Development Commission (RDC).

With help from the RDC, Prairie Waters had mild success in promoting its region over the next decade until, in 1999, the RDC generated two tourism-related studies. The first was prepared for a proposal to build three tourist information centers in the area. It demonstrated both the significance of existing tourism and the potential for future tourism if supported by sufficient marketing. The second project was a conversion study of previous visitors identifying the number of advertisement readers who actually came to the area. The study indicated that the \$4,000 spent on advertising during 1998 resulted in at least \$100,000 being spent in the local economy.

When the results of these studies piqued interest among elected officials about the economic potential of tourism in the area, the RDC worked with the volunteer Prairie Waters group to prepare a proposal for the expansion and formalization of the tourism effort. The jurisdictions in the five-county region Prairie Waters represents responded enthusiastically and supplied the group with a 2001 budget of \$102,000, a portion of which will be used to hire its first full-time coordinator. "The reorganization of Prairie Waters into a more formal organization has allowed us to market our region as a destination to give our local economy the boost it needs," explains Dawn Hegland, who wears hats for both the RDC and Prairie Waters.

Taking their cause to constituents, Prairie Waters and the RDC worked with the Tourism Center at the University of Minnesota Extension Service to explore

the interest of local farmers in agritourism. They held two conferences attended by more than 150 people in agricultural businesses. Fifty local farmers were identified as being highly interested in pursuing the process and, of those, 10 were selected to participate in a pilot agritourism program.

The program includes a brochure featuring the 10 producers and other agricultural attractions which is distributed across the state and sent out in response packages to potential tourists. As has been found in nearly all tourism efforts, the strength of marketing as a unit lends each site credibility as a quality destination and effects far greater visitorship than can be created individually.

In 2001, Prairie Waters will spend \$30,000 on advertising their region and nearly all the ads will feature the agritourism experience. To focus their efforts and ensure



The Threshing Show and antique tractor display at Minnesota's Machinery Museum showcases agriculture's past. The museum features displays of antique farm machines, a typical farmhouse and other farm related antiques.



A typical farm scene for early summer visitors traveling through the Minnesota River Valley—a tractor pulls a cultivator through a field of young corn to remove weeds between the rows.

productivity in the future, the organization is developing a survey to determine visitor perceptions, satisfaction, and expenditures.

“This was a huge feat to get the counties and other groups to commit to something that had always been peripheral in their minds—tourism,” Hegland states.

While the Prairie Waters Coalition has forwarded the cause of agritourism in its five-county region, a larger organization with a broader scope has lent credence to the work of agritourism proponents in Minnesota. This is the Minnesota River

Valley Scenic Byway, an RDC-coordinated project. The byway, which spans 13 counties including the five covered by Prairie Waters, obtained state scenic byway status in 1995 and will seek designation as a National Scenic Byway in 2002. In 2000, the Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway Alliance prepared its corridor management plan and developed its primary interpretive themes, one of which is “Food to a Nation.” This theme provides the structure to unite all of the agricultural heritage sites and facilities into one experience linked by interpretation and the coordinating arm of the Alliance.

While agriculture has always been at the core of the Minnesota River Valley, agritourism is now emerging as a viable adjunct to the established economy thanks to the cohesive nature of the scenic byway, which unites the entire length of the valley. The byway is the skeleton of a more formalized agritourism program for the region than has ever been present before. The Byway Alliance will be able to coordinate funding and marketing efforts using the Prairie Waters Coalition as a demonstrated organizational model.



MAKING THE MOST OF OPPORTUNITIES

Collaborate: It has been the steady growth of collaborations that has made the Minnesota River Valley agritourism project possible. When small, independent, isolated sites join forces they create a stronger voice. From the five-county Prairie Waters Tourism Coalition to the cooperative marketing of farms and farm-related sites and then to the creation of a scenic byway to merge efforts throughout the valley, this region has moved agritourism to the next level of success through strong partnerships.



The membership committee of the Chippewa Historical Society holds an annual drawing for two lucky winners to attend "An Enchanted Evening"—a catered supper at the Olaf Swensson farmhouse.

Find the Fit between the Community and Tourism: Farmers and other agriculture-related venues in the valley have long welcomed the idea of sharing their businesses with visitors as sources of both pride and additional income. The coalescing agritourism industry in the valley is a natural extension of the communities' efforts to strengthen their own economies.

Make Sites and Programs Come Alive: Visitors seeking an agricultural experience can get as down to reality as they like on farm visits where daily chores must go on—visitors or not. The true-to-life activities leave tourists with little

doubt about the lifestyles of working farmers and growers. At the All Natural Fiber Farm in Montevideo, visitors can learn how to take fiber from the animals, turn it into yarn, then try their hand at spinning and weaving.

Focus on Quality and Authenticity: Those who take Prairie Waters' self-guided tours will find Minnesota agricultural life and work at its most authentic. Each producer in the brochure was selected for the quality of the experience they could offer tourists. At EarthRise, a Community Supported Agriculture venture near Louisburg, for example, visitors can tour the gardens and observe the harvesting and preparation of weekly baskets to shareholders. Tours include soil building projects, gardening techniques, greenhouse operation, and use of ducks and chickens for insect control and soil preparation.

Preserve and Protect Resources: Thanks to tourists' renewed interest in farming and other agricultural industries, the producers in the Minnesota River Valley have regained some economic strength to help them stay viable, and thus protect them as independent producers—descendants of hard-working farmers who settled the region.

RESULTS

➤With funding from the National Scenic Byways Program, the Minnesota River Valley Scenic Byway will be able to implement concepts and create a series of agritourism interpretive sites linking the established museums and agricultural heritage sites.

➤The Prairie Waters Coalition is moving ahead with aggressive marketing and advertising of its agritourism product. Given early responses to this effort, it is likely to be quite successful. Given interest from other producers, the agritourism package of experiences will greatly expand and become one of the most concentrated locations for agricultural experiences in the country.

➤Prairie Waters' monitoring and evaluation of this program will provide more evidence to elected leaders that agritourism is a good investment, and could result in increased funding for the group from recently enacted lodging taxes.

➤The region has developed a full spectrum of agricultural attractions, thereby offering a product that is diverse enough to attract a wide range of tourists. The educational and information-exchange Agricultural Innovation Center demonstrates the Minnesota agricultural industry's strength and solidarity. Farmers and other agricultural interests came together to conceive of a facility that can both serve their business needs and be a tourism destination. This facility will become a major anchor for the valley's agritourism experience.





WHAT IS AGRITOURISM?

Agritourism is traveling to farms, ranches and other agricultural attractions and events. Agritourism is typically marketed to residents within a few hours of the farm but sometimes visitors come from across the continent. Getting people to travel from farther away and stay in the area longer is the challenge many rural areas are addressing to make farm-oriented tourism a more substantial part of the local economy. The answer is often coordinated promotional efforts.

In Tioga County, the Central New York Resource Conservation and Development Project sponsors the Agri-Cluster Program in which 15 farm and other backroad businesses are working together to create the critical mass to encourage visitation. The group formed the Catatonk Valley Association to market this destination. *Contact the Central New York RC&D at 607-334-4715.*

Agritourism, cultural heritage, and natural resources are all parts of the North Central Nebraska RC&D Council's seven-county project marketed as the Nebraska's Outback. This destination grew out of a state-initiated regional program called "Community Builders." The regional group identified nature-based and heritage tourism as viable opportunities and formed the North Central Nebraska Travel and Tourism Council to market the region, which received two state scenic byway designations and numerous awards. *For more information, go to www.nebraskaoutback.com.*

State governments are getting in on the act of promoting agricultural and heritage tourism destinations. The Vermont Farms! Association (VF!A), backed by state funds and two USDA Rural Development grants totaling \$750,000, offers workshops and loans for agritourism businesses. VF!A's web site and brochure provides visitor information about a broad spectrum of agricultural experiences available in Vermont. *For more information, go to www.vermontfarms.org.*

For links to information on agritourism, agritainment, agrieducation, alternative enterprises and direct marketing go to www.nhq.nrcs.usda.gov/RESS/econ/ressd.htm

