



Agritourism

An Unsung Economic Gem In New Jersey

By Peter J. Furey, Executive Director, New Jersey Farm Bureau

Agritourism is not new, it continues to grow, has occasionally interacted with municipal regulation, and holds great promise for the future as a complement to land preservation and environmental conservation goals for the rural and semi-rural portion half of New Jersey.

So how do we define the term “agritourism?”

To me and maybe others, it sounds like a bed and breakfast on a farm. It's not part of commodity production, but it could be part of its marketing (u-pick).

It does link to the beauty and “countryside” amenities of rural New Jersey, and it offers a bounty of inexpensive family based experiences steeped in wholesome education (“where does our food come from?”).

Wineries will invite you to their on-farm tasting rooms, alpaca wool growers welcome visitors to see the animals, grain farmers can make a puzzling corn maze that would be the envy of any seashore boardwalk mirror maze vendor.

But to unify our perspectives on a common definition of agritourism, let's use the following that was adopted in 2006 by Rutgers Cooperative Extension: “Agritourism: the business of establishing farms as travel destinations for educational and recreational purposes.”

We will also assume a linkage to the marketing of farm products grown on the farm.

FARMER FOR A DAY So we will think of agritourism as those complementary and supplementary activities for retail farm

customers who are already drawn to the farm to buy a food or horticultural commodity (produce, flowers/plants, other ornamentals). Think of it as selling the experience of visiting a farm.

Where once you might go to a farm and buy a quart of strawberries, the same farm might allow you to now go into the field to “pick your own.” Another farm might offer hay rides or livestock petting zoos to attract customers to the retail business. Still others have arrangements with local school districts that pay them a small fee per student for a half-day educational experience, which usually becomes a marvel for our urban and suburban children who bring their parents back to the same farm as customers.

Some farms allow for birthday parties and other special occasion events. Finally, there are those who will provide active recreational pursuits like horse riding, hunting, fishing, hiking, and even bird-watching.

The retail marketing is itself a mechanism by the farm operator to seek a better profit margin than being in the wholesale business, taking advantage of having close proximity to consumer populations as they cope with higher costs of operation as metropolitan farmers. Indeed, survey results among farmers on the reasons for engaging in agritourism rank the opportunity

Having the public visit farms for recreation, education, and buying food is a dynamic change that supports both the continuation of farms as well as general tourism patronage to other local retailers. It should be nurtured, with an open attitude to each other's concerns by both farmers and local officials. Local Farms, Local Food should also mean local health, local recreation, and local pride.

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for additional revenue generation (92%) and diversification of products offered (58%) as “very important.”

MUNICIPAL PARTNERS Where do municipalities fit with agritourism? First of all, they can be found in those counties with the highest dollar sales of “direct marketings” like Burlington, Gloucester, Hunterdon, Monmouth, Morris, and Warren.

Among agritourism farmers surveyed in the Rutgers study, about 67% said their municipality was “very supportive.”

However, many expressed a concern going into the future as their operations expanded that problems with municipal regulation could arise. Such experiences could come with regulations dealing with signage, zoning, building code, parking, fire code, noise ordinance, health code, and/or odor ordinances.

It seems apparent that public support for farming and farmland preservation remains very high. Some 65% of the statewide electorate voted “yes” for farmland and open space preservation on the November 2014 ballot question.

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GARDEN STATE AGRITOURISM

How much agritourism takes place in New Jersey?

Economic researchers at Rutgers Cooperative Extension documented economic impact estimates of agritourism. Dr. Brian Schilling, extension specialist in agricultural policy, "The Opportunity for Agritourism Development in New Jersey" was published October, 2006.



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21% of the state's farms engaged in some form of agritourism worth about \$57.5 million. 43% of the state's total farmland base is comprised of those farms.



92% of that \$57.5 million income is assigned to: \$9.2 million on-farm sales of ag products, \$5.4 million entertainment, \$1.9 million educational tourism.



These figures demonstrate that agritourism is in fact a lure for retail customer traffic for ag commodity purchases.

