

AGRITOURISM HOLDS OPPORTUNITIES FOR RURAL AREAS AND REGULATORY ENVIRONMENT POSES CHALLENGES FOR FARMERS

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Although most of us have probably participated in agritourism at some point in our lives, not everyone may be familiar with the meaning of term *agritourism*. [One source](#) defines agritourism as “a commercial enterprise at a working farm, ranch or agricultural plant conducted for the enjoyment or education of visitors, and that generates supplemental income for the owner.” Agritourism encompasses a diverse range of activities such as farm tours, festivals that celebrate regional crops, farm stands, school group field trips, on-farm weddings, farm stay bed and breakfasts, vineyard wine tastings, picking fruit at a u-pick operation, culinary events, and farm classes etc. In addition, agritourism can include attractions that have little or nothing to do with food production but that offer entertainment such as hay rides, petting zoos, pumpkin patches, Christmas tree farms, and concerts.

Some regions feature “farm trails,” where agritourism opportunities are made available to visitors to help to contextualize and promote the diversity of events available in a region. One example is [The El Dorado County Farm Trail](#) that offers a published guide to the region’s wineries and on-farm recreational activities.



Agritourism can benefit the region in which the operations take place in a variety of ways. Agritourism can help supplement on-farm revenues and profitability through charging fees for entertainment and allowing visitors to buy products while visiting the farm. Agritourism also serves as a mechanism for bridging the rural urban gap by exposing both rural and urban residence to agriculture and food production, introducing non-farmers to various aspects of farming. Participation in agritourism helps to increase the demand for locally produced foods and farmers are using agritourism to leverage [direct marketing](#). Farm stands allow farmers to sell food grown on the farm as well as value added food products made with ingredients produced on or near the farm, thus enhancing the production and consumption of locally produced foods. In addition, hosting on-farm events allows farmers to extend their earnings across seasons by capitalizing on their most valuable asset: their land. It is estimated that approximately 2.5 percent of farms nationwide receive income from agritourism operations, totaling about [\\$955 million](#) and there exists immeasurable value in the opportunities that arise from farmers engaging with the public to promote an awareness, appreciation and understanding of agriculture. With rising production costs farmers are increasingly in need of additional sources of income to be economically viable and it is important to consider agritourism tradeoffs when assessing the benefits that agritourism can bring to a region.



There are a variety of challenges associated with agritourism. Establishing these operations can interfere with time allotted for farming and initially there can be a low financial return. Farmers aren’t always equipped with the necessary skill set for maintaining a successful operation. In addition to managing the farm, an agritourism business entails personnel management, accounting, marketing, retailing, accommodations, entertainment, etc. Farmers can also be faced with a regulatory environment that might not be conducive to developing effective operations.

Benefits and Costs of an Agritourism and Nature Tourism Enterprise

| Benefits | Costs |
|---|---|
| Provides potential additional income | Provides a low financial return, at least at first |
| Creates a physical operation that appreciates in value | Interferes with farming or ranching operations |
| Efficiently uses underutilized facilities, equipment, land and talents | Hard work! Adds workload to family members |
| Allows you to be your own boss | Demands your full and constant attention, interfering with family time and activities |
| Allows you to work your own hours | Steals your privacy – people are always around |
| Allows you to live your own creation | Requires you always be “on” – upbeat, available, and attentive |
| Is personally rewarding | Involves risk and liability, requiring your holding total responsibility |
| Generates new opportunities for spouse and children | Can create staffing problems |
| Maintains family attention and interest on the farm or ranch | Generates excessive paperwork |
| Provides the opportunity to meet people – visitors, agritourism and nature tourism professionals | |
| Provides the chance to play a significant role in community activities | |
| Provides the chance to educate people about rural living, nature, and the agriculture industry, which in turn can lead to improved local policies | |
| Provides the chance to learn about outside perspectives, which in turn can lead to better-educated rural residents and improved local policies | |
| Promotes the agriculture industry | |
| Models sustainable local industries | |

Table Provided by [Sacramento Area Council of Governments Rural Urban Connections Strategy](#).

There are barriers that have emerged around agritourism regarding the policies and regulations that affect the rules for zoning ordinances and managing a legal operation. Agritourism operations could potentially be governed by several of California’s 29 statewide codes, and operators need to understand current regulations covering land use, public health and safety, environmental health, direct-marketing and general business. This is a complex issue because many regulations are considered to be positive developments and there exists an unclear regulatory process and frustration with regulations that aren’t feasible for small farmers. The lack of support and knowledge sharing around agritourism regulations can make starting an agritourism enterprise an intimidating endeavor and compliance with regulations is often viewed as cost prohibitive and excessive for seasonal operations and small-scale farmers.



Agritourism opportunities hold the potential to expand the broader tourism industry. Farm associations, other rural advocacy organizations, and state and county governments are making these connections across the country. Increasing connections to the rural enhances the economic viability of both the farm and the surrounding region. There is a market demand for local food and agritourism exposes participants to local food products. One survey showed that 89% of Americans would like to see food stores sell more fruits and vegetables that come from local farms and 69 % would pay slightly more for such produce. According to the [National Agricultural Law Center](#), twenty-three states in the United States have enacted statutes that address agritourism. The center has formed a compilation to provide the researcher with easy and free access to a state’s regulatory procedures covering issues such as liability protections for agritourism operators, tax credits and zoning requirements.



Agritourism holds opportunities for rural California communities and economies by encouraging sustainable local businesses and by exposing the public to agriculture. There is also a need for a central source of regulatory information and more flexible policies for individuals interested in developing agritourism enterprise. The economics of agritourism remains an area that requires further research for on-farm profitability statistics on agritourism can be difficult to gather given that these activities are rarely tracked separately and some farmers are reluctant to admit revenues generated from agritourism. Some counties have a robust agritourism sector and these counties have organizations and associations that promote agritourism. For example, Yolo County has a website called [A Taste of Yolo](#) that directs visitors to many agritourism operations and also highlights local restaurants and other food purveyors that feature local produce. [The Central Coast Agritourism Council](#) is another resource for agritourism promotion in California’s central coast. Using the council’s website and publications, visitors to the Central Coast can find agriculture-based adventures.

California farmers, ranchers or vintners wishing to establish operations have a variety of resources available to them. These include UC Davis' Small Farm Center, agricultural marketing departments located within county agricultural agencies, The USDA [NRCS](#) (Natural Resources Conservation Services), county economic development offices, and county Chamber of Commerce departments. The [UC Small Farm Program](#) provides resources for agritourism operators and hosts California's [directory](#) of agritourism operations.



Additional Agritourism Related Resources...

[Entertainment Farming and Agritourism](#)

[2011 EcoFarm Plenary On Agritourism](#)

Tags: [Agriculture](#), [Agriculture Education](#), [Agritourism](#), [Community Development](#), [Direct Marketing](#), [Produce](#), [Rural](#), [Rural California](#), [Rural Development](#), [Tourism](#)

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