Developing an Agri-Tourism Attraction in Alabama
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What is Agri-Tourism?

Agriculture and tourism are two of Alabama’s largest industries. Agriculture has been the traditional backbone of the state’s economy and had over a $7 billion impact last year. Tourism is a relatively new industry, yet its economic impact was also $7 billion. Imagine the possibilities if the two were to combine efforts. Leaders in both industries are beginning to do just that in selected areas. The result is agri-tourism.

This publication is designed to assist farmers and entrepreneurs in deciding if agri-tourism could enhance their incomes and to provide the initial basic information needed for an individual to develop an agri-tourism attraction.

Background of Agri-Tourism

Agri-tourism has had a significant history, both in Europe and in selected segments of the United States, such as the West and upper Midwest. Europe has long had the concept of the farm stay, where travelers stay on a working farm for a holiday or vacation. Minnesota was in the forefront of the agri-tourism movement in the early ‘70s, but interest soon waned. By the late ‘90s, interest had again picked up, primarily because of farmers wanting to produce additional income to be able to stay in agriculture. Interest in this unique form of tourism continues to be on the rise around the country. From the farmers’ and entrepreneurs’ points of view, agri-tourism offers a source of supplemental income and an educational tool to explain agriculture to non-farm individuals. To tourists and tourism organizations, agri-tourism provides additional attractions and marketing opportunities, respectively.

Agri-Tourism Defined

Agri-tourism is a commercial enterprise at any agricultural site, including horticulture and agribusiness operations, conducted for the enjoyment of visitors that generates supplemental tourism income for the owner. The agri-tourism experience could involve the following activities:

- Farm tours
- Holiday visits and tours
- Farm visits and stays
- Hay riders
- Roadside stands and markets
- Barn dances
- U-pick operations
- Photography and painting
- On-farm sales
- Camping and picnicking
- Festivals and fairs
- Mazes (corn, hay)
- Agriculture-related crafts and gifts
- Habitat improvement projects
- Guided crop tours
- Bird watching
- Garden and nursery tours
- Wildlife viewing
- Winery tours
- Hunting dog training and competition
- Historical agricultural exhibits
- Trap and skeet shooting
- Exotic animal farms
- Fee fishing
- Farm skills and farm work
- Fee hunting
- Petting zoos

Why Consider Developing an Agri-Tourism Attraction?

Small farm incomes across Alabama are slowly but substantially eroding by poor agricultural commodity prices coupled with rising input costs. The small farm is further threatened by the outside forces of globalization, industrialization, and development encroachment. According to the National Agricultural Statistical Service, over the past ten years the number of Alabama farms has decreased from 49,000 to 44,000,
and the amount of land in farms has decreased from 10.1 million acres to 8.7 million acres. This represents decreases of 10.2 percent and 13.9 percent, respectively. Most of that reduction in the number of farms has occurred over just the past five years.

To cope with this situation, many farmers are recognizing the need and desire to diversify their products and supplement their incomes based upon traditional agriculture. Agri-tourism provides the opportunity to increase the potential for higher margin, on-farm sales of value-added products and services.

Many people associate the topic of tourism with overcrowded, chaotic attractions that result in communities that are overrun with tourists. These images can discourage farmers and other small entrepreneurs from considering agri-tourism as a method of enhancing agriculture revenues. However, the best way to view agri-tourism is to see it much like ecotourism in that it is often low impact, small scale, and education focused.

The types of activities available in agri-tourism are very broad and can be tailored to fit each individual situation. Because most Alabama farms are operated by small landowners, there is great opportunity for customization and uniqueness in agri-tourism attractions. Furthermore, many agri-tourism activities can successfully be provided with a small farm crew.

Agri-tourism attractions provide many side benefits in addition to providing supplemental income to farmers and entrepreneurs. For example, farmers markets in metro areas provide an economic outlet that keeps thousands of acres of farmland in agriculture, providing local residents with viewsheds, excellent water quality, and wildlife protection. Besides providing higher farm incomes, metro farmers markets attract thousands of shoppers who spend money in local restaurants and shops. This assists in keeping up the local tax base and maintaining a viable downtown area.

**Keys to Success**

As with other forms of tourism, agri-tourism simply will not happen by itself. That is, you cannot just hang out a sign and wait to rake in money from tourists. To be successful, you must plan and market your product. Also, a critical mass of agri-tourism activities and attractions in your area is needed so packages can be created and marketed. Agri-tourism is more effective if groups of activities and attractions are marketed rather than just one or two.

After the tragedies of September 11, 2001, people are still traveling, but they are traveling more often by automobile, and they are taking shorter, more frequent trips closer to home. This works in the favor of agri-tourism attractions. Furthermore, agri-tourism operations also serve the increased desires of tourists to learn more from their travels and to rediscover for themselves and their families their rural and agricultural roots.

Tourism continues to be a growth industry, particularly in the Southeast, and one of the fastest growing segments of the industry is rural tourism. Agri-tourism, a component of rural tourism, can provide income to many involved in the agricultural industry. However, it is not an unlimited resource. The numbers of tourists and the money spent are very large, but they are not infinite. Success requires careful planning, effective marketing, and an investment of time and money.

The information provided in the remainder of this publication is organized according to the following sections:

- Is Agri-Tourism for Me?
- Assessing Your Property/Attraction
- Pricing Considerations
- Developing a Business Plan
- Accessibility, Environmental Considerations, and Animal Welfare
- Marketing Factors
- Developing Partnerships
- Risk Assessment and Management
- Resource Materials and Acknowledgements
Is Agri-Tourism for Me?

Based on the information provided to this point, you may be thinking that agri-tourism has the possibility to diversify your farm business and to provide increased income for your farm operation. If that is the case, then you obviously want to know how to make agri-tourism work in your situation. The first step is to determine if agri-tourism is an appropriate option for you—not everyone is suited to implement agri-tourism activities on their farm. While agri-tourism activities can offer additional income and provide safe alternatives for family labor, they also will result in extra responsibilities and could lead to deterioration of privacy.

**Personal Assessment**

The American farmer is often viewed as an independent individual valiantly struggling with the forces of nature to make a living. If you add tourism to your operational mix, you will be encountering a new force of nature–tourists. You must carefully analyze your potential as a host, for you will be inviting strangers to view portions of your farm operation. You must not only evaluate your ability to be a gracious and thoughtful host to visitors, but you must also evaluate the abilities of your family members. The people involved in an agri-tourism operation need to be “social people.” You need to enjoy being around people and having them on your farm. You must be flexible, open to questions, and able to promote yourself and your operation. To get a better idea if this is a role you would like to play, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I like to entertain strangers?
- Does my family like meeting all types of people?
- Can I always be cheerful and helpful around my guests?
- Can I react well and graciously to “pointless” questions?
- Do I mind giving up some of my privacy at home?
- Are my farm and guest facilities always neat and clean?

If you were able to answer “yes” to all these questions, then you and your family might be the types of individuals who could operate a successful agri-tourism business. However, if you were not able to answer “yes” to all the questions, you may not want to pursue agri-tourism as part of your farm operation.

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

Before pursuing agri-tourism further, you should carefully weigh the costs and benefits of attempting such a venture. Take a sheet of paper, divide it in half, and list the advantages and disadvantages to inviting tourists to your farm operation. Below are some of the items you might want to consider. List the ones that apply to you and your family, and add any other items that also may be applicable.

**Potential Advantages**

- Diversifies farm operations and adds income sources.
- Creates a physical operation that appreciates in value.
- Shares challenges and satisfactions of your lifestyle with others.
- Can have small-scale activities.
- Allows you to work your own hours.
- Develops interpersonal and communication skills.
- Is relatively inexpensive.
- Creates new opportunities for spouse and children.
- Represents a high-value, low-volume market.
- Provides the chance to play a significant role in community activities.
- Promotes the agriculture industry.
- Models sustainable local industries.
Potential Disadvantages

- May require additional money and time.
- Interferes with farming operations.
- Adds workload to family members.
- Interferes with your privacy.
- Can be tedious and frustrating to plan.
- Is a long-term process to add products and services.
- Requires that you are always upbeat, available, and attentive.
- May require additional costs to provide guest facilities.
- Can create staffing problems.
- Generates additional paperwork.
- Involves risks in allowing visitors on your property.
- Is confining because you have to be at home and open for business on weekends.

Visit an Existing Agri-Tourism Business

Here is one word of caution when pursuing any form of economic enterprise, including agri-tourism. While it is true that agri-tourism can provide supplemental income, there is no guarantee that you will be successful. Furthermore, small businesses have high failure rates. Therefore, it is essential that you develop an understanding of the tourism industry before venturing into agri-tourism. Also, attempt to get a firm grasp on how expanding into agri-tourism will impact your lifestyle and time.

One of the best methods of gaining firsthand experience about an agri-tourism operation is to visit an attraction similar to what you are considering. Ask the operators to share their thoughts, and observe what goes into a successful agri-tourism operation. Visit as both a guest and as a potential agri-tourism provider. Consider volunteering or even working part-time on a temporary basis. This will provide you with valuable firsthand experience without a long-term commitment or significant financial obligations.

Goals and Objectives

In addition to considering your personal assessment, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of agri-tourism, you should consider how well agri-tourism would fit with your family’s goals and objectives. Will agri-tourism be compatible with your existing goals and objectives? If so, and if the other factors are agreeable with your situation, agri-tourism might be a viable option for you. If not, you should either reconsider your objectives or consider an alternative other than agri-tourism.
Once you have determined that agri-tourism is compatible with your personal assets and with your goals and objectives, you have completed the first step. Next, you need to determine if you have a potential attraction where tourists are likely to visit and spend money. For this segment you will need to be creative and think like an entrepreneur.

**Inventory Your Resources**

Make a physical inventory of all services, products, and resources currently available on your property. Include in this assessment all physical, financial, human, and natural resources. Take a hard, objective look at your farm. It is essential that you approach this new enterprise with what your operation currently possesses rather than with what you can go out and purchase. To assist in this assessment, ask yourself the following questions:

- **What are my physical resources?**
  - How much land do I own or have access to? (List the acreage amount, location, and proximity. List property that is deeded, leased, private, and state-owned.)
  - What is my primary product or enterprise? What do I produce the most on my farm?
  - What is intrinsic and unique to my land and operation?

- **What does my land look like?**
  - (List your land’s features, including its elevation, topography, and natural places like woodlands, meadows, wetlands, and bodies of water.)

- **How do I want to use my land?**
  - (List your land’s current use, including hayfields, croplands, and feed-grounds.)

- **Can this operation be attractive to visitors?** If so, what do I need to do to enhance its attractiveness? If not, can I modify it and turn it into an attraction, or what can I add to make it an attraction?

- **What are the characteristics of my soil?** What is it best suited for?

- **What streams, lakes, rivers, and ponds will attract tourists?**

- **How will weather patterns affect the activities I want to provide?** What is the growing season?

- **What buildings, fences, corrals, working facilities, equipment, roads, and paths are on my land?**

- **What local infrastructure exists?** (List roads, local transportation systems, nearby lodging and dining, and other accommodations.)

- **What space is available on the farm for parking, including for large buses?**

- **What are my financial resources?**
  - What are my start-up costs?

- **What additional resources must I obtain in order to begin an agri-tourism attraction?** Will it require additional labor? What kind of financial investment will it require?

- **What access do I have to capital?**

- **What are my operations and management assets?**

- **What intangible assets do I have to help create an agri-tourism operation?** (List interpersonal skills, marketing ability, knowledge about specific agricultural topics, and specific skills such as horseback riding, furniture making, and cooking.)

- **What “intangibles” can my family members bring to this enterprise?**

- **What talents, skills, and interests might local residents add?**

- **What is the personality of my farm?** (List information that can help you choose suitable events and design them appropriately.)

- **Why would a tourist enjoy visiting my operation?** What memorable experiences would customers take with them?

- **What other services or products can be added to complement my primary enterprise?**
How supportive are other people?
- What talents and special abilities do my family members and current staff have?
- Do my family members and current staff have the time to deal with visitors?
- What other farmers in my area might be interested in displaying their products at my operation?
- Would other farmers and entrepreneurs be interested in partnering with me to provide agri-tourism in our area?
- Are there any conflicts with neighbors?
- Would neighbors allow bordering access? Would they support recreation options?
- Are local tourism groups supportive of me developing an agri-tourism attraction?
- Are local businesses supportive of me developing an agri-tourism attraction? Would they be interested in collaborating with me?

Labor will be a major consideration. You need to determine how the increased labor requirements from adding an agri-tourism operation will be met. Can you meet the increased demand through family labor, or must outside labor be sought? If you use outside labor in addition to family members, you may need a manager to oversee that labor force.

Location

The old saying that the three most important factors to success are location, location, and location definitely has merit for any tourism attraction. For an agri-tourism attraction, proximity and access to significant population centers is important. Most visitors to agri-tourism attractions are likely to be urban and suburban residents rather than rural residents. The majority of visits to agri-tourism attractions occur on weekends; consequently, it helps to be located within a short drive of population centers.

The location of other agri-tourism attractions in the area is also significant. While one might view additional agri-tourism attractions as competition and, therefore, a negative factor, unless your area is saturated with other agri-tourism operations, the opposite would be true. Additional agri-tourism attractions would add to your area, reaching a critical mass of tourism attractions. The more tourism attractions available in your area, the further tourists are willing to travel.

Make Access Easy

Nothing can be more frustrating to a tourist than getting close to your location but being unable to quickly find it, or once on your property, not knowing how to begin the agri-tourism experience. Be certain travelers unfamiliar with your area can easily locate your attraction.

Provide easy-to-follow directions in all publications, including on the Internet, and provide attractive and strategic signage in your area. Keep your driveways and entrances attractive and graded. Set up parking locations near the activity site. Be sure to light your signs and driveways if visitors are likely to arrive when it is dark. While tourists often like and value remote locations, they still want them to be easy to find.

What Would Tourism’s Role Be in My Farm Operation?

If you think tourism would be a good fit for you and your agricultural operation, what would its role be in your overall farm plan? Tourism could be considered a supplementary, a complementary, or a primary enterprise. If it were a supplementary enterprise, agri-tourism would be a minor activity that would support the other products and activities of your agricultural operation. As a complementary enterprise, agri-tourism would be a minor activity that would support the other products and activities of your agricultural operation. If agri-tourism were the primary enterprise of your operation, tourism activities would be the dominant activities of your operation.
One of the first questions asked by individuals interested in developing an agri-tourism attraction is: “What should I charge?” This segment easily could be placed under Developing a Business Plan (page 10) or Marketing Factors (page 15), but it is presented as a separate section because of its importance to individuals who are considering developing an agri-tourism attraction. If individuals are likely to believe they cannot get a realistic handle on setting a price, they might abandon the idea of pursuing the development of their farm into an agri-tourism attraction.

Determining the admission price and the price of your services and products is a critical component to the success of an agri-tourism operation. If you set the prices too low, you will not cover the cost of operating your enterprise, and you will fail regardless of the number of visitors you attract. On the other hand, if it is set too high, you will not be able to attract the number of tourists you need to make a profit.

Cost-based Pricing

The most basic method of determining the price of your products and services is to use cost-based pricing. To set your prices using this method, you first must determine your total direct costs and your total overhead costs of providing the services and products. You then set the amount of profit margin you want this enterprise to generate. The price for your services and products will be set according to the following formula:

\[
\text{price} = \text{direct costs} + \text{overhead costs} + \text{profit margin}
\]

This is a good starting point regardless of the method you eventually use to set your prices. If you are unable to set the price high enough to cover your costs and generate a profit margin that is acceptable to you, any agri-tourism operation you start will be doomed for failure from the outset. However, through additional research, you may find that you can establish higher prices than those determined through the cost-based pricing formula and still attract adequate numbers of tourists.

Pricing Based on Your Competition

Once you have determined your minimum acceptable price using the cost-based pricing formula, research the prices of existing agri-tourism operations in the area. Also, research the prices set by competing forms of non-agri-tourism entertainment. These comparisons to your minimum acceptable price will let you know how you match up to the other tourist attractions in your area and how you are likely to be viewed at first glance by tourists.

Seasonal Pricing

Be strategic. If the agri-tourism operation you are considering is going to be open all year or most of the year, but attendance is subject to seasonal fluctuations, consider setting your prices based upon the season. You might want to raise your prices in the high season and decrease your off-season prices, thereby increasing customer interest during the time of lowest visitor activity. Or, you might simply have a high-season price and a basic price, and save the money generated during the high season to offset costs during the rest of the year.

Value Pricing

The value you provide to your visitors is as important as the actual price of your products and services. Higher prices are often acceptable if you are providing higher value. Many times tourists will equate low
prices with low value. Remember that tourists in Alabama spend billions of dollars annually. Most are expecting and willing to pay reasonable prices for their activities.

Quality service and a superb product are two of the most important elements you can offer tourists. If one component of your operation is at a lower level than the rest, the entire experience will be brought down to that lowest level. To provide a superb, quality experience, allow visitors to participate in meaningful, fun, and authentic activities. Visitors expect to be welcomed, respected, and cared for, and they want the experience to live up to their expectations. They will leave wanting to return.

A high-value experience means your visitors feel comfortable while at your attraction. To achieve this, keep your grounds clean and the gardens well-groomed, plant flowers, and paint fences. Instead of bringing modular structures to your operation, renovate existing buildings, if possible. Where farm odors are prevalent, post educational markers to explain the issues.

Visitors often associate high-value experiences with hands-on activities in which they become directly involved. Create an environment that invites participation. Examples include hand-feeding calves and participating in self-directed outdoor recreational activities like fishing, canoeing, and bird watching. If hand-feeding is involved, a hand washing or hand sanitizing area must be provided.

**Tour Groups**

Examine providing group bookings and large-scale discounts to raise your profits. While it is unwise to “buy” business, you may be able to earn money on a smaller margin by generating a larger volume. However, be sure to verify that the revenue you are generating is still higher than your total costs and produces an acceptable profit margin.

Potential tour groups could be developed by cooperating with area convention and visitors bureaus. Colleges and universities with agricultural departments often become involved in developing farm exchange programs with farmers from other areas of the country. Local schools provide another obvious tour group for agri-tourism attractions. Many current school children are at least two and three generations removed from the farm. Students in elementary schools study about food harvesting in the fall, and teachers are eager to arrange field trips to farms to reinforce learning and to give classroom instruction an added dimension. This focus in many elementary school lessons on agriculture, coupled with students’ lack of awareness about farming, creates a demand for educational farm tours for early primary students. This demand provides both profit potential and an opportunity for community service.

One of the most important considerations for school tours is to meet the needs of teachers. These field trips require coordination with school studies, a safe environment, pleasant weather, reasonable travel distance, and compatibility with bus schedules and school hours. The key is to emphasize the educational aspects of your farm through fun experiences.

Another educational group tour possibility is preschoolers. These children often are enrolled in day cares, and their inherent curiosities allow for significant learning opportunities during farm experiences. When working with this group, remember that their attention span is much shorter than that of older school children. Rather than traveling in buses, this group often travels by cars and vans in small groups.
For many individuals contemplating entering into entrepreneurial enterprises, the business plan is one of the most intimidating obstacles. These individuals are likely to view the planning of the creative aspects of an agri-tourism operation as exciting and see preparation of the business plan as mundane and even a bit of a “downer.” While the business plan may not be as fun as the creative aspects, it is one of the most important components in determining the success of an agri-tourism enterprise.

The business plan provides guidance and focus for the management of your new venture, and it should clarify your goals, challenges, and operations. It is essential if you need to obtain financing to raise capital for growth or improvements. Through the development of the business plan, you will be working through business decisions and testing alternatives without committing resources.

The development of this plan should not be viewed as a one-time event. Once developed, it should be reviewed and updated in an ongoing process. Do not consider it as being written in stone; revisions and changes should be made as warranted. The key components of an effective business plan are as follows: executive summary, mission statement, business concept, measurable goals and objectives, industry research and market analysis, management needs and history, marketing strategy, financial strategy, and appendix.

Executive Summary

The first component of the business plan should be a one-page summary. Although it appears first, it is, in reality, written last, after you have developed all other components. Begin the summary with your business idea or concept, and follow with the conclusions you provide in your financial strategy.

Mission Statement

The mission statement should be one sentence long and no more than 50 words in length. It should be focused and reflect the core purpose of your proposed business. As a family, you should develop a clear understanding of your values, goals, and resources. Consider questions such as: “What do we want this farm to look like at the end of our stewardship?” “What quality of life is important to us?” and “What relationship do we want with family members?” These questions will help you determine which agri-tourism opportunities best match your family.

Once you have identified your values and the type of enterprise you desire, construct a mission statement. This statement should reflect your desires, how you want to achieve them, and how you will evaluate the results. Take into account financial considerations so that you can ascertain whether you can earn enough money to support your goals.

Your Business Concept

Describe your business idea in a one-page, concise statement that identifies the specifics of your enterprise. This is the heart of your proposal; therefore, you should be to the point and persuasive in describing the what, where, why, and how of your agri-tourism operation. Write this segment in the first person, using “I” or “we,” and describe your enterprise, the products or services, your clientele, and how your enterprise fits with others in the area. A condensed version of this statement will be the initial portion of your executive summary.

Begin by describing your enterprise. Explain when it began or is projected to begin. Describe why it was started and how it complements your overall farm operation. Explain why people will want your services and products, what it will cost to produce, and how much you will charge. Clearly identify who you expect to be your clientele, including their
demographics. Project the length of time you expect visitors to spend at your attraction. Identify all similar services in the region, evaluating which ones will be competitors and which ones will be collaborators.

**Measurable Goals and Objectives**

Although closely related, there is a clear distinction between goals and objectives. Goals are long-term plans (three to five years), and they identify what is to be accomplished. Objectives are short-term plans (up to one year), and they state how the goals are to be achieved. Both should be measurable so you can determine if and when you have accomplished them.

All goals and objectives should be attainable and compatible with your mission statement. Once the objectives have been identified, develop action steps for each goal. Each action step should identify when it will be achieved and who will be responsible for the tasks.

**Industry Research and Market Analysis**

Obviously, no enterprise, including an agri-tourism attraction, operates in a vacuum. The next segment of the business plan should provide background information as to why you are selling the products and services you are providing or intend to provide. Include projected expenditures, estimated visitor days and seasons of operation, competition in the region, and complementary operations and how you will collaborate with them. Additional marketing information is provided under Marketing Factors, page 15.

**Management Needs and History**

Describe how you will run your agri-tourism attraction by identifying your legal structure, management team, staff, insurance, and regulatory requirements. Your management team is comprised of the individuals who will run the daily operations and assist you in achieving your goals and objectives. Team members include paid advisors and individuals within your enterprise. Team members might include lawyers, insurance agents, accountants, marketers, and planners.

Identify the legal structure under which your agri-tourism attraction will be operating. Possibilities include sole proprietorship, general partnership, limited partnership, corporation, limited liability company, and limited liability partnership. Each structure has taxation, control, and liability implications and should be researched thoroughly before making a final decision.

Insurance needs are identified and discussed in greater detail under Risk Assessment and Management, page 23. Staffing and employee issues of the agri-tourism portion of your operation should be kept separate from your other operations. Identify the number of employees you will need to run the agri-tourism component, along with their titles, duties, and skills. Identify the federal, state, and local regulatory agencies with which you will be interacting and the permits and licenses you must obtain.

**Marketing Strategy**

You could have the world’s greatest agri-tourism attraction, but if no one knows about it, you will not succeed. In your business plan, explain what products and services you are selling, why you are selling them, and how you intend to sell them. Refer to Marketing Factors, page 15, for more information on this crucial topic.

**Financial Strategy**

A potential lender will closely evaluate your financial strategy to determine if you will receive loans. As part of this financial
component of your business plan, identify existing debt, financing needs, current and future fixed assets, start-up costs, monthly principal and interest payments, and basic forecasts. Be certain that your sources of capital are accurately researched, your numbers are verified, and your needs are justified. Before being important to a potential lender, your financial strategy component is important to you in determining whether you need outside financing.

You must have a firm understanding of your financial situation. You should use a sound record-keeping system that provides you quick access to accurate data. It is important that you can read and analyze your financial statements and that you know how they are developed. This segment of your business plan should include the following financial information:

- Budget
- Sales forecasts
- Cash-flow forecasts
- Profit and loss statement
- Balance sheet

End this portion of your business plan with a conclusion that summarizes your financial documents and explains how this agri-tourism enterprise fits into your overall operation. This conclusion will be the second part of your executive summary.

**Appendix**

As the name implies, the appendix is located at the very end of your business plan. The following are likely to be included in your appendix:

- Financial statements
- Tax returns
- Resumes of owner and key employees
- Resumes of management team members
- Customer support statements
- Available credit terms
- Certificates of completion for applicable courses such as business and management

This section of the publication provides just a brief overview of what should go into the development of a business plan. To get more detailed information, obtain the publication “Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California: A How-To Manual for Farmers and Ranchers” identified under Resource Materials and Acknowledgements, page 24. Or, contact the Small Business Development Center nearest to you by going through the state office (http://www.asbdc.org). Small Business Development Centers are located throughout Alabama as shown below.

- Huntsville—Alabama A&M University and University of Alabama at Huntsville
- Jacksonville—Jacksonville State University
- Livingston—University of West Alabama
- Mobile—University of South Alabama
- Montgomery—Alabama State University
- Troy—Troy University
- Tuscaloosa—University of Alabama
Your agri-tourism attraction has the potential to attract a wide variety of individuals, including children, senior citizens, and people with disabilities. Some individuals will require special accommodations at your attraction. Bringing visitors onto your property will have an impact on the environment. Depending upon your soil, topography, and number of visitors, the impact may be slight or very significant. Examine your projected visitation with these factors in mind, and become aware of environmental rules and regulations that may impact your operation. Also, if you are within a zoning jurisdiction, you need to determine if there are certain restrictions or requirements for agri-tourism activities.

Accessibility

Not only is it good practice to consider the needs of children, senior citizens, and individuals with disabilities, but also it is required by federal law. Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that commercial businesses and private businesses that serve the public be designed, constructed, and altered to comply with specified standards of accessibility. The federal standards apply to many areas. Some of these areas that might apply to your agri-tourism operation include transportation, eating facilities, parking spaces, lodging, restrooms, and sleeping facilities. Complete information about the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) can be found at http://www.ada.gov/.

To determine your accessibility, begin by inspecting your operation and projected development for barriers to access by special needs groups. Ask yourself the following questions concerning building access, building corridors, restrooms, pathways, and activities:

- **Building access**
  - Are clearly designated parking spaces for disabled individuals?
  - Are designated parking spaces near the main entrance?
  - Do designated parking spaces conform to Alabama law and the federal ADA?
  - Are doors easily opened?
  - Are door entrances wider than 32 inches?
  - Have all revolving doors been replaced?
  - Do doors have less than 8.5 pounds of pull?
  - Are ramps provided in place of steps?

- **Building corridors**
  - Are hallways free of obstacles, including protruding phones and drinking fountains?
  - Are floor surfaces level, hard, and not slippery?
  - Are hallways at least 36 inches wide?

- **Restrooms**
  - Are restrooms easily accessible?
  - Does door hardware hinder entry?
  - Do stall doors have at least 32 inches of width?
  - Are restrooms large enough to permit wheelchairs to turn around?
  - Are sinks mounted at the proper height?

- **Pathways**
  - Do you provide pathways that are level or gently sloped and not slippery?
  - Do you provide railings in strategic locations?
  - Do your pathways have a hard surface?
  - Do you have several transportation options if uneven ground must be traversed by individuals with disabilities?

- **Activities**
  - Do you provide viewing sites that allow for viewing from a low or seated position without endangering the viewer?
**Environmental Considerations**

Most agri-tourism operations have a strong educational component, even if they are not designed for school groups. For this reason, as well as for stewardship purposes, you want to be certain that your agri-tourism attraction is developed in harmony with the environment. You want to minimize the impact upon the environment and create a sustainable operation, both financially and environmentally.

As an individual whose livelihood is largely dependent upon nature and the natural environment, you undoubtedly have a strong commitment to protecting the environment. To demonstrate this commitment, and to foster the concept of environmental stewardship in your visitors, consider implementing and interpreting the following:

- Recycle food service items such as drink containers and paper products used to provide hospitality services.
- Reduce nonpoint source pollution such as nutrients, sediment, and pesticides.
- Use organic gardening techniques.
- Develop a system to control dust.
- Reduce soil erosion and sedimentation from water runoff from parking areas and buildings developed to serve your agri-tourism visitors.
- Promote at-risk species habitat conservation.
- Develop wetlands conservation techniques.
- Develop sound animal waste storage and treatment procedures.
- Control sound pollution by keeping visitors away from loud machinery or by providing ear protection.
- Promote at-risk species habitat conservation.
- Develop wetlands conservation techniques.

**Animal Welfare**

While you will be focusing on employee and visitor safety, remember that animal welfare also is important. As a farmer, you already are likely to have a high regard for your animals and to provide them with good care. With the addition of an agri-tourism enterprise to your operation, you will be inviting strangers onto your farm and will come under increased scrutiny. Living in times of increased animal rights concerns and decreased knowledge of farm operations, it is critical for you to practice defendable health and safety techniques.

The few laws and regulations that apply to animal care practices center on animal cruelty and neglect. While you may not be faced with a high likelihood of legal action in this area, if your agri-tourism attraction involves animals, having healthy animals will be a plus. Resources on animal welfare can be found from the following organizations:

- The University of California Davis Veterinary Medicine Extension has publications that address the issue of animal care relating to food animal production.
If you build it, they will come” only works in the movies. Not only must you build it, but also you must market it. Unfortunately, there is no magic bullet or single formula for marketing success. Marketing involves some science, but it also has a strong creative component, making it more of an art than a science. As stated by a presenter at a national Farmer’s Direct Marketing Conference, “creating a marketing plan does not guarantee success; it only reduces the chance of failure.”

Nonetheless, there are some concepts you should consider when developing your marketing plan. This plan will detail how you intend to promote your agri-tourism attraction. It is a function of your place, product, price, and promotion, and of your customers, complementary businesses, competitors, and costs of production. As with your business plan, the marketing plan is a dynamic process that should be modified based upon evaluating the results you obtain.

**Market Analysis**

Begin developing your marketing plan by researching the market in which you will be operating. Obtain information on the agri-tourism industry and other aspects of the rural tourism industry. Identify trends that are likely to impact your attraction, and project how the market is likely to change and how you can react to those changes. To obtain this type of knowledge, use resources such as trade journals, Web sites like the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, magazines and newspaper articles, and government agencies.

Identify your target customers. There indeed are many potential agri-tourism customers, but using a broad marketing approach is expensive and unlikely to be effective. Through tourism organizations, convention and visitors bureaus, and chambers of commerce, determine who the tourists are in your region. From this group, determine your specific clientele. Calculate the estimated size and growth of your target customers by using sources such as sales tax information, lodging taxes, and population figures.

Become familiar with customer trends through the USDA Farmer Direct Marketing Service (http://www.ams.usda.gov/directmarketing/) and other sources. Build good public relations with your customers, the local community, and other members of the tourism industry. Although you may be selling products in your agri-tourism endeavor, you primarily will be part of the service industry.

**Marketing Mix**

Your marketing mix is the specific marketing tactics you will use to communicate with and satisfy your customers, and it describes the methods and actions required to fully implement your marketing strategy. For your agri-tourism attraction, your marketing mix will consist of the seven Ps: place, product, price, promotion, people, physical evidence, and process.

**Place.** Determine how you can take advantage of where you sell your products and services, wherever you are located. If your agri-tourism attraction is in a remote setting, attract visitors with the serene or natural qualities of your “getaway” destination. Conversely, capitalize on the number of motorists traveling by your attraction if you are situated near a major highway. Focus on your location in relation to natural resources, roads, community resources, and other hospitality industry components.

**Product.** Clearly define the products and services you will be offering your guests. The complete product is the summation of the product’s physical and perceived attributes, including packaging. It is difficult to overemphasize the importance of packaging, particularly if you are targeting a niche market. A marketing professional with the International...
Jelly and Preserve Association stated that 90 percent of niche product purchases are based on presentation.

**Price.** Refer to Pricing Considerations, page 8, for the presentation on price.

**Promotion.** Determine how you will advertise the products and services of your agri-tourism attraction and how you will sell them. Through promotional efforts, you inform customers of your services and products and let them know how they will meet their needs. The goal is to reach the largest number of customers in your target market in the most cost effective manner. Some of the least expensive methods of promoting and advertising your attraction include word-of-mouth advertising, printed materials (stationery, Web sites, business cards, and brochures), familiarization (“fam”) tours, media (print, audio, and video), direct mail, travel writers, and community network.

**People.** As a result of your market analysis, develop a description of your target market. Segment your market according to factors appropriate for your attraction. Segmentation considerations include the following:

- Geography: Where are my customers from?
- Demographics: Who are they? Consider age, gender, and other attributes.
- Social: What are they like?
- Behavioral: What do they want?
- Customization: How can I treat each person as an individual?

**Physical evidence.** The tangible items that facilitate the interaction between your staff and customers are the tangible components of service. Physical evidence is anything the visitor can touch or observe. For example, if a visitor observes a structure is in need of repair, he or she may conclude that your attraction is unsafe. This extends to the appearance of you and your staff and to the materials you distribute, including brochures and Web sites. Another very important area is the cleanliness of your facilities. Particular attention should be given to keeping the grounds free of litter and your restrooms clean and free of odors.

**Process.** Providing quality customer service on a consistent basis will set you apart from other attractions. This involves giving customers what they want, and, at the same time, fulfilling their many less obvious needs. The visitor expects friendliness and accurate information. The visitor encounter should have three components: giving a good first impression (good appearance and a smile), meeting the needs of the guest, and saying good-bye. No matter how hard you try, there will be complaints. If handled correctly, complaints can become golden opportunities. Keys to successfully responding to complaints are to listen, empathize, apologize, rectify, and reaffirm the customer’s value.

**Evaluation**

Continually evaluate your marketing success to determine the progress you are making toward your sales goals. Evaluation allows you to avoid problems and to identify other avenues of marketing options. The key to effective marketing evaluation is the tracking of your marketing methods. Many tracking methods exist, including hiring consultants. There are also low-cost, effective methods you and your staff can employ. Some of these include the following:

- Informal survey: Ask customers how they became aware of your agri-tourism attraction, or place comment cards on tables.
- Formal survey: Develop a questionnaire using brief, specific questions to provide information on customer satisfaction, visitor preferences, and usage patterns.
- Off-hand comments: Listen for off-hand comments as visitors wait in line.
• Head and license counts: Count the number of customers you serve or identify where your customers come from based upon license tags in your parking lots.

• Discounts: Insert coupons into mailings and count them as they are redeemed, or advertise that guests mentioning your radio advertisements will receive a discount.

You must develop a thick skin when it comes to criticism. Unlike traditional farming, agri-tourism focuses on pleasing people, not merely producing a product. Even if you are doing a good job, the visitor’s perception is reality. You must respond or explain why you do things a certain way.

**Collaboration**

Work with other businesses to assist each other. For example, you might sell local products from other producers, explaining their origin at your agri-tourism attraction, and they would do the same for your products and literature. Collaborate with other area agri-tourism attractions. No two agri-tourism attractions are identical, so refer individuals you cannot serve to other agri-tourism attractions in the region. The following section on partnerships will provide more information on collaboration.
Developing Partnerships

The development and expansion of partnerships is an excellent method of achieving more with existing monies. Partnerships avoid duplication of efforts, combine the resources of several groups, and allow each member to do what he or she does best. In addition to more efficient use of funds, partnerships will allow you to capitalize on opportunities of which you otherwise would be unaware. Partnerships can be formed with local, state, and federal governmental agencies, non-governmental organizations, and other private businesses and companies. This section will touch on three groups of partnerships related to agri-tourism in the state: the Alabama Agri-Tourism Partnership, regional tourism organizations, and the overall tourism industry in Alabama.

Alabama Agri-Tourism Partnership

Before 2004 there was no statewide effort in Alabama to market all the components included in agri-tourism. The Alabama Agri-Tourism Partnership was formed in June 2004 for the purpose of developing and marketing the statewide Alabama Agri-Tourism Trail. The members of the partnership are the following four organizations:

- Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries
- Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel
- Alabama Farmers Federation
- Alabama Cooperative Extension System

This partnership created a Web site to develop and promote the Alabama Agri-Tourism Trail. The Web address is www.AlabamaAgriTourism.com. The trail was formed to serve both individuals and businesses involved in agri-tourism and local communities. The desired results are to generate added revenues for farmers and agri-businesses and to increase the number of attractions for small communities, allowing for the development of a critical mass of attractions in rural areas.

The strengths of the Alabama Agri-Tourism Partnership include shared vision and goals, substantial contributions made by all partners, an informal and flexible organizational structure, and strong group ownership with a lack of egos. The short- and long-term goals of the partnership include the following:

- Assess the existing agri-tourism attractions in Alabama.
- Develop a comprehensive inventory that is updated periodically.
- Develop high-quality advertisements (print and Web) to promote a single Web site to allow tourists to identify agri-tourism attractions that are available to travelers.
- Create a Web site that will identify, by category and location, agri-tourism attractions, and keep the site up-to-date.
- Market the Alabama Agri-Tourism Trail, and include links with partners’ Web sites.
- Develop a series of workshops, seminars, and publications to assist farmers and entrepreneurs in the development of future agri-tourism attractions.
- Certify attractions on the Alabama Agri-Tourism Trail.

If you develop an agri-tourism attraction, strongly consider listing your attraction on the Alabama Agri-Tourism Trail. There are no fees or expenses, and photographs can be included in the listings. If your attraction has a Web site, links will be established between the trail Web site and your Web site.

Regional Tourism Organizations

Tourism is a method many Alabama communities are including in their mix of economic development strategies. Like other techniques of economic development, tourism will not happen by itself. To be successful, communities must effectively market their tourism attractions and hospitality services. One method of
accomplishing this is through the development of regional tourism organizations designed to promote multi-county regions.

As stated earlier in this publication, only in the movies can you operate on the premise that “if you build it, they will come.” This is not Hollywood; this is real-world Alabama. The Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel is the state’s primary tourism marketing organization, and it does a very effective job of attracting visitors. However, communities cannot rely solely on the state. Each community interested in including tourism as part of its economic development strategy must develop and implement a marketing plan. Yet, that marketing will not reach its full potential if it is done in a vacuum. To fully achieve our tourism potential, we must market regions of the state, not just individual communities and attractions.

Numerous regional tourism organizations are currently marketing multi-county regions. If you decide to develop an agri-tourism attraction, contact the organization that markets in your area, and determine how you can partner with it. These organizations, which are identified as follows, range from two that have professional staffs to those that rely almost entirely on volunteers:

- **North Alabama Tourism Association**—established in 1964; serves the 16 northernmost counties in Alabama; membership organization with 475 members; membership includes attractions, accommodations, restaurants, and other allied members.

- **Historic Chattahoochee Commission**—established in 1970; serves 18 Alabama and Georgia counties along the lower Chattahoochee River; is a state agency of both Alabama and Georgia; mission is to develop the region’s full potential for tourism and historic preservation.

- **Alabama Sunrise Region**—a volunteer organization established in 1993; serves 15 counties in east-central Alabama; mission is to promote community development primarily through tourism and retiree attraction.

- **Tenn-Tom Tourism Association**—primarily a volunteer organization established in 1994; under the umbrella of the Tenn-Tom Waterway Development Authority; serves the counties along the waterway in Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

- **Alabama Tombigbee Tourism Initiative**—primarily a volunteer organization established in 2002; partially sponsored by three regional economic development organizations; serves 10 counties in Southwest Alabama.

- **West Alabama Regional Alliance**—primarily a volunteer organization established in 2002; partially sponsored by West Alabama University; serves five counties in West Alabama.

**Tourism Industry in Alabama**

In 2004 over 20.6 million people visited Alabama, spending over $7.3 billion in the state—an increase of 8 percent from 2003. Travel industry expenditures represent about 3 percent of Alabama’s Gross State Product. More than 157,200 jobs, 8.3 percent of non-agricultural employment in Alabama, were directly or indirectly attributable to the travel and tourism industry, and more than $548 million of state and local tax revenues were realized, primarily because of travel and tourism activities.
With an industry this large, the opportunities for partnerships abound. The organizations, agencies, and businesses involved in this diverse industry include the following:

- **State agencies**
  - Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel
  - Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
  - Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs
  - Alabama Department of Transportation
  - Alabama Historical Commission
  - Alabama Arts Council
  - Farmers Market Authority
  - Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries

- **Non-governmental organizations**
  - Alabama Travel Council
  - Local convention and visitors bureaus
  - Local chambers of commerce

- **Trade associations**
  - Alabama Hospitality Association
  - Alabama Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus
  - Alabama Restaurant Association
  - Bed and Breakfast Association of Alabama
  - Alabama Farmers Federation
  - AAA Alabama Motorists Association

- **Local and regional tourism organizations**

- **Federal agencies**
  - U.S. Forest Service
  - USDA Rural Development
  - Army Corps of Engineers
  - National Park Service
  - TVA
  - Appalachian Regional Commission
  - Alabama Cooperative Extension System
  - Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service

- **Private businesses**
  - Attractions and hospitality services (hotels and restaurants)

- **Other stateside organizations**
  - Regional planning agencies
  - Small business development centers
Risk Assessment and Management

Operating an agricultural enterprise such as a farm has inherent risks. Inviting tourists to your property adds additional risks. While these risks cannot be eliminated, they can be assessed and reduced, and you can prepare to respond to accidents when they do occur through a risk management plan. You should not invite any visitors to your agri-tourism attraction until you have developed this plan with the assistance of your attorney and insurance agent.

In operating an agri-tourism attraction, you will be faced with two types of risks: farm-safety risks and financial risks. Farm-safety risks are those involving the physical operations of your attraction. Financial risks are employee-related concerns involving injuries to visitors and loss of markets. Liability is one of the higher profile risks and results from injury or property damage because one of your guests acted negligently, because you or one of your employees were negligent, or because of special circumstances in which the law allows recovery even in the absence of fault. Types of legal liability include general liability, personal injury, property damage, product liability, and professional liability. With your attorney, you should determine how these potential forms of liability relate to you and your attraction.

Strategies to Reduce Risk

Since risks cannot be eliminated, even if you did not invite guests onto your agricultural operation, they must be reduced to the fullest extent possible. The first step is to recognize the potential risks and hazards you are creating through an agri-tourism attraction. Then you should develop strategies to reduce them. Possible risk reduction strategies include the following:

- Make each component of your operation as safe as possible.
- Avoid certain high-risk activities.
- Use liability waivers.
- Select the legal structure most appropriate for your enterprise.
- Establish and follow good management rules related to hiring, training, and developing employees.
- Purchase insurance.
- Abide by environmental rules and regulations regarding fire codes, transportation, food safety, and health.

Farm-Safety Risk Management

To protect your visitors as well as yourself and your operation, you must think and act proactively. Identify your assets and reduce hazards. If an accident should occur, your risk management plan will assist in legally protecting you. To reduce the physical risks associated with your agri-tourism attraction, consider implementing the following steps:

- Reevaluate your decision to establish an agri-tourism attraction.
- Bringing visitors onto your property is a risky business not only for visitors and you and your staff, but also for animals.
- Identify methods of reducing disease transmission, including practicing good sanitation.
- Reexamine planned visitor activities.
- Avoid activities with a high probability of being hazardous.
- Establish and follow safety precautions for all activities to be included in the visitor experience.
- Identify and reduce dangers facing visitors unfamiliar with your farm. Remember, many of these people are out of their element when on a farm.
- Post boundaries, and identify and enforce visitor areas and rules.
- Clean up visitor areas.
- Explain hazards to your guests.
- Conduct safety education programs for visitors.
• Protect against fire and carbon-dioxide poisoning.
• Establish an emergency plan.
• Block off bodies of water because children tend to gravitate toward water.
• Provide hand-washing facilities.
• Prevent hand-mouth activities where animals are located.
• Lock your shops and keep farm implements and equipment away from guests.
• Supervise all interactions your guests have with animals. Use only your healthiest and friendliest animals for these interactions.
• Vaccinate viewing animals against rabies.
• If you have pets, be certain only friendly, social ones are near the public.

Train all of your employees.

Issue liability waivers.
• Clearly describe the activities to be involved.
• The waiver serves as an educational tool to highlight the risks involved.
• These do not resolve you from all responsibility, but through them your visitors acknowledge risks and assume responsibility for their actions.

Select the appropriate legal structure. See Developing a Business Plan, page 10.

Financial Risk Management

Not only are you liable for your own actions, but also you are liable for those of family members and non-family employees. Consequently, it is essential that you establish sound management practices. By following good hiring and training practices, you safeguard employee health and safety, and you protect yourself legally. Steps and strategies follow that will assist you in establishing good management practices:

• Acquire employer status.
  Obtain the necessary employer identification numbers from the federal and Alabama state governments.

• Develop and follow sound hiring practices.
  • Identify the employees you will need for your agri-tourism attraction.
  • Develop titles, duties, skills, and job descriptions.

Financial Risk Management

• Develop advertising and screening procedures to be followed over time.
• Once you hire an individual, complete all necessary forms and provide required taxes.

Orient all new employees.
• Tour the entire operation and explain how all positions fit into the overall operation.
• Emphasize that your attraction is here for the customers, not the employees.
• Develop a cohesive work team and fit new hires into it promptly.

Train all staff members, including family.
• Educate them on the tourism industry through publications, other tourism professionals, and videos.
• Conduct periodic hospitality training sessions for frontline personnel and managers.
• Provide access to outside classes.

Encourage, empower, and reward.
• Model behavior and treat your employees as you want them to treat your visitors. If employees are unhappy, customers are likely to be unhappy.
• Meet regularly with your staff at established times and locations.
• Discuss customer comments, complaints, and suggestions.
• Pay fair wages.
• Document all aspects of employee hiring, training, and performance.
  • Keep personnel files that record both exceptional and poor performance.
  • Keep orderly files on all required areas, including OSHA actions, discrimination complaints, workers’ compensation claims, unemployment insurance claims, and vacation and leave requests.
• Provide safe and healthy working conditions.
  • Follow strict hand-washing procedures.
  • Have one or more staff members take first-aid and CPR courses.

**Insurance**

Once you have identified all areas of potential risk and have reduced those risks as much as you can, you should transfer the remaining risk to another party by purchasing insurance. Although the company providing the insurance will assume much of the risk, you will need to establish a fund to cover deductibles on the insurance policies.

Be sure your insurance agent is aware of all the activities that will be occurring in your agri-tourism venture. Even though they will be agriculture-related, do not be surprised if existing insurance does not cover this additional operation. Your existing insurance that covers farm operations is likely to cover an occasional guest, but it is not likely to be designed to cover the number of paying visitors you will be attracting.

When exploring the purchase of insurance coverage for your agri-tourism operation, be sure to get several quotes. Also, consult with other agri-tourism attractions concerning their insurance coverage. Regardless of rates, be certain that you select a quality company and one that understands your operation and coverage needs. Seek answers to the following questions:

• Is there a deductible? If so, how much?
• Does the insurance apply to:
  • my products and operations liability?
  • my premises and operations liability?
  • my contractual liability to others?
  • my property liability damage to others?
  • incidental medical malpractice liability resulting from providing aid to an injured person?
  • host-liquor liability?

• Is each employee added as an additional insured?

When adding insurance, be sure to select a coverage package that will protect your personal assets. Depending upon the legal structure under which you will be operating, you may want to divide your operations into two separate entities. One would include your traditional agricultural operation, and the other would include the agri-tourism attraction. While both operations would take place on much of the same physical property, the assets and insurance coverage would be divided between the two legal entities. This is where you will need to rely heavily upon trusted members of your management team: your attorney and your insurance agent.

To this point, only liability insurance has been covered. Obviously, you will need to evaluate your total needs and compare them with your existing insurance coverage in all areas. Other types of insurance that you may need are:

• Workers’ compensation
• Employee benefits
• Life and disability
• Business interruption
• Fire and other hazards
• Property
• Rental
• Vehicle
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Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California: A How-To Manual for Farmers and Ranchers, Small Farm Center, University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, 2002.


The New Entrepreneurial Agriculture, Michigan Land Use Institute, Beulah, MI, April 2002.


All photographs used in this publication are of actual Alabama agri-tourism attractions and were provided by the Alabama Farmers Federation.
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For more information, call your county Extension office. Look in your telephone directory under your county’s name to find the number.

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