



Farm Business Management

Handout 22

Pilot Project Shows Potential for agricultural Tourism in Wisconsin

Pilot project shows potential for agricultural tourism in Wisconsin (Research Brief #6)

Agriculture and tourism — two of Wisconsin's most important industries — are teaming up in southwestern Wisconsin. A pilot project has found that tourists, rural communities, and some farmers could benefit from stronger efforts to promote and market agricultural tourism there.

In 1990, agricultural tourism project members surveyed 290 visitors to the annual Monroe Cheese Festival and 164 visitors to the Picnic on the Farm, a one-time event held in Platteville in conjunction with the Chicago Bears summer training camp. More than one-half of those surveyed responded favourably to a proposed tour, saying they would be interested in participating in some type of agricultural tour in southwestern Wisconsin.

Survey respondents reported that they would prefer to visit cheese factories, sausage processing plants, dairy farms, and historical farm sites, as well as enjoy an old-fashioned picnic dinner. The study also found strong interest in visiting specialty farms (strawberries, cranberries, poultry, etc.).

More than 75 percent of the Cheese Day visitors planned ahead for the trip, with 37 percent planning at least two months in advance. More than 40 percent of the visitors came to Monroe for two- or three-day visits. Many stopped at other communities on their way to Cheese Days.

Visitors at both events indicated that they were there to enjoy themselves and were willing to spend money on food and arts and crafts. They also wanted the opportunity to experience the "country" while there.

The study found that planning around existing events should take into account what brought visitors to the area and provide additional attractions that will appeal to them. For example, visitors to Cheese Days said they were on a holiday and appeared to be more open to various tour proposals. Picnic visitors came specifically to see the Chicago Bears practice. They showed less interest in a proposed agricultural tour than Cheese Day visitors, but more interest in a picnic dinner.

The study identified three primary audiences for agricultural tourism: 1) elderly people who take bus tours to see the country; 2) families interested in tours that could be enjoyed by both parents and children; and 3) persons already involved in agriculture, including international visitors.

Agricultural tourism can serve to educate urban tourists about the problems and challenges facing farmers, says Andy Lewis, Grant county community development agent. While agriculture is vital to Wisconsin, more and more urban folk are becoming isolated from the industry. In fact, Lewis notes, farmers are just as interested in the educational aspects of agricultural tours as they are in any financial returns.

"Farmers feel that urban consumers are out of touch with farming," Lewis says. "If tourists can be educated on issues that concern farmers, those visits could lead to policies more favorable to agriculture."

Animal rights and the environment are examples of two issues that concern both urban consumers and farmers. Farm tours could help consumers get the farmer's perspective on these issues, Lewis notes.

Several Wisconsin farms already offer some type of learning experience for tourists. However, most agricultural tourism enterprises currently market their businesses independently, leading to a lack of a concerted effort to promote agricultural tourism as an industry.

Lewis is conducting the study with Jean Murphy, assistant community development agent. Other participants include UW-Platteville Agricultural Economist Bob Acton, the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems, UW-Extension Recreation Resources Center, the Wisconsin Rural Development Center, and Hidden Valleys, a Southwestern Wisconsin regional tourism organization.

This past fall, Murphy organized several workshops with some Green and Grant County farmers, local business leaders, and motor coach tour operators to discuss how best to organize and put on farm tours. Committees were formed to look at the following: tour site evaluations, inventory of the area's resources, tour marketing, and familiarization of tours. The fourth committee is organizing tours for people such as tour bus guides and local reporters to help better educate them about agricultural tourism.

Green County farmers already have experience hosting visitors during the annual Monroe Cheese Days. Green county Tourism Director Larry Lindgren says these farmers are set to go ahead with more formal agricultural tours next year. The tours will combine a farm visit with a visit to a local cheese factory and a picnic lunch.

Another farm interested in hosting an organized tour is Sinsinawa, a 200-acre Grant County farm devoted to sustainable agriculture and run by the Dominican Sisters. Education plays a major role at the farm, which has an orchard, dairy and beef cows, and hogs.

Farm tours could be combined with other activities in the area such as trips to the Mississippi River and/or visits to historical towns or landmarks, Lewis says. The project will help expose farmers to the tourism industry and farm vacations as a way to possibly supplement incomes, he adds. While farm families probably wouldn't make a lot of money through farm tours, they would be compensated for their time, says Lewis.

Farmers could earn additional income through the sale of farm products, crafts, and recreational activities.

Below are results from the 1990 survey of Monroe Cheese Days and Picnic on the Farm visitors.

The first table shows the degree of interest in a proposed agricultural tour.

The second table shows how the visitors would rank various activities in the proposed tour.

Table 1: Interest in proposed tour		
Percent of Visitors Attending		
Degree of Interest	Cheese Days	Picnic
Eager	30.9	13.8
Some Interest	47.2	54.1
Don't Feel Strongly	15.1	21.1
No Interest	6.8	11.0

Table 2: Interest in specific activities in proposed tour		
Activity	Cheese Days (Rank)	Picnic (Rank)
Cheese Factory Visit	1	2
Sausage Processing Visit	2	2
Dairy Farm Visit	3	5
Picnic Dinner	3	1
Historical Farm Visit	3	3
Crop Farm Visit	4	6