

*Research Topics: Community Connection*

## **Agritourism and Economic Development: Role of Research and Extension**

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**Agritourism, some important facts:** While agritourism has long existed in United States, the agriculture census for the first time included agritourism related questions in the 2007 survey (Das and Rainey, 2009). This is testament to the growing popularity and importance of this infant industry across the nation. Common agritourism activities include; farmers markets, u-pick operations, corn maze, pumpkin patches, wineries, ag-festivals and on-farm hunting and fishing. The profile of the majority of agritourism operations tend to be small and medium sized farms, family- managed, who are in it primarily for supplementing income or as a hobby and love for preserving their farm heritage. Income gets augmented, but there is no significant direct job creation as a result of agritourism businesses, mainly due to them being under family-management. The existence of agritourism enterprises are not publicized as much through formal advertising on television or print media, but rather through word-of-mouth and road signs on state and inter-state highways. Extension networks in many states are aggressively bringing this discussion to community forums and shading light on how this could be an engine of economic growth and bring communities closer. There is a paucity of academic research on U.S. agritourism, mainly attributable to non-availability of reliable secondary data on both providers and consumers of agritourism businesses (Das and Rainey, 2009).

**What should extension professionals know?** Agritourism is critical to community and economic development for the following reasons. First, agritourism venues and events provide supplemental income to farmers and the rural communities that they live in, as well as help preserve and sustain family farms. Second, agritourism helps to add value to crops, livestock and the natural resources that a farm has to offer, and offers an opportunity to build a bridge between the agricultural community and the local tourism industry by incorporating tour groups, educating school children and hosting civic events. These activities translate into dollars which spill over to other sectors of the local economy translating to jobs and augmented incomes. Third, agritourism gives people an opportunity to better understand and appreciate the skill and hard work that go into producing the food and fiber we all enjoy. There are several aspects to agritourism that are highly essential for an existing or a potential operator to be knowledgeable about: economic, legal, marketing, educational, retailing and financing.

**How can K-state research and extension assist interested communities?** Extension personnel can and need to: (1) bring this discussion to community forums and highlight the accomplishments of communities that have used agritourism as an avenue for positive economic and community activity; (2) develop and disseminate well researched materials and brochures that are valuable instruments to stimulate community thinking; (3) educate community leaders and citizenry on the need for, implications and potential of a high growth agritourism industry that can: (a) trigger local economic growth; (b) contain rising transportation costs and increase energy security; (c) build social and political capital; (d) be a good quality of life indicator (e) build positive perception of and toward the community Agritourism can by itself be a stand-alone economic development program that can be adopted by communities, supported by K-state research and extension.

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Das, Biswa R and Daniel V Rainey, 'Agritourism in the Arkansas Delta Byways: Assessing the Economic Impacts', *International Journal of Tourism Research*, (forthcoming, 2009)

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