



Fostering an Agritourism Industry

M.E. HENRY*

University of Florida, IFAS, Polk County Extension, Bartow, FL

From “buy local” slogans to specialty logos communicating the value of the origin of products, consumers are looking for opportunities to connect with growers. This trend in consumer preference may also offer a profitable business opportunity for agritourism operations prepared to take on the challenge. Beyond labeling and rhetoric, a segment of “locovores” and “foodies” are looking to have an on farm experience to provide a connection to the origin of the product like no other. Though many Extension programs currently feature limited farm tours organized by Agents in cooperation with growers, a comprehensive plan for delivering such programs statewide is lacking. The Agricultural Awareness Initiative in the current University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Extension Strategic Plan seeks to eventually provide some guidance and framework and future statewide efforts are expected to be modeled after existing successful programs. Within an hour of both Tampa and Orlando, Polk County is strategically located to benefit from tourist destinations such as Walt Disney World, Busch Gardens and Legoland Florida. Though existing agritourism options in the County are hit or miss and limited agricultural educational tours have been conducted through Extension to date, Polk County may be well positioned to capitalize on the development of an agritourism industry. An inaugural blueberry tour conducted in April 2014 by UF/IFAS Extension Polk County featured a blueberry U-Pick, a blueberry winery and packinghouse (Fig. 1). Open to the public and advertised with cooperating County departments and industry outlets, the objectives of the program were to foster the development of an agritourism industry by providing a test of the potential interest and willingness of consumers to pay for such activities. Short term, the outcomes of the program will inform future efforts and expected long term outcomes include a positive impact on the development of the industry. Fostering agritourism offers the opportunity to strengthen relationships with individual growers and increase the agricultural awareness of participants. Depending on the status of the industry in the particular county, there may be an opportunity to be in on the ground floor of developing a profitable industry and contribute to short and long term economic impacts. Farm tours offer Agents an opportunity to get out from behind their computers, connect with the public, and the wonder



Fig. 1. Located in Davenport, True Blue Winery is Polk County's first blueberry winery.

of growing food out of the soil. Limited time and resources may dissuade Agents from undertaking this effort without statewide guidance and resources. Without well-defined curriculum and objectives, the experience may lack the educational punchline necessary for documenting an impact. Agritourism operations must be open to allotting time and resources to the program and tolerate the risk of hosting visitors on agricultural properties. A recently passed law limits the liability of agricultural operations engaged in agritourism, but the limits of this law are yet untested and some farms may be unwilling to participate.

*Corresponding author; email: hmayer@ufl.edu