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INDUSTRY news
with Editor Jamie Macready

Agritourism rules top farm groups’ concerns

HARRISBURG, Pa. — Reducing the regulatory burden on agritourism will be a top lobbying priority for Pennsylvania’s agriculture organizations this year.

“Diversity is the best insurance policy,” said Hannah Smith-Brubaker, executive director of Pasa Sustainable Agriculture.

Leaders from five ag groups spoke at a House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee hearing on Wednesday at the Pennsylvania Farm Show.

With prices soft for many ag commodities, farmers continue to look for ways to diversify their operations.

But regulatory changes are needed to reduce the cost of starting these businesses.

Legislators have already introduced several bills to help.

Rick Ebert, president of the Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, and Heidi Secord, president of the state Farmers Union, both praised Rep. Barbara Gleim’s bill to limit the liability of agritourism venues when neither party is at fault for injury or damages.

Similar laws, passed in 20 states, are designed to prevent frivolous lawsuits over the realities of farming, such as weather, livestock and uneven ground.

“Our farms are not shopping centers. They are working lands,” Ebert said.

Farms would need to post warning signs, and visitors could still sue in cases of gross negligence.

Farm Bureau is also pushing legislation introduced last year that would exempt farm event venues from certain code requirements, including the installation of sprinklers.

Retrofitting a barn with sprinklers can cost $60,000 — more than many farms can afford. Because most farmers are not hooked up to municipal water, they would have to install holding tanks to get sufficient water pressure, Ebert said.

Exempt barns would still need smoke detectors and fire extinguishers, and could not have open flames indoors.

Rep. Clint Owlett, R-Wellsboro, asked how dairy farmers could diversify when several years of low prices have left some farmers struggling to qualify for loans.
Chris Herr, executive vice president of PennAg Industries Association, speaks to the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee on Wednesday at the Pennsylvania Farm Show.

One option might be to build on USDA assistance for building high tunnels, said Ebert, who is adding one of the greenhouses himself as he brings his sons into the business.

And even when they’re looking to diversify, many dairy farmers could use some help on their main business.

Two bills by Rep. John Lawrence would do just that, said Wayne Campbell, president of the Pennsylvania State Grange.

One bill would create incentives for dairy processing in the state. The other would allow the state to collect and distribute the over-order premium. This payment on in-state milk currently filters back to farmers through the supply chain.

For organic dairy farmers, improved promotion through the PA Preferred program could be a big win, Smith-Brubaker said.

Though Pennsylvania is a leader in overall organic sales, many large retailers in the state get their organic milk from farms in Texas or Colorado, she said.

Though dairy and diversification are important, the Grange is even more adamant about the need for expanded rural broadband. A good internet connection is key for precision agriculture, education and telemedicine.

Storybook Farm gives children back their childhood

OPELIKA, AL. - Dena Little understands the value of the human-animal bond and how it effects people, having grown up around animals, horses in particular.

Taking bond a step further, she has come up with ways to help children going through difficult times.

Little runs Storybook Farm, founded in 2002, to “give childhoods back to children” by experiencing the human-animal bond, free of charge.

The farm’s 51 acres are home to horses, goats and donkeys as well as a host of dogs and cats.

“What I want to do for the kids...is provide an opportunity for them to be kids. They’re just a kid,” Little explained.

“They’re not a child with ‘X, Y and Z’. They’re simply a child.”

The farm has served over 10,000 children to date. Little says that in helping the children heal, it’s important that the parents and siblings are also able to heal, so there are also activities and volunteers assigned to work with them.

“Wherever they are, these parents need to hit the pause button every now and then, and there are not a lot of places you can do that,” Little said, adding that visiting the farm gives parents a chance to watch their kid just be a kid.

Reading is also a large component of what the farm’s programs center on, with all of the farm’s animals named after literary characters that kids can recognize.

“I feel like the whimsy, the wonder you can find in literature; it introduces you to language and communication skills, but it also allows you to make a connection with the characters in the book,” Little said. Even correspondence with families is done through literature. The farm will send letters to the child “written” by an animal that they interacted with during their visit.

People who have donated either their time or even resources to the farm will even receive thank-you notes from one of the animals.

The farm has a great deal of community support and that, along with successful fundraising efforts, has helped keep the farm gates open.

Little hopes to have a grand opening for the Papa Bear Horse Center, a new barn set, by the end of March.

The Papa Bear Horse Center will enable the farm to bring in more horses and expand their programming with the extra space and resources they’ll be able to bring in. The barn will also be air-conditioned, with different rooms for activities.

One area, Ribsy’s Doghouse, is named after the beloved dog featured in books by Beverly Cleary, where kids will have the option to read by themselves or aloud to one of the farm’s dogs.

“The dog is a nonjudgmental listener, so if a child has trouble, stumbling over a word or takes a long time to read a passage, the dog absolutely does not care,” Little said, adding that the practice helps a child’s confidence and becomes a small victory for them.

Full Article: https://bit.ly/36S2eZn
As agritourism grows, research universities urge farmers to take survey

SALEM, ORE. — Oregon State University’s Extension Service urges farmers to take a brief agritourism survey to help researchers measure the industry’s nationwide impact, understand what makes a successful agritourism business and develop resources to help farmers.

The survey, which will take less than 15 minutes to complete, is for any ranch, farm, fishery or vineyard operation that has visitors.

“This survey is important because nothing like it has been done before for this industry, especially in Oregon,” said Audrey Comerford, agritourism coordinator for OSU Extension. “I encourage everyone who allows the public onto their farm to fill this out.”

Researchers will use the data to develop workshops, educational materials and other tools to help farms of all sizes succeed, said Comerford.

Agritourism is broadly defined as any agricultural operation that brings visitors to a farm or ranch.

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Mesa area offers bushels of agritourism opportunities

ARIZONA - Schnepf Farms, one of Arizona's great agritourism attractions, is a peach of a place.

The fourth-generation family peach estate turned out to be the juicy highlight of my recent trip to Mesa, the state's third-largest city. One of the sites that make up the Mesa area's Fresh Foodie Trail, Schnepf Farms kept me well fed with peachy delights from its bakery and even provided a roof over my head for two nights.

But not just any roof. I slept in a vintage, stainless-steel auto trailer in the farm's retro campground, called The Cozy Peach. It was my first time glamping (camping in style).

The Schnepf family has restored nine shiny, aerodynamic, mid-century trailers (with a 10th under renovation) and offers them to tourists for nostalgia-tinged overnight stays. Most are those iconic Airstream trailers, but my cozy nest was the Silver Streak brand's Continental model.

Manufactured in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, these early RVs have been refitted with modern comforts, including plumbing, heating and air-conditioning, but retain 95 percent of their original parts. Owners Mark and Carrie Schnepf are always on the lookout for restorable trailers to add to the collection.

My unit had the original stove and refrigerator (no longer operable). Additional touches of authenticity: a linoleum-type floor, whimsical knick-knacks from the period, cute curtains and original cabinetry. The home on wheels also featured two twin beds and a carpeted living area with an armchair and long couch. The kitchen was equipped with a microwave and coffee maker, and stocked with dishes and silverware.

Upon my arrival, they brought a slice of peach pie from the Farm Fresh Cafe & Bakery.

Glampers booking these trailers have to expect a small doorway, low ceilings and a tiny shower-tub. (For more comfortable bathing, there's a shower building at the farm's adjacent RV campground.) A nice surprise: plush white robes in the bathroom closet.

Each trailer is hemmed in by a white board fence and has a patio with a table, fire pit with firewood and gas grill. Striped awnings and kitschy yard ornaments (like plastic pink flamingoes) lend further retro flair. Another amenity: vintage bikes for exploring the grounds.

Breakfast from the cafe is delivered to your glamping unit if you put out the order form before midnight. Guests who get up early enough can help the workers with daily chores in the U-pick gardens or feed the animals (turtles, cows, pigs, goats).

Full Article: https://bit.ly/2FOlag4
Lied Lodge to host state 2020 Agritourism and Adventure Travel Workshop

NEBRASKA CITY, NEBRASKA - Registration is now open for the 2020 Agritourism and Adventure Travel Workshop. This year’s workshop takes place Feb. 25 to 27 at the Lied Lodge and Conference Center in Nebraska City. Attendees will learn from professionals how to successfully start, grow and market an agritourism, ecotourism or adventure-oriented business.

“Nebraska has so many opportunities for travelers looking to experience rural destinations. There’s something really special about fruit right off the tree, homegrown and handmade goods and experiences that let you escape from all of the hustle and bustle,” said John Ricks, Nebraska Tourism executive director.

The workshop will begin on Tuesday afternoon with a Nebraska Tourism Commission meeting at the Fox Center Event Space. Following the meeting is an optional reception and locally sourced farm-to-fork dinner cooked by resident chefs.

Full Article: https://bit.ly/2FN9tpF
Agritourism allows farms to diversify and has potential benefits for rural communities

Agritourism helps U.S. farmers and ranchers generate revenue from recreational or educational activities, such as tours of a working farm or “pick-your-own fruits and vegetables” programs. Beginning and small and mid-size farms are increasingly exploring agritourism as a strategy to remain competitive. Agritourism also has the potential to help revitalize rural economies, educate the public about agriculture, and preserve agricultural heritage. In addition, community-focused farms may find agritourism an attractive option because it provides more labor opportunities for local residents.

Farm agritourism revenue more than tripled between 2002 and 2017, according to data from the Census of Agriculture. Adjusted for inflation, agritourism revenue grew from $704 million in 2012 to almost $950 million in 2017. The 2017 data excluded wineries, although they were included in the 2002, 2007, and 2012 data, which suggests agritourism revenue growth may have been even greater during that period. However, agritourism revenue is still small relative to total farm revenue, accounting for 5.6 percent of farm-related income in 2017.

Although many factors affect an operator’s decision to adopt agritourism, ERS researchers identified farm and regional characteristics associated with higher agritourism revenue. Being located near natural amenities or in close proximity to other outdoor activities had a statistically significant positive impact on agritourism economic activity.

Farms and ranches in more populated counties also earned more revenue, although farms in less populated counties were more likely to adopt agritourism. This may be due to expanded marketing opportunities in more populated areas, whereas farms in more rural areas may be adopting agritourism due to fewer perceived alternative sources of income. For example, farms near urban areas also have higher local food sales, all else being equal.

Lastly, certain types of crop and livestock production – specifically, grapes, fruit and tree nuts, and specialty livestock farms – had a positive and statistically significant impact on agritourism revenue.

You can have water sustainability on the farm

By: Don Cameron

When the King River in California floods, a system of pumps and canals will divert the overflow onto Terranova Ranch’s fruit and vegetable fields.

I STARTED farming in 1981, and the attitude at that time was, “Drill whatever wells you need; pump whatever groundwater you need.” Back then, we used 75- and 100-horsepower wells to get the volume of water we needed. It was just a matter of how much the power cost to pump the water. Water conservation wasn’t really on anyone’s mind because it wasn’t a big issue. It was a matter of if you could pay for it and be profitable growing.

Over time, however, I began to see that the water table was dropping at a rate of about two feet per year. The weather and climate didn’t have a lot of effect on the water level. We had flood periods and dry periods, but we continued to see a drop in the groundwater reserves of about 2 feet per year.

I realized early on that this was a no-win situation. At some point, we were going to run out of water. We had a lot of water storage below us, but as you continue to drop your water table, your electric costs go up to support pumping the water from new depths.

Today, we run 200- to 250-horsepower motors to get the same amount of water out of the ground. And we’ve had wells go dry over the last 10 to 15 years.

FINDING SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

I’ve probably been working on trying to find a solution for over 25 years. We started by doing some tests to see what kind of soil structure we had and whether it would be suitable for groundwater recharge or if we had clay that would prohibit that. For the most part, we found that we could put water on the top of our soils, and it would infiltrate down to the water table.

We’ve learned a lot in the past 25 or 30 years, but we got serious back in 2010 when the farm had a visit from the chief of the USDA-NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service). At that time, it was David White. He visited the farm.

When we met, I told him I had this idea to do groundwater recharge in our region. This meant taking floodwater from the North Fork of the King River, which was causing flooding downstream, and divert it onto our land. We ended up getting a $75,000 grant from the NRCS, and we matched it with another $75,000.

We worked with Phil Bashar, a research engineer from UC Davis, who wrote the initial grant. After the grant was accepted, Bashar came down, and we designed the plan for how we were going to divert the water and get it onto our land.

Then in 2011, lo and behold, we had some flood water show up. It had been a dry year, so this was somewhat of a surprise. We began our project this year, flooding the wine grapes and open ground from February all the way till the end of May.

It was a very simple system, but we were able to put more water on more than 5,000 acres in different fields. We proved this concept could work, so we went looking for more money to scale up our project. In 2012, we received a $5 million grant to
take floodwater off the King River and prevent flooding downstream. Terranova put in $2 million to help fund this project.

SCALING UP
We had to go through environmental verification processes, engineering, permitting, cultural studies and a whole lot of red tape before we could actually get started building the infrastructure. Because of all the delays, our project costs went from $7 million to somewhere between $11 and $12 million. These are additional expenses that we’ve had to fund.

In 2014, the governor signed the Groundwater Sustainability Management Act. Farmers in the area were just starting to hear about this legislation and its effects. Soon, the light began to come on for some of our neighbors. They realized that this recharge project could help keep them farming their ground in the future when controls might come into place on groundwater pumping.

Now, our neighbors support this initiative wholeheartedly. Back then, though, they thought I was crazy when I flooded our wine grapes for months on end.

We began phase one of the project in October 2018, and we will finish that at the end of 2019 or in early 2020. Phase one encompasses our farming operation and covers about 6,000 acres. The project was designed to be scaled up. So we can eventually expand it to the east and north, covering 80,000 acres and include other growers in the region. We tell people that we built a four-lane highway.

IF YOU BUILD IT…
In the mid-1990s, we built about a mile-long canal from the King River that cost us $25,000 and took three weeks from start to finish. There wasn’t any permitting, so we just did it.

For this project, we went back in and put control gates right up the river, and then, we put a large canal that travels to the north east for about a mile. With the canals in place, we’re building the pumping stations. We’re putting in the pumps and piping that will take the water to the next set of canals.

Essentially, the infrastructure moves the water from the north fork of the King River onto and throughout the farmland. That allows us to then put it on the fields and recharge the groundwater. We’re also putting up a berm or small levy around our fields to help hold the water in. And we’re creating little dams around the field, so we can hold more water when it comes. It’s a really involved process.

BETTING THE FARM ON GROUNDWATER RECHARGE
I knew that flooding our grapes wouldn’t kill them. Back in 1983 when Silicon Valley had record flooding, I would drive along the San Joaquin River up to the farm. I noticed in the bottom of the river channel that there was a vineyard. It had water that was probably four feet deep.

The water stayed from January until the first of August, and I watched the grapes continued to grow through the spring and early summer, and eventually, they dropped the water.

I stored this tidbit of information away. It came in handy when we started our project. I knew if we were careful, we wouldn’t kill the grapes. We did, however, watch the grapes closely.

In late May, when the air temperature got up above 95 degrees, we found the grapevines developed issues from warm water temperatures in the fields. Cold water holds more oxygen, so when the water warmed, the grapevine started to turn a bright yellow. We immediately drained the water below the root zone. And within 10 days, the vineyards were a beautiful dark green again. We ended up having a normal harvest.

Full Article: https://bit.ly/35NT52Z
On-farm solar grows as farmers see economic rewards-and risks

From struggling dairy operations to massive grain operations, farms are starting to see the light as on-farm solar proves to be an important income stream.

STEVE Pierson switched from raising conventional dairy cows in confinement to grazing the animals on organic pasture for a simple reason: they kept getting sick. He had heard and read about the fact that cows that ate grass had healthier immune systems, since their bodies are designed to digest grasses, not the grain used as feed at most dairies. The transition did make the cows live longer, and he also began to notice other environmental benefits, such as healthier soil and more perennial grasses.

“I didn’t understand at that point the far-reaching benefits that [grazing] can have…and it started me on this journey to sustainability,” he said. “That’s what led us to investigating solar and sustainable energy practices on our farm.”

Pierson runs his organic farm in Saint Paul, Oregon, 30 miles south of Portland, with his wife and three children. He’s a member (and sits on the board) of the national dairy co-op Organic Valley, and the family’s farm is one of about 350 within the co-op’s network of more than 2,000 farms that has installed solar energy systems. Organic Valley says it is helping its member-owners install solar because it’s a relatively easy win-win scenario—a means for farmers to bring costs down amid a bleak farm economy while simultaneously reducing fossil fuel consumption.

Organic Valley’s goal is to triple the number of farmers it helps with solar installations over the next few years. It has dedicated staff members supporting farmers as they navigate the installation process and access grants; company staff have been in Washington, D.C. advocating for an extension to the federal tax credits that help farmers afford the upfront cost.

The company’s efforts aren’t happening in a vacuum. Although the solar energy industry and agriculture have been at odds in the past due to competition for valuable farmland, there appears to be new momentum behind a push toward installing more solar panels on farms. (There is also growing interest in agrivoltaics, dual-use solar installations in which crops grow and animals graze below and around panels, but those systems are much less common.)

According to the 2017
Census of Agriculture, the number of farms with solar panels increased nearly 150 percent between 2012 and 2017, from 36,000 to 90,000. Even American Farmland Trust (AFT), an organization dedicated to preserving agricultural land, is promoting agriculture and solar “co-location.” AFT just hosted an event last month for Long Island farmers called, “Combating Climate Change: Solar Energy, Farming, and the Future in New York.”

“Renewable energy is a natural fit for America’s farmlands. When you put a solar array or wind turbine on a farm, it pays dividends both economically and environmentally,” said Gregory Wetstone, president and CEO of the American Council on Renewable Energy (ACORE). “We’re just scratching the surface of the partnership potential.”

**PLANTING (AND PAYING FOR) PANELS**

“The commitment to sustainability is waking up before the sun and farming in a way that supports ecosystems—and solar has been part of our on-farm work for years,” said Stanley Minnick, Organic Valley’s energy services and technology manager, during a presentation at the Solar Energy Industries Association conference in November.

Minnick was at the event to present the results of a project the company had completed at its corporate headquarters. After installing solar panels on three rooftops, investing in both solar and wind farms, and forming creative alliances, the company’s operations are now powered by 100 percent renewable energy.

But with a network of dairy farms across the country, Organic Valley’s energy footprint is much greater across the supply chain. Which is why, Minnick said, the co-op committed to helping farms evaluate, implement, and afford solar systems several years earlier.

“We’ve had a formal sustainability program for over 10 years and it really did start with renewable energy,” Nicole Rakobitsch, Organic Valley’s sustainability manager, told Civil Eats. Rakobitsch oversees an on-farm solar team, which reaches out to member farms and educates them about the opportunity to install solar arrays on their farms. Team members also offer technical assistance around what size system is appropriate, conducts site assessments, and more. They can also help farmers tally costs and write grants for programs like the U. S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s Rural Energy for America Program (REAP).

That piece is crucial for small and medium-scale farmers because the up-front installation costs are so high.

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Early bird registration deadline for Women Managing the Farm is January 17

THE early bird registration deadline for the Women Managing the Farm conference is coming up on January 17, 2020. Breakout sessions have been added to the website at https://bit.ly/30uiCxb. Attendees can choose six of 30 breakout sessions on topics ranging from livestock management, financial options, farm succession planning, coping with stress, farm policy, crop marketing and many others.

The award-winning Women Managing the Farm conference is set for February 13-14, 2020, in Manhattan, Kansas. Since 2005, the event has brought together women farmers, rural business leaders and landowners. The Women Managing the Farm conference provides a supportive setting in which women can develop the skills, resources and knowledge needed for success in a competitive agricultural environment.

Registration for the conference is available at https://bit.ly/2RgHX9p, with an early bird rate of $150 available through January 17. After January 17, registration is $175.

Conference sessions are designed to keep women up-to-date on the latest advancements in agriculture and thriving within their rural communities. During the two-day conference, attendees select from presentations covering many topics, including farm finances, relationships and health, agricultural and estate law, crop production and marketing, management and more. Attendees also choose networking sessions tailored to the different roles women hold, such as agricultural partners and helpers, independent producers, absentee landowners, ag industry career women and business managers.

Full Article: https://bit.ly/374oFus

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