

The Agri-Tourism Boom

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Over the past decade, farmers have found a way to turn their production farms into an entertainment and tourism business. The terms agritourism, agrotourism, or agritainment have been coined to describe this new trend. Virginia law describes this new trend as “*any activity carried out on a farm or ranch that allows members of the general public, for recreational, entertainment, or educational purposes, to view or enjoy rural activities, including farming, wineries, ranching, historical, cultural, harvest-your-own activities, or natural activities and attractions. An activity is an agritourism activity whether or not the participant paid to participate in the activity.*” (Code of Virginia § 3.2-6400) (VT WEBSITE** WEB). In other words, this new trend has transformed the everyday farm into an educational experience for the public, including educational, recreational, and entertainment features. This new and enticing business has attracted a 20% population growth, for permanent as well as seasonal residents and tourists and 24% employment growth. Many view the agritourism business as a booming and successful venture for the community as well as the farmers, but some skeptics say that his business has led to negative economic and social impacts (GREEN PDF** WEB5).

One major reason that farmers have introduced the agritourism aspect to their farm is due to lack of incentives for farmers. The agritourism feature of the farm has brought farmers a new market, resulting in more income. It has linked agriculture and production a more recreational and educational aspect. Agritourism has benefited farmers in ways that sole production farming had not in the past. It has given farmers the opportunity to not only grow their business but to also grow their knowledge of production and the environment. Activities that have benefited the environment while rewards farmers include: “accommodations in building renovations, on-farm consumption or selling of organic foods and beverages, educational programs and training in areas such as organic gardening, compost making, wild herb collection and drying, traditional food and beverage processing, and sensitizing guests on the rational use of natural resources” (PAPER **AND WEB4)

Agritourism not only benefits their and their income, it also benefits the community in a number of ways. It can “better the rural environmental quality and can attract more tourists.” This new influx of tourists can benefit the community as a whole as it may increase permanent population and in turn boost the need for goods and services. This added population can offer new development for the community and provide more employment as well. Recreation counties, on average, “had more than double the rate of employment growth of other rural areas.” The employment growth generally offers residents more job opportunities, enabling some unemployed residents to find jobs and employed residents to find better jobs. Overall, it contributes to rural well being, “increasing local employment, wage levels, and income, reducing poverty, and improving education and health” (PAPER* AND WEB3)

The community can also benefit from agritourism because it provides an educational aspect for the public. Due to the increase in consumer and material interests, the development of cities has increased. As a result, this has led to a decrease in the number of farms in skirting areas. Many families and young children do not experience life on a farm and, thus, have a weak understanding of the need to care for the environment and provide food locally. The agritourism business provides this through many educational programs such as: “how to’s,” picking a pumpkin, going on hayrides, and petting farm animals. This educational benefit really adds to the community and raises awareness of the importance of growing food locally and supporting local farms. Also, for adults, the understanding of the organic production of goods can “increase consumer interest and confidence in purchasing organic products from local farms.” It can also eliminate the complex network of the relationship between the producer and consumer. It can become an easier one-step process between the farmer and consumer. Understanding local production can alleviate the difficulties from buying from mass manufactured companies. It can also generate additional income for local organic farmers. In one study, 90% of tourists want to buy organic products directly during their agritourism trip (CITE**). In addition, tourists who have experienced the local farm life, 78% of them said they would continue to buy organic products. The education of locally produced goods plays a significant role in the growth and success of local farms. Temporary and permanent residents are the driving force behind the success of agri-tourism businesses. Residents can continue to support farmers in their transition from production farming to an agri-tourism business (PAPER* AND WEB2)

Overall, studies have found that agritourism and agri-development results in generally improved socioeconomic well-being. It can lead to higher employment rates and a higher percentage of working-age residents who are employed. Income and earning levels are also positively affected (GREEN**)

Even though the transition to the agritourism aspect of farming has provided many opportunities for employment, development of the community, and a growing understanding of crop production, it also has negative drawbacks that some believe could offset the positive production. Because many of the agritourism businesses consist mainly of hotels, restaurants, farms, and other service-oriented jobs, this can lead to an increasing amount of unskilled jobs. The employees can face low-wage jobs and lack of benefits that could ultimately depress local wage and income for the entire community. The more of the workforce that is employed in these unskilled, low-wage jobs, the more agritourism could increase poverty in the local community. As a result, it could affect the levels of education, health, and other aspects of community welfare. The rapid growth associated with this development could strain the local infrastructure, leading to problems such as road congestion. The overworking of roads could cause the aesthetic value of the community to decline as well (CITE**)

For all of this to work fluidly, we must find the perfect recipe between maintaining an operational community, apart from low-wage jobs and declining aesthetic features, while aiding the agritourism business to boost the community's development. One study suggests blending the two worlds together: maintain the eco-organic growing and producing crops, and add the agro-ecotourism aspect as well. This is an optimal choice to connect the two together because both are centered on conserving nature, protecting the environment, and sustainable development. This blending will limit the development scale of tourism and the number of tourists would be more environmentally friendly. It will also maintain the support of local consumers, not affecting the farmers production and income. With this merging, many benefits can come out of combining an organic production aspect of farming to a tourism aspect. It can create an additional value of organic agriculture, in particular recreational value. It can provide opportunities for local families to enjoy educational and hands-on work on the farm that many lack experience in. It can also connect local food supply with the demands in the tourism industry, in particular organic products. The local farmers who produce crops each year can enter into a new market for goods. The ever-expanding tourism business can be a new venue to sell and teach consumers about organic produce (CITE**)

Overall, organic agriculture can become an enticing tourism resource and attract tourists to visit rural areas, and eco-organic tourism can spark more economic assistance than organic production itself. Consequently, the gain of organic agriculture is not only within the commodities and goods economy. Organic agriculture has the possibility to become an important part in service economy and experience economy when it is coupled with the tourism industry (CITE**)