

## **General Topic**

### **Culinary Trails as a Cluster-Building Strategy for Maine-Branded Farm Products**

## **Problem statement**

Maine farms provide residents with local food and employment along with the rural character that contributes to the state's high quality of life and its destination brand. Over the last decade, however, the number of Maine farms has decreased 14% while acreage has declined 16% (Census of Agriculture, 2022). Moreover, Maine imports over 95% of all food consumed within the state (New England Feeding New England, 2024). One strategy for reversing these trends is agritourism.

Agritourism offers a variety of benefits to producers, enabling them to increase sales, generate supplemental income, attract new customers, and create jobs. However, most studies are limited by their focus on agritourism's impacts at the establishment (e.g., individual farm) level versus regional or industry-wide impacts. More research is needed to examine the impacts on a broader scale.

Culinary trails are emerging as a new framework to organize, market, and brand the signature assets of a region, shaping the identity of places (Andéhn & L'Esper Decosta, 2021; Nazariadli, et al, 2018; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020); promoting rural economic development (Van Sandt, et al, 2019); branding distinctive local food products (Che, 2006); and increasing the contribution of tourism, agriculture and fisheries to GDP (Dhungana & Khanal, 2023; Rossi, et al, 2017).

To achieve these positive outcomes, farmers, fishermen, and other food producers must work together to organize and market assets. In fact, agritourism can function as an industry cluster, a geographic concentration of suppliers, producers, and service providers in a related industry that improves productivity and performance across the value chain (Porter, 1998; Ruiz-Labrador et al, 2023; Wulandari et al, 2024). Beyond wine tourism, no study has explored how farmers and fishermen work together as a cluster to address the challenges of their regions and industries. Additional research is needed to explore how farmers and fishermen view the benefits and challenges of agritourism for their industries and what strategies or approaches members use to work together to support agritourism for their industry.

## **Research purpose**

The purpose of this exploratory qualitative research study is to examine how individual farmers and fishermen who participate in a culinary trail perceive and describe the benefits and challenges of agritourism to their industries and their regions along with the strategies and approaches these groups use to work together to promote agritourism. At this stage of the research, culinary trails are defined as a route or zone that organizes and promotes product-specific assets into a cohesive theme, highlighting producers, history, culture, and related activities.

## **Broad research questions**

1. How do individual farmers and fishermen perceive and describe the benefits and challenges of agritourism to their industries and regions?

2. How do farmers and fishermen describe how their members work together as an industry cluster to promote agritourism, for example, through strategies like cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration?

#### Table of Research Methods

Research Questions	Questions	Observation
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Q1: How do individual farmers and fishermen perceive and describe the benefits and challenges of agritourism to their industries and regions?	4-7	
Q 2: How do farmers and fishermen describe how their members work together as an industry cluster to promote agritourism, for example, through strategies like cooperation, communication, coordination and collaboration)?	8-12	11.a.
Reflection	13-16	

#### Sampling Plan for Interviews

For the purposes of the EHD 571 pilot project, I will employ both purposeful and convenience sampling. The convenience approach will be represented by reaching out to two producers affiliated with the Maine Cheese Guild and Maine Fibershed. Both approaches will allow me to beta test the interview protocol with gatekeepers who are also producers amongst the target population.

For the larger dissertation study, the sampling plan will be implemented through a gatekeeper approach whereby the executive director or president of each trade group invites all members who engage in agritourism to participate in the research study through an email. Interviews will be conducted with 10 producers who participate in one of three culinary trails (10 producers x 3 trails = 30 interviews): Maine Fiber Trail (28 members), Maine Cheese Trail (21 members), and Maine Oyster Trail (57 members). The researcher will use a maximum variation sampling approach to choose willing participants that considers the following criteria:

- **Range of agritourism activities**, including direct sales, education, outdoor recreation, and special events.
- **Geographic dispersion** that considers four clusters of activity: Southern Maine, Central Maine, Midcoast Maine, and Downeast Maine. There are no producers located in Northern Maine.

Each interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes and be recorded via an audio device. Interviews will take place on-site at the producer's place of production presuming that multiple interviews in geographic clusters, e.g., Midcoast Maine, can be consolidated into 1-3 days in order to maximize logistics of mileage, time, and overnight travel.

Other data sources that may contribute to an understanding of cluster-building activities include digital marketing assets plus organizational meeting minutes and annual reports.

## **Semi-Structured Interview Protocol**

### **Background information**

1. Tell me about your business. Probe tenure, history, personal journey.
2. Describe the agritourism activities you offer visitors.
3. Describe your primary motivation for participating in agritourism.

### **Challenges & benefits of agritourism to industries & regions**

4. How would you describe the state of agritourism in your industry sector?  
  
Potential probes: How has agritourism changed in recent years for your sector?
5. In your view, what kinds of benefits does agritourism provide to your industry association? If none, explain why not.
6. In your view, what kinds of challenges does agritourism help your industry overcome? If none, explain why not.
7. In your view, what kinds of challenges does agritourism help your region address? If none, explain why not.

### **Industry-level strategies to promote agritourism**

8. How do members of your industry work together to promote your businesses/products?
  - a. Probe: To what extent do you see cooperation or collaboration among members in this effort?
  - b. Please share some examples.
9. Please describe the specific strategies your industry employs to promote agritourism.
  - a. Same for the region.
10. How do members of your industry communicate internally to implement these strategies?  
  
Probe: How would you describe the quality of internal communication? Please share examples.  
  
How could internal communication be improved if at all?
11. Describe the external messages your industry shares with the public to promote your products. Please give some specific examples.
  - a. What stories do you share with visitors as part of your agritourism activities?
  - b. How do these compare with your association's messaging?

12. Please describe your industry's partnerships with outside organizations to promote agritourism.

a. Your region's?

## Reflection

13. In your view, what has been the most successful approach used in your industry to promote businesses like yours through agritourism?

a. Your region's?

14. How would you improve your industry's promotion of agritourism?

a. Your region's?

15. Is there anything else you would like to share that I haven't asked you?

16. Please provide me with feedback on my interviewing skills.

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