

Northeast Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program
Producer Grant Final Report

Agri-tourism: Educating the public and generating on-farm income

The goals of this project were to provide a model for generating income from existing on-farm resources (i.e. marketing the farmer's knowledge and experience and the aesthetic, educational and entertainment attributes of farms to the general public). We also wanted to educate visitors about the importance and value of locally produced food.

Since we received this grant, the farm has changed. We are no longer raising poultry for sale (due to occasional predator problems, liability, and getting tired of killing all those chickens!), our farmstand is open on weekends only now and we set up a farm market at Smugglers Notch Resort twice a week during the summer. We have found it more profitable to go to the people rather than trying to lure them to the farm.

The project had mixed success. We set up interactive farm tours that included stations on vegetable production, free range eggs, pastured meat birds, and raising lamb and wool on pasture. We put out a flyer advertising this and our Farmer-for-the-day program, and had approximately 40 individual and family tours over the 2 year project. This only generated about \$400 from the tours but each family or group probably spent an average of \$15 in the farmstand after the tour (rather than buying produce, they tended to buy syrup and other VT products). That was a nice by-product of the tour. The Farmer-for-the-day program worked well and ended up attracting mostly local children. We ran it for 5 weeks and had an average of 4 kids a session. Our break even number was 3 kids (to pay the teacher/coordinator and food and supplies). If we could average 6 kids/week it would be a profitable use of time.

We discontinued both projects for several reasons. Without a formal link to Smugglers Notch Resort (i.e. a planned tour with bussing), we weren't getting high enough numbers for our tours. People vacationing there tend to stay on site. I think this could be overcome with better coordination and planning as well as having the longevity to build up a word of mouth clientele. The main problem was that I would rather be doing my farm work than leading tours. It takes a lot of patience to deal with some of the people who are truly clueless about agriculture. Most of the guests were friendly and appreciative though. The Farmer-for-the-day program had potential, but again no-one wanted to make it a priority, and Christina who was coordinating it preferred having her summer off. We like our lifestyle the way it is!

Where we are now: I still do several school tours every year and I enjoy interacting with the kids. We maintain a petting pen with goats, sheep and a pot-bellied pig. We set up an educational display on fleece to fiber in the farmstand, and encourage people to look around the farm, check out our poultry and poke around in the garden. I think with the right farm and personnel, agri-tourism has potential, because people are looking for something different and educational to do. Location and networking with tour guides would be key to a successful program.

I appreciate the support of the SARE Program and would be glad to speak with anyone who would like further information on our dabbling with the agri-tourism industry.

