

# An Overview of the Montana Agritourism Fellows Program: Developing Leaders to

## Advance Sustainable Agritourism

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### Program Justification

- Today's societal disconnect from the agricultural industry is increasing as the public has less direct contact with food and farming.
- At the same time, there exists a growing touring population looking for educational, physical, and cultural, hands-on experience.
- Agritourism, defined as "the business of establishing farms as travel destinations for educational and recreational purposes," offers a viable option to help reconnect the public to the food system and bridge the growing gap of knowledge between consumer and producer (Schilling et al., 2006, p. 200).
- The additional income stream, coupled with the ability to diversify operations, have been found to be strong motivators for starting an agritourism business.



### Program Development

- The program was created in 2021 by faculty at Montana State University, MSU Extension, and the state agritourism steering committee.
- Funding was provided by a Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Professional Development Program Grant.
- The program goal is to establish a cohort of leaders, the Fellows, who can effectively educate others on diversification opportunities, sustainable practices, and the economic, environmental, and social impacts of agritourism.
- Participants include extension and tourism professionals, agricultural producers, and government officials.

#### Get to Know the Fellows

SEEING AGRITOURISM IN ACTION  
AT THE MAHLSTEDT RANCH



During Seminar Two, fellows had the opportunity to visit one of their own: Tana and Tienna Canen at the Mahlstedt Ranch. Well-known for their Quarter Horses and Saliers/Angus Cattle, the operation has introduced agritourism as a way to share the story of agriculture with others.

By integrating the use of outbuildings as venues and places to rent, the Canens hope to welcome hunters, stargazers, birdwatchers, wedding parties, hikers, and visitors of all kinds to the Mahlstedt Ranch. The fellows experienced the welcome atmosphere created by the Canens as they were served lunch and given a hayride tour of the mare pasture. Tienna's puppy, Oakley, also helped greet the fellows, keeping several of them company throughout the afternoon.



Photos: (Top) Fellows watch the mares and take in the scenery of the Mahlstedt Ranch (Circle, MT). (Bottom Left) Fellows enjoy the hayride tour of the ranch. (Bottom Right) A foal tries to steal a quick snack.

### Program Implementation and Evaluation

- The program is being offered as a two-year cycle of four seminars consisting of workshops, tours and networking opportunities with speakers on different topics of sustainable agritourism.
- Seminar topics focus on building skills and knowledge to promote agritourism in the areas of sustainability, leadership and communication, business management, advocacy, event planning and media relations. Funding, resources, and networking opportunities are provided.
- Program outcomes include the creation of a community education digital repository, an educational outreach plan, a state agritourism conference, and initial formation of a state agritourism association.
- A post-then-pre survey is facilitated after each seminar allowing participants to more accurately identify self-reported changes for program impact and mid-program interviews were recently conducted as a formative assessment tool.