

# Understanding Your Agritourism Visitor

By Dax Schieffer and Susan Joy

## This guide will discuss:

- Montana's Tourism Industry
- Agritourism definition and activities
- Resources for operators

Agritourism is a young and growing tourism activity in Montana. In 2017, the Montana legislature passed HB342 which defines "Agritourism" as a form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production or agricultural processing with tourism in order to attract visitors to a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business for purposes of entertaining or educating the visitors. Viewing agritourism broadly, activities can include education, entertainment, hospitality, recreation, and direct sales.

Visitors to Montana seek authentic experiences in wide open landscapes, connection with nature and culture, and the opportunity to learn about local food production. Montana is divided into six tourism regions, each with a distinct marketing strategy and target audience.

Montana has over 27,000 farms and ranches operating on more than 58 million acres of land. Only 2% report agritourism as a farm-related source of income. Operators interested in developing an agritourism activity are encouraged to use existing tools, research, and resources to identify the target visitor as part of their business plan.

## Tourism in Montana

Tourism is the second largest industry in Montana, with Agriculture in the number one spot. In 2023, 12.5 million visitors to Montana spent \$5.45 billion and generated \$414 million in state and local taxes. Top spending categories include fuel, dining, lodging, guides/outfitters, groceries and retail sales.

Travel trends in Montana and across the West indicate that visitors seek authentic experiences in places where they can connect with others, learn more about the unique culture and history of the destination, and enjoy the outdoors.



Sustainable Agriculture  
Research & Education

The Marketing and Communications team at Montana Department of Commerce conducted visitor and audience research ahead of launching the 2024 Warm Season Campaign. Research identified Montanans and residents of Wyoming, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Saskatchewan as the target audience. These markets access Montana primarily by road and air. Within this primary audience, the target visitor is interested in road trips through expansive landscapes, enjoying history, recreation, and unpretentious experiences. These visitors are solo adventurers, families with teens, or older adults enjoying retirement. The Marketing and Communications team created four rural focused itineraries to appeal to this target audience.



The 2023 Montana legislature passed Senate Bill (SB) 540 which directed the Department of Commerce to create new strategies to invest bed-tax revenue to disperse visitors to rural and under visited places in Montana. SB 540 specifically identified funding targets for rural tourism, attraction projects, tourism and agritourism grants, and promotion.

The Tourism Grants program at the Department of Commerce will offer new agritourism grant opportunities in the next year; designed to encourage development of projects that combine Montana's two largest industries.



## A closer look at Tourism in Montana

Montana's top two industries are Tourism and Agriculture generating revenue of \$5.45 billion and \$6.22 billion respectively. Agritourism is a young and growing tourism activity in Montana and in broad terms connects people to farms and ranches. In Montana, "Agritourism" means a form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production or agricultural processing with tourism in order to attract visitors to a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business for purposes of entertaining or educating the visitors. Within that definition, an operator can develop agritourism activities in categories of education, entertainment, hospitality, recreation, and direct sales.

Tourism regions in Montana promote assets and activities to visitors seeking an authentic experience in the most beautiful and diverse landscape.

The six tourism regions are Western Montana's Glacier Country, Central Montana, Southwest Montana, Montana's Yellowstone Country, Missouri River Country, and Visit Southeast Montana. Within each tourism region are Convention and Visitor Bureaus (CVB) also called Destination Marketing/Management Organizations (DMO). Each CVB or DMO promotes the city and surrounding area, while the region promotes the entire region.

The Marketing and Communications team at the State of Montana markets and promotes the entire state to targeted audiences within the state and in specific audiences in other states. Farms and Ranches in each region should connect with the closest CVB or region director to learn more about specific marketing and adver-

tising strategies. Region and CVB directors often partner with makers, producers, growers, and small businesses to highlight unique aspects of the destination.

Research is an important part of any business strategy, including adding an agritourism activity to a farm or ranch. The Department of Commerce uses research publicly available through the University of Montana Institute for Travel and Recreation Research (ITRR), in addition internal economists, and purchasing research and data from a contracted agency of record. Research and data from ITRR is available for free to any operator interested in understanding the demographics and travel patterns of Montana visitors.

In 2024, tourism promotion from the Department of Commerce will use data and apply it toward new strategies directed by the 2023 Senate Bill (SB) 540 to invest bed-tax revenue to disperse visitors to rural and under visited places in Montana. SB 540 specifically identified funding targets for rural tourism, attraction projects, tourism and agritourism grants, and promotion. The Tourism Grants program at the Department of Commerce will offer new agritourism grant opportunities in the next year; designed to encourage development of projects that combine Montana's two largest industries.

Scan the QR code below to visit the Montana Tourism Grant and Loan Program:



## Next Steps for your agritourism operation:

- 1 Identify the Tourism Region and CVB or DMO relevant to your location.
- 2 Select the Agritourism Activity (or Activities) appropriate to your operation.
- 3 Review the Four Components of the Tourism Economy: Attraction, Accommodation, Access, and Awareness. How does your operation meet the 4As and where are the gaps?
- 4 Use free research and data available from Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research to determine your target audience.  
<https://www.umt.edu/tourism-recreation-research/>
- 5 Take advantage of free listing sites through VisitMT.com and Abundant Montana to list your agritourism activity.  
<https://abundantmontana.com/search/>  
<https://brand.mt.gov/Programs/Marketing/VISITMT.COM>
- 6 Seek funding through Montana Department of Agriculture Business Development, Grants and Loans  
<https://agr.mt.gov/GTA>  
<https://agr.mt.gov/Topics/E-G/GTA-Pages/GTA-BAM>
- 7 Seek funding through Montana Department of Commerce, Tourism Grant Program  
<https://brand.mt.gov/Programs/Office-Of-Tourism/Tourism-Grant-Program/>





**Tourism in Montana can be as turbulent as Agriculture. Market trends will change as the demographics of the US change. Any operator interested in adding an agritourism activity to their farm or ranch should consider volatility in the tourism industry, just as they would the commodity market. Become familiar with your market, notice where growth happens in the industry and the types of activities and experiences visitors seek. Continue to seek out research and data to inform decision making and stay connected with tourism industry partners.**

### **About the authors:**

Dax Schieffer is the Director of Voices of Montana Tourism. Voices of Montana Tourism exists to educate audiences on the importance of tourism promotion funding—which comes from a lodging tax paid by overnight guests. Since its creation in 2011, Voices has led the effort with education and outreach to communicate the immense value a sustainably grown tourism industry provides for all Montanans.

Susan Joy is the part of the Office of Tourism at the Montana Department of Commerce and works directly with Made in Montana members to promote authentic and locally made products. The Office of Tourism team at the Montana Department of Commerce works directly with tourism industry partners and small businesses to promote Montana’s spectacular, unspoiled nature and charming towns by coordinating opportunities throughout the state.