

Sustainability and Agritourism

Sustainable Agritourism Production Practices

By Tienna Canen

In this guide you will find:

- An Agritourism enterprise can help build sustainability into a farm or ranch business
- Action steps to determine if agritourism as an enterprise is a good fit for your ranch/farm business
- The options in agritourism are endless and will fit nicely into most farm/ranch's existing business models

The definition of sustainability is easy—the ability to maintain or support a process continuously over time—but going about maintaining or supporting a ranching/agriculture operation in the long term is not as easy as that! To me the definition of sustainable agriculture or sustainable agritourism is about as broad as the number of letters in the word sustainability; it takes multiple forms. Having access to quality food and fiber is a necessity as a society and would be impossible without agriculture. Unfortunately, farmers and ranchers across the country (and the world) are struggling to make their operations succeed due to extremely slim profit margins, government regulations, inflation, uneducated consumers, high start-up costs, and competition from other employment options.

Fortunately, for some ranching and farming operations, incorporating agritourism might be just the trick to help educate consumers on food production and agricultural practices as well as provide another income stream to bring in family/employees and increase their operation's income. By making our agriculture operations sound and sustainable, we in turn can make agritourism a sustainable and viable option for tourists and agriculture operations.



If we choose to ignore the fact that many farm and ranching businesses are struggling to survive, that our soils and other natural resources are being depleted and mis-used, and that a huge majority of the population do not understand or, quite frankly, care where their food comes from, we are on a path to disaster as a civilization and economy. We have to make sure our consumers have accurate information about the food they are eating and the food and nutrition choices they have. It's imperative that our agriculturists have a business model that can survive so they can keep producing the food, fiber, and items we use every day.

We must also come up with ways to bring in family back into the business and be creating opportunities for first generation ranchers to break into the business. As stewards of the land, protecting and regenerating our natural resources is a non-negotiable.



By adding an agritourism enterprise to the farm or ranch, we are able to:

- 1) better educate our consumers,
- 2) create more resilient ranching/farming business models, and
- 3) better care for the land and resources.

All of this makes farming and ranching more sustainable. Agritourism can look very different for different people, but that's the fun and unique part of it!



The options in agritourism are so diverse. For some agritourism, looks like hosting farm tours and selling vegetables, while for others it is milking goats, riding horses, and hunting. Other opportunities in agritourism might include star gazing, wedding venues, women's retreats, skiing, hiking, homesteading classes and workshops, digging for dinosaur bones, or harvesting flowers. The options and opportunities in agritourism are as vast as the stars in an Eastern Montana night sky! By determining your goals, strengths, and abilities, an agritourism enterprise can be started with hardly any start-up expense, making it a great way to build sustainability into your farm or ranch. There are risks involved as with anything, but with good planning beforehand, the benefits will far exceed the risks and challenges.

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The graphic features a background image of a herd of horses running across a dry, grassy field with rolling hills in the distance. The text is overlaid on this image. In the top right, there is a logo for 'Montana Moments' with a silhouette of the state of Montana and a pair of antlers. In the bottom left, there is a small map of Montana with 'Mahlstedt Ranch, Inc. MT' written next to it. At the bottom, there are social media icons for Facebook and Instagram, along with the company name and contact information.

Getting started in sustainable Agritourism:

To determine if agritourism is an option to build sustainability into your farm or ranch agriculture business you must first determine the needs of the business as well as the goals for the future. Is the business needing to find ways to:

- Bring other family members back to the place?
- Hire local community members?
- Create more cash flow?
- Increase profit?
- Build in risk management?
- Make a land payment?
- Use a resource or infrastructure that isn't being utilized otherwise?
- Educate consumers on their specific products?
- Market and sell their products?



There are a lot of questions to ask the already existing business before adding the agritourism enterprise. Determine the needs of the ag business before moving on to the next step.



- Once the needs are established, write down the goals of the already existing agriculture business. Both short-term and long-term goals. What role does an agritourism operation play in achieving these goals?
- Next, determine the competitive advantages of your potential agritourism enterprise. This is what sets you apart from others. Are you in a location that already has tourists coming through by the bus load (ex. Glacier Park), or are you in an extremely remote location where people who want to get away from other people and be one with nature can explore and re-connect with the land? Do you have access to farmers markets to sell your meat, vegetables, and other products or do you have the ability to ship to consumers across the county? Do you have accommodations for lodging or do you have the ability and resources to have school kids out to learn about your operation for one afternoon a month?
- What are the strengths and backgrounds of your team? If the people involved in the business do not like interacting with people, agritourism might not be the right enterprise for you. But if you have an extraverted team member who loves interacting with people and showing them how to saddle a horse, then they would be a good fit in guiding rides on the ranch. Capitalizing on the strengths and abilities of the team will not only make the endeavor more successful, but will make it more fun and enjoyable for all involved.



- Consider your limiting factors. This could be time, financial resources, or distance to town.
- Don't spend too much time on being a negative Nancy, but it is important to determine what could go wrong and how to handle those specific situations. Plan for the worst – expect the best!
- Are there any other additional opportunities agritourism could open up for you as an individual or a business?
- What are the specific goals of the agritourism enterprise?
- Determine your target audience and clientele.
- Reach out to others doing similar agritourism endeavors and learn from them. Research and ask questions as much as possible. Remember the sustainability of your ag business will be partly relying on the success of your agritourism enterprise.
- Enjoy the process! It's exciting to grow into agritourism!

Other factors to consider to ensure your agritourism operation is sustainable:

- The risks of an agritourism enterprise are going to vary with the model of your business and what you are offering to your guests and clients, but here are some considerations.
- For every agritourism business no matter what the offering is, determining what you will need for insurance and liability is #1 priority. This is probably the most challenging part of this business, but it can't be neglected. Shop around for insurance and make sure you find a good fit with an agent you work well with. You will be communicating with them a lot, so it's important you are on the same page. Talk to an attorney to determine what you need for waivers and signs on the property. Investing time and money into insurance and liability protections will pay you back in ten fold.
- What's your emergency protocol? Think about the injuries and accidents that could happen while participating in your agritourism activity. Make sure everyone on your team is trained on how to handle an emergency from interacting with the guests during the accident, caring for the injury, and filling out the appropriate paperwork. Consider having all employees CPR-certified.
- Weather is a factor to consider. If the weather turns bad, how will you handle rescheduling, refunding, or working through the weather?
- Time – Do you have enough time and energy to commit to the enterprise? Or do you need to hire out some of the components like social media management, bookings, or landscaping? Don't stretch yourself too thin. It's okay to ask for help!
- Money and finances. How much money are you willing to contribute to the enterprise to start-up? Will you need to take out a loan or invite an investor to be involved? If you don't have much money to put into the enterprise at the start, don't let that stop you! You may have to get creative but there are some really great things you can do in agritourism with minimal start up expense! Create a budget to help keep you on a financially stable position.
- How will you advertise and market your offerings? How will you reach your target audience?
- It's really important to weigh all the possibilities, risks, and opportunities before jumping off into your new agritourism enterprise. Weighing the good and bad beforehand will make it easier to handle any situation you encounter on your journey to sustainability!

About the author:

Tienna Canen is a 5th generation rancher on her family's diversified farm and ranch operation near Circle, MT (Mahlstedt Ranch Inc.) where they are known for raising quality Quarter Horses. You will find Tienna either sitting in a tractor seat or sitting atop a horse most days, but the view is much better horseback! Tienna is passionate about agriculture education, improving and maintaining soil health, and the ranching lifestyle. Her background in production agriculture combined with 6+ years of horseback guiding and tourism experience in South Dakota and Arizona. She has helped create the unique Western Ranching Experiences offered on Mahlstedt Ranch. Montana Moments LLC was established in 2022 as a way to bring in a new income stream to support and sustain multiple families on the ranch. The tourism opportunities on the ranch are endless and so unique, including but not limited to: ranch tours, lodging, hiking, hunting, bring your own horse to ride, retreats, workshops, event venue, and so much more! Tienna loves the opportunity to educate and connect people with the land and their food through tours and conversations and finds that there is no better way to do this than through tourism.



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- Montana Agritourism Fellows: www.montanaagritourism.com
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