

# **Agri-tourism in Northern Alberta**

Prepared for the  
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

Prepared by:  
Beverly MacKeen  
Beverly A. MacKeen Ph.D. & Associates  
(780) 454 - 8686

September, 2002



## **Table of Contents**

Agri-Tourism in Northern Alberta.....	1
Introduction .....	1
Methodology .....	1
Background .....	2
Rural Festivals and Special Events .....	4
Resources Available for New Operators.....	5
Discussion .....	8
Appendix A - Sources .....	9
Appendix B - Contacts .....	10

## **Agri-Tourism in Northern Alberta**

### **Introduction**

The Northern Alberta Clearinghouse Project is a partnership of northern colleges who each year identify a number of priority research topics. The partner colleges are: Fairview College, Grande Prairie Regional College, Keyano College, Lakeland College and Northern Lakes College. The investigation of relevant issues as well as industry requirements for the tourism industry in Northern Alberta colleges was one such priority topic. The agri-tourism investigation is the second part of the larger tourism paper.

### **Methodology**

Contacts were established at both Economic Development and Agriculture and Rural Development. These contacts led to the two staff members from Agriculture and Rural Development who have responsibility for a relatively new agri-tourism initiative. Both were extremely helpful, providing sources for much of the information that follows.

A number of relevant websites were searched. These searches led to particularly useful documents that were downloaded and subsequently included as information in this report. Agriculture and Rural Development maintains a site that contains all of their instructional materials for agri-tourism. The site also provides links to other sites on the same subject. The University of California, Davis campus, Small Farms Program, provided some of the information contained below.

## Background

Farming is an industry that is subject to severe income fluctuations caused by unfavourable weather conditions, national and international market forces, international monetary policies and occasionally, disease. In order to stabilize their farming operations, many farmers have undertaken farm diversification measures including growing specialty crops, producing value-added agriculture products, organic farming and offering u-pick opportunities to neighbouring residents.

A number of farmers are interested in exploring the practicality of adding an agri-tourism component to the farm as a means of further diversifying.

Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development uses the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture definition of agri-tourism as follows: “ --- the economic activity that occurs when people link travel with agricultural products, services or experiences”.

The University of California, Small Farm Center, has a slightly broader definition. Agri-tourism is a “a commercial enterprise at a working farm, ranch or agricultural plant conducted for the enjoyment of visitors that generates supplemental income for the owner”. Agri-tourism is a subset of a larger industry called “rural tourism” that includes resorts, off-site farmers’ markets, non-profit agricultural tours and other leisure and hospitality businesses that attract visitors to the countryside.

Farms and ranches that offer agri-tourism experiences to the travelling public have existed in Canada for over twenty years. Several Canadian provinces have recognized the potential for agri-tourism and have prepared strategy-related documents about the industry. These include Newfoundland, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Nova Scotia. Alberta has not yet produced a policy document. Nonetheless, as indicated above, the province has two full-time staff dedicated to an agri-tourism initiative.

Quebec has the highest number of “country vacation” destinations (200). The Atlantic provinces and Ontario report the second highest number of farms and ranches offering country vacations each at 175 working

establishments. The Prairie Provinces combined report a total of 135. British Columbia has the fewest.

The distribution of Alberta farms and ranches offering country vacations indicates that northern farmers have not adopted tourism ventures as readily as their more southerly colleagues. The Alberta Country Vacations Association reports 21 such ventures south of Calgary, 9 in central Alberta and 7 north of Edmonton. It should be noted that not all farm/ranch operations offering country vacations are members of the organization and thus are not included in the count. (The Alberta Country Vacations Association (ACVA) was established in 1971 to help develop and promote farm/ranch experiences in the province.)

Agri-tourism is gaining popularity in other parts of the world. In the United States, there were approximately 2,000 farms offering vacation packages. During the 1900's rapid growth occurred in the northwestern states. Europe is experiencing rapidly expanding agri-tourism. Austria, which has a history of farm vacations going back to the 19th century, provides a total of 21,000 farm accommodations.

There are many reasons for the growing popularity of agri-tourism experiences. *Country Vacation Enterprise* reports that the primary reasons include:

- Nostalgia – a desire to “go home”
- A curiosity about rural lifestyles
- Learning something new such as learning to ride a horse or about modern farm practices
- Health consciousness – homegrown food and fresh air
- Favourable exchange rates for international visitors

In Alberta, there are two types of farms and ranches that have accommodations and recreation activities. The first type is farm/ranch stay. These operations offer overnight accommodation in a family home, a cabin or campsite. Breakfast is either provided or self-catered. The second is a farm/ranch vacation. These operations offer longer visits, averaging 3-5 days in length. Visitors stay in the family home, cottages or on-site cabins .

Activities, both on and off-site are included as part of a package. The farm/ranch also serves as a staging area for day excursions.

Country vacation operators offer a variety of experiences. Some include horseback riding as the main attraction, while others feature a quiet relaxing farm experience. Others invite guests to participate in a traditional working ranch lifestyle.

Other additional agri-tourism enterprises exist in Alberta. They include farm tours, festivals, rural petting zoos, bed and breakfasts, horseback riding, fruit and vegetable u-picks, wild boar hunting, teahouses, country stores and barn dancing.

The University of California, Davis, names a number of additional possibilities.

**Outdoor Recreation**

- Wildlife viewing and photography
- Clay bird shooting
- Off-road vehicles

**Accommodations**

- Youth exchange
- Elder hostel

**Direct Agricultural Sales**

- Agriculture related crafts

**Educational Experiences**

- School tours
- Garden/nursery tours
- Agriculture technical tours
- Exotic animal farm

**Entertainment**

- Concerts or special events
- Hunting/working dogs trials/training

**Rural Festivals and Special Events**

Festivals and events can include agricultural festivals, the celebration of village historic sites, country fairs or world-class urban events. Examples include the Smoky Lake Pumpkin Festival, the Markerville Icelandic Festival, the Tofield Snow Goose Festival, the Millarville Country Fair and the Calgary Stampede.

Agri-tourism festivals and events in Alberta are usually:

- Short duration (a weekend)
- Related to a seasonal theme
- Representative of a heritage theme

### Resources Available for New Operators

There are many resources available to individuals wishing to explore starting an agri-tourism operation. The Alberta government has an online publication available for beginning tourism operators; *Getting Into Tourism: A General Overview of Developing a Tourism Business in Alberta*. The document contains a checklist against which one can measure oneself for the characteristics of tourism operators. It also provides a template for use in developing a business plan. The user can complete a feasibility study outline that includes how to do a financial analysis. The paper has a listing and explanation of all regulatory controls affecting tourism businesses. As well there is an outline of how to conduct human resource planning for a future business.

An overview document concerning agri-tourism, About Alberta Agri-tourism is found at <http://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/general/agritour.nsf> Information provided is a general introduction to on-farm tourism activities. The site also provides many of the links cited in this paper.

Those interested can subscribe to an on-line newsletter as well. This is found at:

<http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/economic/mgmt/diversification/agtour.html>

Links to instructional materials Minnesota State University are located at [http://www.msue.msu.edu/valueadded/ag\\_tourism1.htm](http://www.msue.msu.edu/valueadded/ag_tourism1.htm)

Individuals interested in conducting farm tours have access to assistance in starting a farm tours operation, *Providing Farm Tours*, prepared by Alberta

Agriculture and Rural Development. A farm tour operation is suitable for farms that have something unique to offer.

The fact sheet leads the reader through a number of points to consider.

- Do I have any products to sell that can provide additional spin-off revenue?
- Are there other attractions in the area that would interest a tour group? Can I partner with any of my neighbours to provide a full day of activities for visitors?
- Do I want people visiting my property on a regular basis?
- Do I enjoy talking to groups of people? If I have a fear of public speaking, am I willing to take steps such as joining Toastmasters?
- Am I prepared to do the work involved in offering tours? A tour can last 30 minutes to over an hour. Preparation typically takes two to three times longer.
- What size group can I handle? Is there sufficient parking? Is there access for tour busses?

Additional topics covered in the fact sheet are as follows:

- Family buy-in
- Target market
- Advertising
- Safety and risk management
- Clear signage
- Liability insurance
- First aid
- Charging a fee
- Facilities (tidiness, washrooms, garbage cans, etc).
- Staff
- Legal considerations
- Availability and timing of tours
- Preparing the presentation
- The tour



- Visitor evaluation

Another document found through the Agriculture and Rural Development website is *Creating a Business Plan*. This is one of a series of monographs developed by the University of California, Davis Campus, Small Farms Center. The monographs are part of a series of Fact Sheets for Managing Agri- and Nature-Tourism Operations. The content is specific to a farm operation:

- Create a mission statement
- Create a marketing slogan
- Set measurable goals and objectives
- Gather relevant information from reputable sources
- Describe your farm or ranch recreation enterprise
- Describe your product or service
- Define your customers
- Compete or complement
- Develop a marketing strategy
- Management and key employee résumés
- Complete a human resource plan
- Identify the types of insurance you will need
- Identify current and future fixed assets
- Detail start-up expenses
- Forecast sales (include a best-case and worse-case scenario)
- Create a financial plan
- Develop a monthly chart of operating expenses
- Create necessary bookkeeping and forecasting documents

Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development has posted a descriptive outline of a bookkeeping and forecasting document on their website: *Country Vacation Profit\$ ... profit planning tools in a start-up country vacation enterprise*. This fact sheet provides specialized business information on developing and operating a country vacation enterprise. The information was generated by a group of operators who arrived at a consensus on investment, bookings, costs and revenues for a start-up two-room enterprise.

The document is more than a fact sheet in that it is in workbook format, designed to have the individual calculate his/her own financial information in each section.

## **Discussion**

Agri-tourism is becoming a growth industry in Alberta. The province's reputation for clean, wide-open spaces and large untouched areas provides attraction in a number of parts of the world.

With only a small number of agri-tourism enterprises in northern Alberta, it appears that there is an opportunity for expansion.

Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development has two full-time staff devoted to the coordination of activities for this sector. Among other services, they have developed a comprehensive web-site containing useful fact sheets and workbooks for individuals interested in exploring the start-up of an on-farm agri-tourism business.

Department staff indicated that they are pleased with the range of services they have been able to provide to date. However, they also indicated a possible role for partnerships with northern colleges. Specifically, the preference would be for use of government material, with the advance permission of the department and after consultation. With so many rural families having internet access, the recommendation is for the development of on-line modular learning materials.

The development of on-line materials is logical, given the probability that no single region would have sufficient critical mass to offer profitable classroom experiences.

The opportunities for growth and the willingness of Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development to enter consultations with colleges indicates real potential for interested colleges that wish to explore the possibility of offering agri-tourism programs.

---

---

## Sources

---

---

*Country Vacation Enterprise.*

[http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/agdex/800/888\\_2.html](http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/agdex/800/888_2.html)

*Country Vacation Profit\$ ... profit planning tools in a start-up country vacation enterprise.*

[http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/agdex/800/888\\_1.html](http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/agdex/800/888_1.html)

*Getting Into Tourism: A General Overview of Developing a Tourism Business in Alberta.* Alberta Economic Development.

[http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/economic/mgmt/diversification/getting\\_into\\_tourism.pdf](http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/economic/mgmt/diversification/getting_into_tourism.pdf)

*Providing Farm Tours.*

[http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/agdex/800/888\\_4.html](http://www.agric.gov.ab.ca/agdex/800/888_4.html)

*Creating a Business Plan.*

<http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/>

---

---

## **Contacts**

---

---

### **Sharon Stollery**

Agri-tourism Development Specialist,  
Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development.....(780) 968 – 3514

### **Bill Reynolds**

Agri-tourism Development Specialist,  
Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development.....(780) 427 – 4424

### **Bruce Wilson**

Assistant Deputy Minister  
Alberta Economic Development.....(780) 427 – 6654