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Agritourism and the Tennessee Agritourism Initiative An Overview for the Great Smoky Mountain Sustainable Tourism Summit

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Agritourism – also called agritainment, agricultural tourism, agrotourism or farm tourism – has several definitions. Most definitions combine elements of the tourism and agriculture industries and involve bringing members of the public to farms. In Tennessee, agritourism has been defined as

an activity, enterprise or business which combines primary elements and characteristics of Tennessee agriculture and tourism and provides an experience for visitors which stimulates economic activity and impacts both farm and community income.

Agritourism enterprises may offer activities or attractions such as corn mazes, pumpkin patches, on-farm retail markets, pick-your-own fruits, farm animal exhibits, on-farm bed and breakfasts, on-farm fee fishing, wagon rides, nature trails, wineries, choose and cut Christmas trees and more.

Agritourism sustains farm and rural economies. This industry provides farmers and agri-entrepreneurs a method by which they can add value to their farm resources and increase farm revenue. Dollars spent at the agritourism operation multiply through the local economy, and agritourism visitors stimulate rural economies even more by visiting local businesses on their way to and from the farm.

Agritourism sustains the history and culture of agriculture. Visitors to agritourism operations, who are often several generations removed from a farm, experience a glimpse of life on the farm and learn about food and fiber production. Agritourism provides some farmers with a greater opportunity to earn a living from agriculture thus keeping farms in production.

Agritourism sustains the environment by preserving open space on farms. By strengthening farm economies and educating the public about the importance of agriculture, farmland is more likely to be preserved rather than transitioned into alternative uses.

In 2003, the Tennessee Agritourism Initiative (TAI) was formed to develop and support the agritourism industry in Tennessee. The TAI is a partnership of the Tennessee Departments of Agriculture, Tourist Development, Economic and Community Development and Transportation, USDA Rural Development, the University of Tennessee Extension, including the Center for Profitable Agriculture, the Tennessee Farm Bureau Federation, and the newly formed Tennessee

Agritourism Association. USDA Rural Development provided \$235,000 of initial funding to conduct initiative efforts with initiative partners contributing additional funding and in-kind contributions.

The main goal of the initiative is to “increase farm income and make a positive impact on rural communities in Tennessee.” A four-pronged approach has been implemented to reach this goal:

1. An inventory of the industry and survey of agritourism visitors in Tennessee
2. Training and education efforts for agritourism operators and service providers
3. Marketing and promotional efforts for the agritourism industry
4. Development of an agritourism operator’s association in the state

The initiative partners began efforts by studying agritourism programs in other states and developing a definition of agritourism for use in Tennessee. Two studies of agritourism enterprises and one study of agritourism visitors were conducted. Results of these studies can be found on the Center for Profitable Agriculture’s Web site at <http://cpa.utk.edu>.

Training and education have been a major component of the initiative. Efforts included a combination of coordinated regional workshops and multi-day conferences. A comprehensive guide for agritourism entrepreneurs was also developed and released. Information gained and assistance received was expected to increase sales by respondents to the 2004 industry investigation by an average of 14.4 percent. A complete list of educational materials and information on educational events can be found on-line at <http://cpa.utk.edu>.

Another major component of the Tennessee Agritourism Initiative was promotions of the industry. Promotion activities included listing of agritourism venues on the Tennessee Department of Agriculture and Tennessee Department of Tourist Development marketing Web sites; press releases, advertisements and sponsorships; and regional agritourism brochures. Agritourism entrepreneurs participating in the 2004 industry investigation expected initiative-sponsored promotions to improve their sales by an average of 10 percent.

Finally, initiative partners have provided support to agritourism entrepreneurs working to develop a statewide agritourism operators association, the Tennessee Agritourism Association. This association is part of initiative plans to create a sustainable agritourism effort in the state. Learn more about the TAA at www.visittnfarms.com.

The Tennessee Agritourism Initiative has been successful in positively impacting rural communities and increasing farm income in the state. The impact of the initiative has potential to grow into the future as agritourism entrepreneurs continue to implement knowledge learned through educational programs and use tools developed, customers first introduced to agritourism enterprises through initiative promotions become lifetime customers and spread the word about their experiences to others, and the agritourism operators association continues its work.