



**Corn Maze**





# Takes Root in the Southeast

Most Southerners are generations removed from their agrarian roots, if they ever had any. Agritourism, which combines elements of modern-day agriculture and tourism, is growing in popularity across the region as urban residents seek to play in the dirt again.

When Bentley Curry began growing and selling Christmas trees on his small family farm in northeastern Louisiana in 1981, he didn't realize that he was part of a budding trend in agriculture. Initially, Curry and his wife were simply looking for a way to wring more income from their farmland, but within a few years they were embracing agritourism—short for agricultural tourism—as a way to supplement and diversify their income. From October to mid-December, they welcome about 20,000 visitors to their farm, which started with just the tree farm and a lake stocked with mallards and catfish. Over time, their operation has grown to include a three-acre corn maze, a pumpkin patch, and hayrides, among other activities.

Sitting at the intersection of two of the Southeast's largest economic engines—agriculture and tourism—the growing agritourism industry is helping rural communities tap into the region's dynamic tourism market. Agritourism covers a wide variety of operations, from pick-it-yourself farms and farmers markets to corn mazes and farm stays. While the term is relatively new, the practice has been around far longer, said Dora Ann Hatch, agritourism coordinator with the Louisiana State University (LSU) Agricultural Center. Although agritourism really picked up in the late 1990s, she traces it back to at least

the 19th century, when well-heeled urbanites took summer trips to the country to escape hot, crowded cities. `

## **A diversion born of pragmatism**

Today's more modern version of agritourism is driven by a host of other factors, in addition to the desire to escape urban settings. For one, financially squeezed small farms and ranches across the United States are looking for ways to increase revenues and diversify their sources of income. While some farmers cultivate niche products, such as baby organic greens or cage-free chickens, or seek off-farm employment, others are touting tourism to generate additional revenues. Reflecting what has been a nationwide trend, more than 2,600 southeastern farms are involved in agritourism, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Indeed, farm-based recreation is an important source of income for southeastern farmers, who account for a large portion of all U.S. farms receiving recreational income.

Agritourism "is a logical and necessary transition for many farms," said Jane Eckert, founder and CEO of Eckert AgriMarketing. "We're seeing a growing interest because [farmers] are not making enough money in production agriculture to sustain the farm, much less carry it into the next generation." Small



**A growing interest in the sourcing of food is one of the factors fueling the growth of agritourism, which combines elements of farm life with recreation.**



The USDA's 2007 agriculture census took note of these efforts, stating that "producers are finding that diversification can make their operations more profitable by providing additional income from agritourism."

#### **Both crops and cash grow**

Farms engaged in agritourism and other recreational services generated an average income of \$24,276 in 2007 on top of their traditional farm income, up more than 230 percent from 2002, according to the USDA. Further, agritourism creates a direct market for farm products. For instance, many farmers set up farm stores that sell value-added products such as jams, cheeses, eggs, and other goods to earn additional income on top of an admission fee to their venue, said LSU's Hatch.

In addition to supplementing farm income, agritourism also benefits the surrounding community—perhaps most importantly by bringing more tourists to rural areas. The influx of tourists generates additional revenues for local restaurants, shops, and other businesses, bringing a welcome infusion of outside dollars. These "imported" dollars often stay within the local economy and are recirculated through additional purchases of goods and services or wages paid.

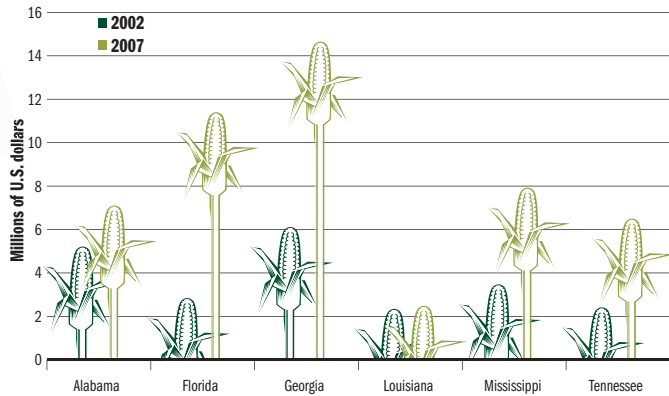
"Agritourism is a great economic development tool," said Kent Wolfe, director of the University of Georgia's (UGA) Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development. While the various operations vary in terms of size and revenues, "the successful ones are able to hire local folks," he explained. Further, a recent report by the USDA's Economic Research Service surmises that agritourism, while still a small segment of the larger agriculture and tourism industries, "could play a more important role in the U.S. economy in the future, both as an alternative source of

commercial farmers (those with gross cash income between \$10,000 and \$250,000 annually) saw their share of U.S. production halved, to roughly 20 percent, between 1991 and 2007, said the USDA. Meanwhile, more than half of small farms lost money in 2007. Further, depending on the type of activities that are offered, agritourism revenue can be a more constant and reliable source of income than commodity sales.

The pressures driving farmers to consider alternative sources of income are many—including competition from larger farms and overseas products, variable commodity prices, rising production costs, and harsh weather conditions, such as the droughts that plagued parts of the southeastern United States in recent years. "Farmers are looking beyond what they can grow," Eckert said. They are considering what they have, be it a secluded lakeside cabin or an apple orchard, and asking, "What would people pay for this experience?" she explained.



## Value of Agritourism and Recreational Services



Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture's 2007 Census of Agriculture

farm income and as a way for rural communities to diversify and stimulate their economies.

In Georgia, agritourism had an economic impact of more than \$107 million (direct and indirect impacts), according to a 2005 study conducted by UGA's Center for Agribusiness and Economic Development. In addition, the industry generated more than 1,000 full- and part-time jobs that paid more than \$21 million in wages. State and local government coffers benefited, too—agritourism contributed \$4.75 million and \$2.5 million in state and local taxes, respectively, the 2005 UGA study said. Across the Southeast, farms' agritourism and recreational activities generated more than \$50 million in revenue, according to the USDA's 2007 census (see the chart).

### Tourists remain grounded

Agritourism may also provide an important educational experience for a population whose agrarian roots are becoming increasingly distant with each generation. Only about 17 percent of the U.S. population lived in nonmetro areas in 2009, the USDA estimates. In past generations, most people had at least one relative they could visit on a farm. These opportunities have become increasingly rare as the number of family farms dwindle. However, agritourism helps urban dwellers connect to the agrarian past, even if it is not their ancestors' past.

For instance, one popular activity among agritourists, the farm stay, allows people to experience farm life firsthand. Farm stays typically involve visitors paying for accommodations on a working farm. The accommodations can be as rustic as a sleeping bag on a hay-covered barn floor or as comfortable as a luxury hotel. Most farm stays give tourists an opportunity to help with the daily chores as well as participate in a range of activities that showcase farm life. "People want to get out of the city and experience nature, and agritourism gives them an opportunity to do that in a controlled environment," Curry said.

Agritourism's growing popularity can also be attributed to its alignment with a number of consumer trends. For instance, over the past several decades Americans have trended toward shorter, more frequent vacations. Further, the 2007–09 recession's impact on consumers' pocketbooks has caused travelers to look for vacation destinations that are affordable and closer to home. A 2010 Ypartnership/Harrison Group survey confirms the trend. It found that family travelers in particular are more likely to take a vacation less than 50 miles from home—the so-called "staycation" that has gained popularity in recent years. As a result, low-cost agritourism operations that are within a couple hours' drive from metropolitan areas are well-positioned to capitalize on these trends.

Another trend behind agritourism's growth is consumers' increasing awareness of food production. Spurred by the "locavore" movement—which encourages consumption of locally grown meats and produce and a renewed emphasis on nutrition—interest has grown in where and how food is produced. Indeed, in a recent survey by the National Restaurant Association, chefs identified locally sourced meat and produce as two top industry trends. "We are generations removed from the farm, and people do not understand where their food comes from," explained Hatch. "Agritourism helps people, especially urban dwellers, learn about what life on a farm is really like and what farming is all about."

### Future of agritourism: Fad or lasting trend?

"It's not a fad—agritourism is here to stay," said Eckert. Agritourism may be the next big thing in agriculture, but will the trend sustain farms over the longer term? Proponents of the industry say that there is plenty of room for it to grow, especially since each farm is unique. At the same time, experts like Hatch encourage farmers to add new features often to keep up a steady stream of visitors. And while many farms have successfully embraced tourism as a way to sustain their farms, it's not for everybody, said Curry. "You've got to have an extroverted personality."

State and local governments and other organizations are beginning to take agritourism seriously, too. A number of southeastern states have enacted laws that support farmers involved in agritourism. For instance, Louisiana passed a law in 2008 that affords limited liability protection to agritourism operators. Additionally, Florida and Georgia have passed laws that allow agricultural land to be used for agritourism while still maintaining an agricultural classification for tax purposes.

While it is still unclear how much agritourism will grow, those involved in the industry maintain its importance as a diversification strategy for farmers and as a way to protect an important part of the southeastern economy and cultural heritage. ■

*This article was written by Lela Somoza, a staff writer for EconSouth.*