

AG Strategies

Agriculture Business Strategies

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Establishing Ag Tourism Routes

The purpose of this factsheet series is to help producers and processors understand the key elements needed to manage a business. The factsheets also discuss some of the essential components used to develop a business plan and assess the profitability of a business venture.

Self-guided touring (or driving) routes allow visitors to take in a variety of ag tourism-related experiences. When considering establishing a touring route, keep in mind that:

- route potential can be determined by first considering if there are enough ag tourism attractions that are reasonably close together
- touring routes may be developed to capitalize upon one day, weekend, seasonal or year-round attractions
- touring routes are attractive to individual, family and group travellers, as well as pre-and-post convention participants
- once a touring route is established, it can be used to create travel itineraries for tour groups or pre-and-post convention offerings

There are several steps to establishing a tour route:

1. form a working group of route partners
2. set objectives for the working group
3. plot the route
4. planning details
5. considerations for individual sites and site hosts

Form a working group of route partners

Bring together a working group of people interested in establishing a touring route, including:

- local agriculture tourism operators
- farmers and ranchers interested in opening their gates to the public
- local agricultural groups, such as ag societies and ag fieldmen
- local businesses (restaurant, saddlery, green house, farmer's market, etc.)
- resource people like economic development and tourism officers

Set objectives for the working group

There are several questions the working group must answer before setting up a touring route.

What are goals of the working group in setting up a touring route?

Establish measurable goals and prioritize them. Goals may include:

- raising awareness of ag tourism operators
- increasing product sales
- creating new revenue streams
- providing an entertaining, educational experience
- reaching a new market
- encouraging repeat business

Where should the route be?

There is a need to establish what the route boundaries are and whether the tour stops are close to a large urban centre from which a reasonable driving time radius can be determined.

What message should visitors take away?

It is important to decide what statement or impression organizers want the tour to make. Determine if visitors will be encouraged to return by offering them a return incentive or product samples. Also, consider whether the tour will result in valuable word-of-mouth promotion.

Who is the target audience?

Determine how far people will travel and who the tour group wants to target; families, adults, boomer couples, special interest groups, other farmers and ranchers, etc.? It is important to find out if site hosts are interested in hosting bus groups or individual cars.

Consider the market segments identified by Travel Alberta (March 2004). These include: Accomplishers, Comfort Seekers and Real Relaxers. Contact Travel Alberta at: www.industry.travelalberta.com for more information about these market segments. Additional market research studies are available from Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development at: www.agtourism.ca.

What will appeal to the visitor?

Establish what is unique or characteristic about the region. Are there historic buildings, visible conservation practises, beautiful landscapes, alternative crops or animals, new technology or organic production sites?

When should the tour be in operation?

When trying to decide when a tour should operate, there are many issues to consider. They include:

- examining the impact the season has on the appearance of the tour sites
- deciding if the tour will be a one-day event, a weekend event, a seasonal attraction or open year-round
- establishing the operating day(s) and hours as having people visit farm sites on a regular basis requires a large time commitment from each operator
- ensuring each stop along the route is committed to being open consistent hours
- evaluating opportunities for piggy-backing with other complementary rural events

Will the working group establish criteria and standards that the participating operators must meet?

Operator standards might include:

- location within a certain geographic area
- agreement with touring route objectives
- the ability to provide a short activity, demonstration, tour, story telling or game that engages the visitor
- proof of public liability insurance
- ability to park a minimum of 10 vehicles on-site or permission from neighbours for increased parking
- a contingency plan for inclement weather
- attendance at working group meetings, training sessions and work bees
- awareness and compliance with health regulations if there is to be food for sale on-site
- payment of a buy-in fee for those selling products, resulting in entitlement to profit sharing
- commitment to abide by the *Freedom of Information and Privacy Act* if personal information is being gathered on-site

What overall program or activities would be offered at each site?

Is there interest in providing information, an interactive hands-on experience, entertainment, demonstrations, product samples or a variety of these? Consider partnering with complimentary businesses that don't have an outlet with established venues. This would allow visitors access to additional products, services and activities from the area such as food, crafts, leather, pottery or woollen goods.

What is the visitor's expected length of stay?

Short visits allow time to see a variety of the places included on the tour. Longer visits allow for increased activities at each site.

Ensure the working group discusses:

- the expected volunteer time commitment
- if an upfront dollar commitment is needed as a kick-start and the value of that commitment based on the projected budget
- if educational sites and not-for-profit facilities can join at a reduced rate

In addition, according to the regional area covered, the following facilities need to be geographically convenient (but not necessarily provided by each operator):

- washroom facilities (temporary or permanent)
- a picnic area
- handicapped-accessible areas

Plot the route

All resources, scenic vistas and attractions should be plotted on a map of the area. Try to break up long drives with interesting stops. Include operators that offer food and beverage, accommodations and retail opportunities. Determine if there are any livestock, crop, market garden, nursery or greenhouse, machinery or agricultural practises that could be featured. Can ag-inspired artisans, crafters or musicians be included? Finally, determine any additional partners and identify gaps in the route.

Next, refine the route identifying any major attractions that could act as a catalyst to readily draw visitors to the area. Build the new or emerging attractions around the major ones.

Planning details

Do not rush the planning process as there are many details to work out in order to be successful. Don't reinvent the wheel. Look at other successful examples throughout this process. Some examples are included at the end of this factsheet.

Establish group task teams

Establish work teams to ensure that the tasks are spread out among the partners. Key work teams may include:

- financial
- promotions
- route logistics
- sponsorship
- food and beverage
- ticket sales
- volunteer recruitment
- group tours
- packaging
- not-for-profit charitable group

Develop farm etiquette guidelines

It is important for the working group to identify farm etiquette rules for the tour. These rules should be posted at each site and be published in the passport/guide book, if one is available. Examples of farm etiquette rules are:

- parking vehicles in designated areas
- keeping within the areas of the farm identified by the host
- leaving gates as they are found
- taking litter home
- not picking any wild or domestic flowers
- keeping clear of the farm machinery
- not walking through private gardens
- respecting the animals and the property of the place being visited
- leaving pets at home or have them on a leash
- keeping an eye on children
- asking permission before feeding farm animals or pets
- bringing a cooler to keep any food purchases fresh

Design a map or passport

A map or passport for the route is necessary and should point out and explain the rural addressing system. The map or passport should include:

- township and range roads
- distance between rural roads, showing how the numbers increase to help visitors from urban areas to follow the map
- route stops, washrooms, picnic areas, accommodations, campgrounds, food and beverage availability, and retail opportunities

- detailed information about each stop and what is offered
- information about the area and its history
- farm etiquette rules

Develop a financial forecast

A financial forecast should include the following:

- a budget and estimated project revenues
- an access fee (per person and per car/van/group) based on the amount of time it took to develop the tour, the expertise being offered, the experience the visitors will have, any costs that have been incurred, any spin-off revenue and what other similar groups are charging
- where the profits will go (divided up, seed money for next year, etc.)
- how ticket sales (pre-sales and on the day) will be processed

As well, ensure that the accepted methods of payment are clearly listed up front. Visitors will appreciate knowing if they need cash, or can use credit or debit cards.

Insurance implications

Ensure that all activities are covered under regular insurance policies. If not, the group may need a policy (potentially under municipal or ag society coverage) or an additional rider on individual site policies for the tour.

Attract sponsors

Sponsors can be helpful in contributing to the success of a driving route. The ways in which they may contribute include:

- financially
- through staff time and resources
- via equipment and expertise

Look at working with the local municipality to help with signage or mapping. The local chamber of commerce may be able to be the call centre where visitors go for information and to buy their passes. Determine what is needed and who may be able and interested in providing it.

Consider signage

The driving route needs directional and location gate signs. This signage needs to be clear, identifiable and should be consistent in appearance. Be sure to check with Alberta Transportation and the municipal transportation department for signage regulations.

Overestimate the number of signs needed. Have a person unfamiliar with the area recommend locations/directions for the signs and do a dry run from different locations to ensure that the signs are easy to follow. At each site there should also be signs designating parking areas and identifying areas on the farm where visitors are and are not permitted to go. Mark potential hazards such as low doorways or uneven ground.

Roadway access

The tour sites need to be accessible for visitors:

- are they near a major roadway and easy for visitors to find?
- are there any road regulations for weight restrictions?
- are there any structures or bridges that large vehicles should be aware of?
- will road construction in the area affect access?

It is important to indicate if sites can only be reached by gravel roads. As well, notify provincial and municipal transportation and highway staff of the intended event.

Washroom availability

Be sure that there are enough washrooms available along the route:

- identify sites that don't have visitor washrooms facilities
- clearly show on the map where each washrooms stop is
- the number of washrooms that are needed will depend on how many people are expected on the tour, how long each visitors is expected to stay at a particular site and where food and beverages will be available
- portable washrooms may have to be brought in for the touring route

Food and beverage opportunities

Food and beverages should be available for purchase within the working group partnership. These provisions are not only a need for the visitor, but also are an important revenue opportunity for the group and partners. If providing food and beverages:

- be sure to meet the local public health regulations
- identify which sites will have food and beverages
- recruit local restaurants, caterers or community groups if sites are not able to handle meals
- consider selling packaged foods as an important revenue generator

One idea for a retail opportunity is to offer picnic catering, such as ready-made picnics for sale on farm sites.

Retail or shopping options

In order to increase revenues for the touring route, include retail opportunities along the route. Some great partnering opportunities can involve ag-inspired artisans that fit with the themes of food, farm, ranch, garden, horse, cowboy and barnyard animals. As well, involve artists, sculptors, photographers, blacksmiths, toy makers, quilters, leathersmiths, silversmiths and wood carvers.

Marketing plan

Develop a marketing plan for the touring route and develop strategies to reach the target market. Some marketing ideas include:

- newspaper advertising
- media releases
- website postings (be sure to keep info current)
- attendance at events (farmers' markets, rodeos, fairs and parades)
- newsletters to existing customers
- a special media tour or media family

Work with Travel Alberta In-Province, tourism destination regions, the area destination marketing organizations and regional marketing groups to develop a marketing plan. Funding may also be available through some of these groups.

Pre-packaged experiences

Visitors may want to buy a pre-packaged experience. Packages could include accommodation, food and beverage, entry passport and even a gift. Use some imagination to create an unforgettable experience. Travel Alberta In-Province offers workshops for this topic area.

One-window access

Establish a control centre that is responsible for answering public inquiries, ticket sales and media support. A 'call centre' should have convenient hours for the public. Consider asking local attractions, the town office, the chamber of commerce or the municipality to be the control centre for the event.

Project evaluation

Ensure mechanisms are in place to measure the success of the project:

- have visitors fill out a questionnaire
- gather feedback from the sponsors and partners
- use the questionnaire to gather a mailing list
- increase the incentive to fill out the questionnaire by offering a door prize
- make it easy for each partner to track attendance and revenue at their site
- use the information gathered for future planning

Considerations for individual sites and site hosts

Creating an experience

Will guests have the chance to see, touch, taste, smell, hear and sample something interesting? Think about any "behind the scenes" opportunities that may be offered. Consider forming a partnership with a local storyteller, artist or musician to make sites come alive.

Managing visitors

Think about how to handle visitors on the site. Will there be guided tours, activity areas around the farm, or scheduled demonstrations? How will people arriving in the middle of a tour be handled?

Facilities

“You never get a second chance to make a first impression.” As an ambassador for the ag tourism operators and support services in the area, it is important to make sure that the sites have curb-appeal, and are neat and tidy. The sites should draw people in and make them want to stop and visit.

Site capacity and amenities

How many people can each site handle (or want to handle) at one time? How will each site handle parking, washrooms, shelter and access for individuals with disabilities? Determine what types of seating are available (picnic tables, benches or lawn seating). Think about the other amenities that the area can offer such as:

- barbecue grills
- picnic areas
- playground equipment

Meeting and greeting guests

Greet all visitors when they arrive, as this will form part of the guest’s first impression. Introduce yourself and begin fostering a relationship with these future customers. Explain the history of the operation and the principles or stewardship practises that your operation has. During the “meet and greet” outline your expectations to them. Point out any safety precautions and hazards. Give a general orientation to the site and outline the experience that they will have. Consider using nametags to make the experience more personable.

Practice

Before receiving the actual visitors, test the presentation program and skills on a practice audience. Also, do a site assessment of the property with others that are not familiar with the site to identify any concerns or potential opportunities.

Be proud of being part of the ag tourism industry

Clean working conditions and a sense of pride of one’s establishment will reap positive rewards:

- keep physical facilities in good repair and ensure that they are clean, bright and free of hazards
- keep the grass mowed and the weeds under control

- provide good drainage and practise good fly, rodent and waste control programs
- try to plan any disruptive property chores around scheduled tours

Be an agricultural ambassador throughout the tour

Let visitors know that the agriculture industry attracts operators who take tremendous pride in being good stewards of the land, water and air resources, and who wish to showcase their properties through ag tourism ventures.

Make the tour relevant and understandable

Speak in terms that visitors will understand:

- find out the level of experience the audience has with agricultural practices and deliver the presentation accordingly
- pick a theme or a key message to convey
- allow time for plenty of questions
- address any common misconceptions that may arise during the tour

Make it memorable

This may be the visitors’ first and only opportunity to experience an agricultural business. There are many ways to involve the public and make their visit a learning, fun experience with hands-on activities. Activities could include:

- milking
- shearing demonstrations
- egg grading
- butter making
- riding in the hay wagon

If providing food samples, be sure to meet the local public health regulations.

Establish a route for an on-site tour

Some suggestions:

- pick the start and end points carefully to create a lasting impression
- determine the areas that people will not be allowed to go and ensure that these non-access areas are clearly marked
- consider where to end the tour; an on-site product sales area is the ideal place to conclude

The on-site team

Be sure to have enough well-trained, friendly and helpful staff/volunteers on-site to guide visitors and answer questions. Recruit volunteers from local organizations if additional people are required. Help will be needed with parking, meeting and greeting, touring, activities or demonstrations, answering questions, housekeeping and sales.

Safety

Have someone available who knows basic first aid and CPR. Be sure to have on hand a well-stocked first aid kit and a list of the emergency service phone numbers.

Biosecurity

Agricultural businesses can be both a source and a recipient of contaminants. Livestock and crops can be damaged by the introduction of diseases carried on the shoes or vehicle tires of visitors. Farms can also harbour contaminants, chemicals and diseases that could be harmful to the visitors. Consider all safety steps and sanitation practises to minimize the risk of biosecurity problems. Have an emergency plan in place in case of contamination. For more information see Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's factsheet, *Ag Strategies: Biosecurity Considerations for Ag Tourism Ventures* (Agdex 888-7).

Animal welfare

When opening an agricultural establishment to the public, operators may encounter visitors with concerns about animal welfare.

Agricultural operations that work with the public should implement livestock management practises that are generally accepted and defensible. Consider asking a representative from the local humane society to visit, inspect and evaluate the operation.

When doing a public tour:

- explain how and why things are done on the farm
- point out the shade, water and feed available to animals
- highlight animal housing that protects them from predators, provides climate control and gives easy access to fresh feed and water

- explain restraining devices or point out the lack of them
- point out practises that make birth less stressful and protect the young
- discuss medical care given to livestock to cure illness and protect against disease
- describe animal handling practises and welfare of the animal
- explain feeding procedures and the basics of animal nutrition

If a confrontation with an animal rights activist occurs:

- stay calm
- keep the conversation brief or move to a private location
- listen for any real concerns
- be knowledgeable

Contingency Plan

Have a contingency plan in place. This plan should cover all possibilities for being unable to open the gates for planned ag tourism experiences. What will happen if the weather is bad, if additional staff are not available and other "what if" scenarios?

For additional information

Consult these other ag tourism clusters for ideas and strategies:

Country Soul Stroll: www.countrysoulstroll.ca

Rural Ramble: www.rural-ramble.com

The Fruit Loop: www.hoodriverfruitloop.com

Loudoun Valley: www.loudounfarms.org

Prince Edward County: www.tastetrail.ca

Silos and Smokestacks National Heritage Area: www.silosandsmokestacks.org

For more information on ag tourism development go to: www.agtourism.ca or contact a new venture specialist at the Ag-Info Centre at 1-866-882-7677.