

“From the Ground Up: Starting A Statewide Agritourism Association”

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Introduction/need for innovation or idea

Agritourism has been one of the fastest growing forms of new enterprises over the last 20 years with significant growth in Montana during the last decade. Agritourism, defined as “the business of establishing farms as travel destinations for educational and recreational purposes,” offers a viable option to help reconnect the public to the food system, sustain the rural lifestyle, diversify revenue streams, and preserve agricultural land for production (Schilling et al., 2006, p. 1). Despite the supply and demand factors that are increasing opportunities for a growing agritourism sector in Montana, limited educational resources and outreach exist to aid current and potential operators with managing the multitude of aspects that make a successful, economically sustainable agritourism business. Currently, Montana agritourism is deficient in the areas of practices, policies, definitions, guidelines, and business development. In this expanding sector, educational resources and answers to questions remain difficult to locate. The lack of an organized forum is a critical barrier to achieving industry growth and success. An association can fill these gaps by increasing the ease of entry for agritourism businesses, reduce the challenges and pitfalls, and create positive spillovers to communities surrounding these operations.

The need for organized public and producer education was confirmed with several state advancements including Montana HB 342 (2017) to define agritourism, an agritourism resource manual (AERO, 2018), a volunteer agritourism steering committee (2020), a statewide Agritourism survey (ITRR, 2024), and various grants awarded improve education, resources, and communications about agritourism. Since 2020, the steering committee has offered the only venue for relevant discussion about agritourism initiatives. Findings from the first statewide agritourism conference and stakeholder listening sessions confirmed the need for a formal association to provide an organized forum for ideas and resources, promote networking, influence public policy, publicize and market events, and facilitate funding opportunities. In 2023, with significant input from this committee, producers, and stakeholders, Montana SB540 created a funding source to generate and promote new business in agritourism. These initiatives have increased producers’ interest in the ability for agritourism to integrate education and economic diversification on-the-farm. However, forming an association requires assistance to navigate the process. As such, a Western SARE grant was sought to create the Agritourism Fellows, a cohort of agriculture and tourism professionals interested to lead these initiatives.

How it works/methodology/program phases/steps

To date, the Agritourism Fellows group completed a two-year leadership program focused on building advocacy for agritourism, hosted the first statewide conference, and formed an executive board for the Association. State and federal paperwork to start the Montana Agritourism Association was filed and approved. The following steps guided the process: obtaining certification from the Montana Secretary of State, formalizing an executive board, creating Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws, filing a 1023EZ, obtaining an EIN, opening a

business checking account, gaining tax-exempt and 501c3 status from the IRS, registering with the Montana Department of Revenue as a Business Tax Account, and completing W9s.

Results to date/implications

In February 2025, the Montana Agritourism Association was officially founded with initial priority areas in education and resources, professional development, lobbying, farm tours, advertising, membership, and an annual conference. Membership includes farmers, ranchers, producers, educators, tourism professionals, and service providers who are using agritourism to grow businesses and strengthen rural communities. The second statewide conference will be held in Fall 2025. Additionally, the Montana Department of Agriculture collaborated with AmeriCorps to create a temporary, full-time AgCorps Agritourism Specialist Position for 2025. This service member is assisting in Association development, building relationships, organizing the Board and conference, and providing programming. The Specialist's role has proven to be crucial in accomplishing the Association's priorities and objectives, providing industry support, and carrying out initiatives. The Association has already been able to achieve several key milestones with this full-time support. However, this role is only funded until the end of 2025. Therefore, a Specialty Crop Block grant (SCBG) was written by the executive board to assist with continuous funding.

Future plans/advice to others

The SCBG was recently awarded to fund a half-time, two-year Agritourism Specialist position and assist with business expenses. This position will ensure agricultural producers have ongoing expertise and stability, maintain momentum to manage on-going industry needs, develop new initiatives, and ensure long-term success. Funds will also be used to support operational fees, travel, annual conference and event expenses, marketing and communications, office supplies, printing, insurance, software, and faculty stipends. Continued funding will be supported by membership services at 40%, conferences, seminars, and events at 25%, training and fee for service at 15%, sponsorships at 10%, and grants at 10% aligning with non-profit benchmarks for revenue and expenses (US Census National Council for Nonprofits, 2025).

Costs/resources needed

Starting an Association requires funding, time, exposure and partnerships. Since 2018, grants provided initial funding to conduct research and outreach; create education, communications and marketing materials; host a conference and events; develop an advocacy program; grow partnerships between tourism, government, and agricultural professionals; and build a leadership team. Association income is projected at \$100,000 annually, with expenses for services, staffing, administration, communications, and marketing at \$75,000 annually. The Specialist will be critical to promote awareness of the Association to accomplish objectives and build membership. It is critical that this person has knowledge and expertise in non-profit and grant management, education and communications, programming, and an understanding of stakeholders.

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