

FROM THE GROUND UP

Starting a Statewide Agritourism Association



Montana
Agritourism

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Introduction/Need

- Agritourism is one of the **fastest-growing sectors** in Montana (AERO, 2017).
- Provides education, recreation, diversification, and land preservation.
- Resources, policies, and definitions are limited.
- Lack of an organized forum creates **barriers to growth** (Nickerson, Black & McCool, 2001).
- A **statewide Association fills these gaps** → easier entry, fewer pitfalls, stronger communities.

80% of agritourism operators say they need financial, marketing, or legal support to succeed.

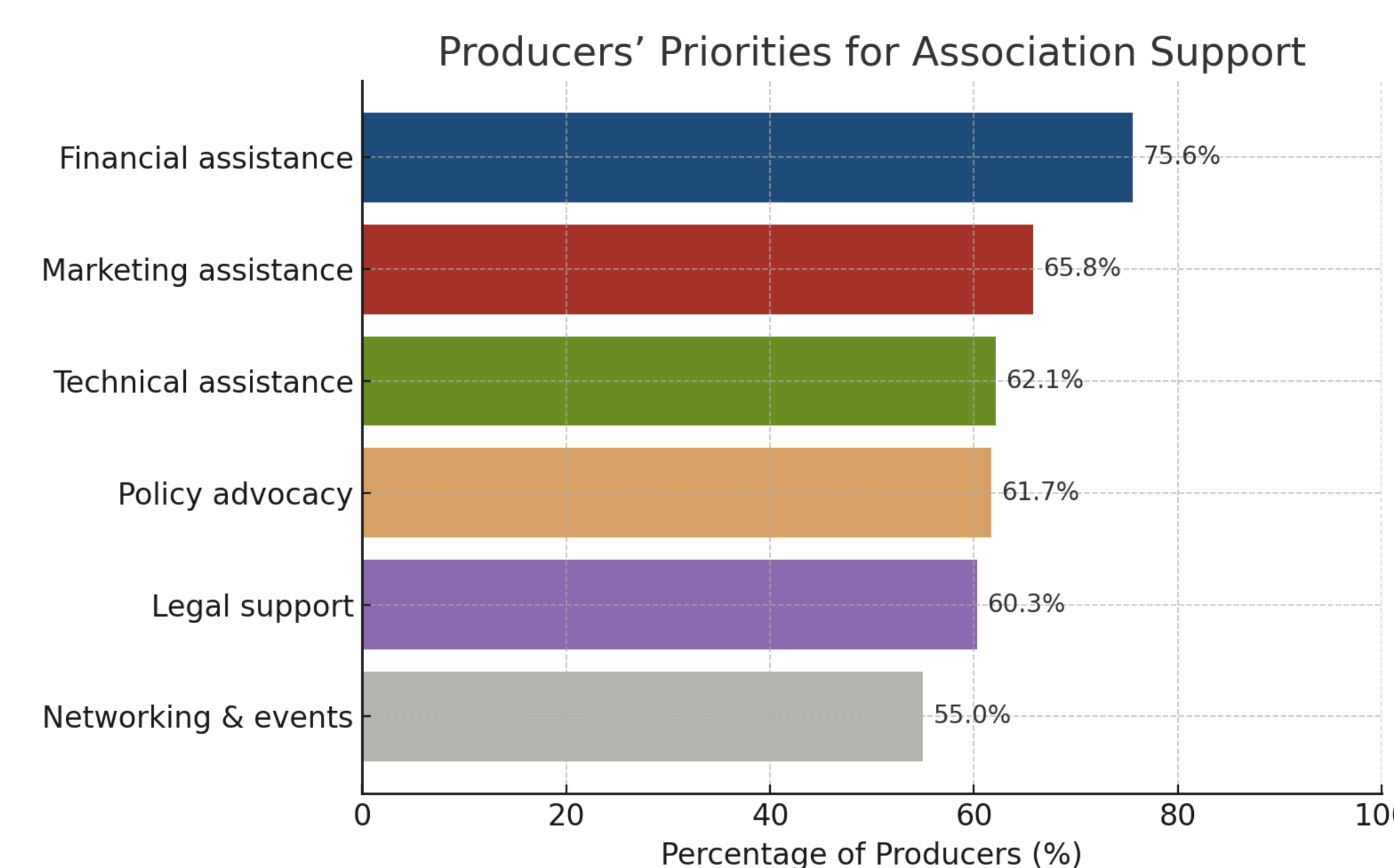


Objectives

- **Establish** a statewide agritourism association to support producers and strengthen rural communities.
- **Build** an organized forum connecting agriculture and tourism through education, advocacy, and shared resources.
- **Offer** professional development and reduce barriers for new and existing ventures.
- **Provide** stability and a collective voice to sustain Montana's agritourism sector.

Methodology

- 01 >> A Western SARE grant **funded** the creation of the Agritourism Fellows, a cohort of agriculture and tourism professionals, to learn about and promote the industry.
- 02 >> The Fellows **completed** a two-year leadership program on advocacy, capacity building, and industry development.
- 03 >> The Fellows **hosted** Montana's first statewide agritourism conference, providing a forum for producers, educators, and tourism partners.
- 04 >> An executive board was **formed** to set priorities, guide strategy, and represent agritourism at state and regional levels. Legislation was passed to support agritourism growth (Montana HB 342, SB 540).
- 05 >> Legal and IRS requirements were completed – incorporation, nonprofit status, bylaws, and tax registrations – **culminating in the 2025 launch of the Montana Agritourism Association.**



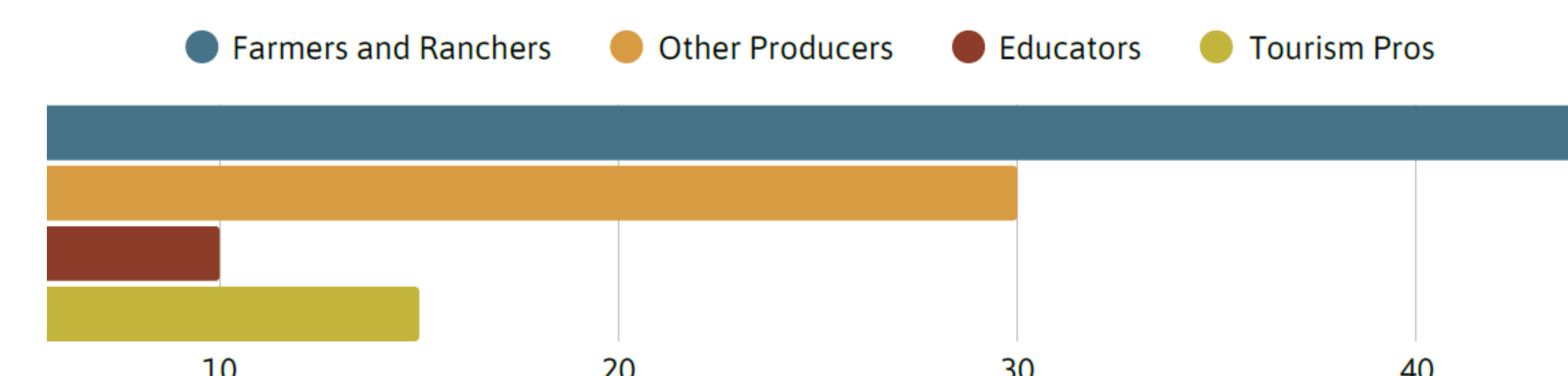
Analysis

- Findings from stakeholder listening sessions, advisory boards, statewide surveys, and conference feedback confirmed **strong demand** for agritourism resources and statewide coordination.
- Data revealed **gaps** in business tools, education, and clear policies, and highlighted the need for **structured advocacy** and networking for new and continuing producers
- Comparative models demonstrated that association-led support improves **industry sustainability** (Nickerson, Black & McCool, 2001).
- Analysis guided the decision to form a **dedicated nonprofit association.**

Results

- **Montana Agritourism Association** was officially founded in 2025.
- Priorities established: **education, resources, advocacy, professional development, events.**
- Membership launched with **farmers, ranchers, educators, and tourism partners.**
- A temporary **AgCorps Specialist** position, funded by AmeriCorps and the Department of Agriculture, was created to support development and early initiatives.
- The Specialist provided critical support in **building momentum** and **relationships** statewide.
- A Specialty Crop Block Grant was recently **awarded** to continue the Specialist position for two additional years.

Membership across Montana



Conclusion

- A dedicated association fills **critical gaps** in Montana's agritourism support.
- Early success demonstrates **strong producer interest** and statewide momentum.
- Sustained staffing and funding are essential to **long-term stability and growth.**
- Collaboration across agriculture and tourism sectors strengthens **rural communities.**
- The model offers lessons for **other states** building agritourism networks.

References

Key sources include the 2017 Montana Agritourism Manual, the 2024 National Agritourism Producer Survey, and foundational U.S. research on agritourism development (Nickerson, Black & McCool, 2001). Legislative milestones such as Montana HB 342 (2017) and SB 540 (2023) also informed this work.