

VERMONT FOOD SYSTEM PLAN ISSUE BRIEF



ISSUE:
Agritourism

What's At Stake?

Agritourism is a promising sub-sector of Vermont's agricultural economy, encompassing direct-to-consumer sales of local food (e.g., farm stands, pick-your-own), agricultural education (e.g., school visits and workshops on farms), hospitality (e.g., overnight farm stays), recreation (e.g., hunting, horseback riding), and entertainment (e.g., hayrides, harvest festivals). Agritourism enterprises allow farms to diversify their operations while preserving their core production model and the working landscape, retaining or creating additional jobs, and maintaining farming traditions. At the same time, the public becomes educated about the importance of agriculture to a community's economic base, quality of life, history, and culture. However, opening a farm to visitors increases liability exposure and requires skills beyond food production, such as marketing and customer service.

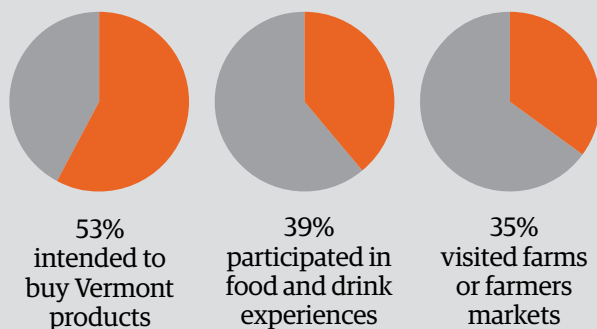
Current Conditions

Consumer demand for local food and experiences on farms has led to rapid increases in agritourism around the world. The global agritourism market was estimated at \$5.7 billion in 2018 with projected annual growth of 12% through 2025.¹ Vermont is at the forefront of this movement. In 2017, at least 1,833 farms in Vermont benefitted from \$49,971,000 in direct sales. The same year, 186 farms reported \$1,709,000 in income from agritourism and recreational services such as farm tours, hay rides, hunting, and fishing. In addition, many farms offer agritourism activities as a way of building consumer demand without receiving income directly from those activities.² (see [Consumer Demand brief](#), [Direct Markets brief](#)).

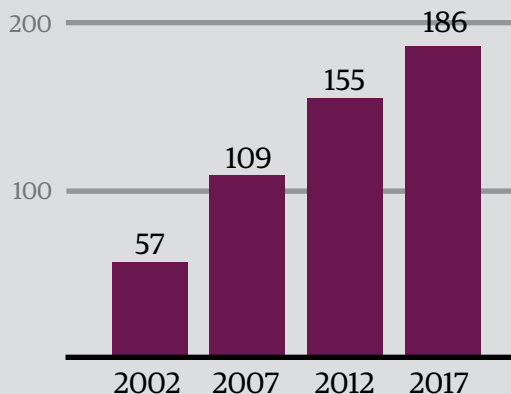
Agritourism is a way for Vermont farms to differentiate themselves through authentic experiences that strengthen the Vermont brand and increase product sales. Several organizations are working together to establish beneficial

partnerships for marketing and technical assistance to support food, beverage, and farm tourism. However, bridging the divides between agriculture, education, and tourism comes with challenges. Farmers must acquire different skills than those used for producing food, and new facilities may be needed to accommodate visitors. Innovative enterprises test the boundaries of policy and regulation, which led to the passage of Act 143 in 2018, related to accessory on-farm businesses. A multi-state research project led by the University of Vermont is underway to address critical success factors for agritourism, but substantially more research and outreach is needed to fully understand the scale and scope of this sub-sector and the best ways to support farmers, their communities, and the local food system.

In 2017, there were an estimated 13.1 million out-of-state visitors to Vermont. A 2014 survey of visitors showed that:



The number of Vermont farms reporting income directly from agritourism and recreational services grew steadily from 2002-2017, with 186 farms in 2017 reporting an average \$9,187 in revenue per farm from these activities.



Bottlenecks & Gaps

- Agritourism may require new skills for farmers, such as marketing and customer service.
- Farmers often have questions about zoning, regulations, and permitting at the municipal, state, and federal levels; and creative enterprises may test boundaries. Answers can be difficult to find and vary from town to town.
- Concerns about liability and safety discourage some farms from allowing visitors on their property.
- The languages of tourism and education are different than the language of agriculture, creating barriers for collaboration.
- There is not a current, comprehensive database of all types of agritourism businesses to advise tourism operators and the media.

Opportunities

- Many people, both within and outside of Vermont, are interested in experiencing agritourism and are looking for ways to identify specific experiences.
- Best practice standards for high quality, educational, authentic agritourism experiences were initially developed by Vermont Farms Association and have been updated.
- Municipal and county officials regularly participate in training and professional development programs.
- Separate training and networking events already take place annually for Vermonters working in agriculture, education, and tourism and can be built upon.
- Research methods from other states have been developed to measure the size and scope of agritourism as well as food and farm tourism in a broad sense.

Recommendations

- Organize training and networking events that bring together farmers, educators, and tourism professionals, contribute to the development of a statewide agritourism strategy, and help service providers support agritourism. Priority topics include marketing and communications, liability and safety, and group tours (ranging from school field trips to media tours).
- Develop and promote best practice standards for agritourism that enhance the Vermont brand and reputation for high-quality, authentic products and experiences. As agritourism is rapidly expanding, standards are needed that allow for innovation while also protecting farmers, consumers, and neighbors.
- Conduct market research to develop a narrative toolkit for practitioners and consumer-facing digital content. Consolidate databases and share lists to facilitate communication internally and contribute to research that measures the size and scope of agritourism.
- Draft tightly-crafted legislation around the definition of agritourism in a way that supports a limited liability statute for farms offering agritourism experiences. This type of legislation would build on the accessory on-farm business statute (Act 143) and potentially impact zoning, insurance, liability, signage, and the types of activities permitted on farms.
- To demystify zoning and regulations, develop decision trees that detail procedures for addressing issues related to zoning, regulations, and permitting at the municipal, state, and federal levels. Help farmers strengthen relationships with municipal and planning officials to create a more supportive environment for agritourism.

Farm to Plate is Vermont's food system plan being implemented statewide to increase economic development and jobs in the farm and food sector and improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFMM) facilitates, supports, and encourages the growth and viability of agriculture in Vermont while protecting the working landscape, human health, animal health, plant health, consumers, and the environment.

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