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Agritourism as Economic Development

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Dear Members of the House Commerce and Economic Development Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss agritourism and its importance to Vermont's economy and working landscape. I have worked for UVM Extension and the Vermont Tourism Research Center since 2002. During the past 18 years, we've seen many shifts in agriculture and the economy as milk prices have fluctuated, some farms have struggled and gone out of business while other farms have innovated and new farms have been established. One constant during these past 18 years is the growth in agritourism, both on the demand side and the supply side.

Agritourism can be defined in different ways. The core is on-farm experiences and product sales that are deeply connected to agriculture, including farm stands, pick-your-own, school field trips, overnight farm stays, educational workshops, and dinners on the farm. Agritourism is not only for visitors from away but also for neighbors and school children down the road.

The global agritourism market was estimated at \$6 billion in 2018 with projected annual growth of 12 percent putting it at \$13 billion by 2025. In Vermont, agritourism including direct sales brings in \$52 million for approximately 2000 farms throughout the state. While these numbers may sound small on a global scale, they are critical for the farms that rely on agritourism – and Vermont is recognized internationally for our leadership and authenticity. The first World Congress on Agritourism was held in Italy in 2018. This was fitting, as Italy is the birthplace of the modern concept of *agriturismo*. What may be surprising to some other countries – but not to us here in Vermont – is that the next international agritourism conference is coming to Burlington October 27-29, 2020.

The World Congress in Italy attracted over 250 people from 42 countries. We are hoping to double the number of attendees for the Vermont conference. Part of the success of the conference in Italy was the scholarships that allowed farmers, researchers and entrepreneurs from all over the world to travel to Bolzano, Italy. We are working hard to raise funds to similarly support travel to the three-day conference and also to the pre- and post-conference tours that feature best practices on farms that are part of an international culinary trail in Vermont, New York, Ontario and Quebec. This international conference puts the spotlight on Vermont and the international culinary trail not only for the week of the conference, but also for the year leading up to the conference as we promote Vermont as the premiere destination for authentic agritourism. We expect the buzz around the conference to amplify afterwards, as attendees return to their home states and countries and share stories of the amazing farms, food, and hospitality they experienced in Vermont.

Agritourism is economic development that benefits the whole state, even the most remote places, where farms on dirt roads way off the beaten track can diversity their income sources, educate visitors, and build community. But opening working farms to visitors comes with challenges and requires support. The Vermont Food System Plan Issue Brief on Agritourism describes many of the challenges and outlines five recommendations. One is currently being addressed by H.794 An act relating to limiting liability for agritourism.

In closing, I'd like to emphasize that Vermont is well-positioned to reap benefits for our farms, working landscape, and rural communities as agritourism continues to grow on a global scale. But we need to be proactive and invest in agritourism marketing and infrastructure on farms to remain competitive in the international marketplace.

Feel free to contact me any time if you have questions or would like more information.

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Additional documents:
Vermont Food System Plan Issue Brief on Agritourism
Agritourism Summary Statistics
Powerpoint slides