

## **Agritourism: Heading Out to the Farm**

**[Music]**

**Dee Shore:**

Harvest time is a busy time for North Carolina farmers. That's especially true for those who open their gates to visitors. From the mountains to the coastal plain, there are corn mazes, hayrides, vineyard and winery tours, and opportunities to pick your own sunflowers, berries, apples, pumpkins, and even hemp.

But, as so many things are right now, North Carolina agritourism could be a little different this season.

I'm Dee Shore from North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. In this episode of Farms, Food and You, we'll take a look at what's in store for the fall agritourism season, how COVID-19 is affecting it, and how you can find out more.

Before we get to that, we'll consider the agritourism industry in general: What is it? How did it come to be? And how does it benefit farmers and the rest of us?

**[Music]**

**Dee Shore:**

For just about all things related to agritourism in North Carolina, Annie Baggett is a go-to person. Agritourism is a merger of two industries important to our state—agriculture and tourism. Baggett's job with the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services is to help farmers develop and promote agritourism operations. She also works with stakeholders to elevate the state's agritourism industry as a major revenue stream for diversifying farms.

**Annie Baggett:**

Agritourism is an industry that is booming. It's tripled in growth nationwide in recent years, and it's a wonderful, viable opportunity for farms to expand their operation.

Especially as tobacco has shifted as being a top crop, farmers needed to figure out how to diversify. So agritourism was a way to do that.

And agritourism is defined as education, recreation, entertainment on farms. And it's been valued in North Carolina in 2012 at about \$16 million and in 2017 at about \$22 million.

A smaller snapshot of that is that we did a survey of 63 farms that attended a conference, and those 63 farms welcomed 669,534 visitors on their farm in 2018. So that's an average of 10,628 per farm! So it is significant, especially when you put a ticket price attached to that guest.

**Dee Shore:**

While the agritourism industry is growing quickly, the concept isn't new to American farmers. Carla Barbieri, an extension tourism specialist and professor at North Carolina State University, points to early dude ranches in Texas in the 1800s and to trips that city dwellers have long made to visit their country relatives for recreation and relaxation.

**Carla Barbieri:**

The concept of agritourism is not new. What is new is how farmers are capitalizing on that as another form of enterprise. So 20, 30, 100 years ago, when we visited a relative to stay in their farm, it was for free. We used to have that recreation service, just free of charge.

Now what we see is there are some functions that farmers provide to society that we were not used to pay for them. And we should. That is the new, modern era of agritourism when we are trying to capitalize to pay back the farmers who contribute in many ways to society for the recreational value that they provide to us.

**Dee Shore:**

Barbieri is quick to note that agritourism's benefits extend well beyond the farmer's wallet.

**Carla Barbieri:**

Agritourism can help to employ the next generation of family members in the farm. Succession—it's very difficult in agriculture. But if the farmer decides to diversify their operations, and assign, let's say, for example, the actual agricultural production to the daughter and maybe the agritourism to the son, or vice versa, they are allowing for them to have a good paid job on the farm. And many times that happens to the spouse, too.

And if we think more broadly in society, during the peak agritourism seasons, farmers need to hire seasonal employees to help with an influx of visitors. Maybe they will need a part-time employee for cashier or for tending the crops or for doing the tours. And so on.

**Dee Shore:**

Agritourism also helps protect important cultural resources, Barbieri says. Many North Carolina farms that are open to tourists have rich histories, stretching back 100 or 200 years or more. And agritourism farms also have environmental benefits.

**Carla Barbieri:**

In one of the studies that we conducted, we found that farmers engaging in agritourism, they have more plants on their farms, because the flowers are beautiful. By protecting wild plants and wildflowers, then you also help to perpetuate other natural cycles.

**Dee Shore:**

Another plus for agritourism: It helps educate people of all ages about the critical contributions agriculture makes to our world every day.

Martha Mobley is an agricultural extension agent in Franklin County who occasionally uses her farm as a teaching tool. It's something that her mother had made a priority.

**Martha Mobley:**

My late mother was a home economics teacher, and when she retired in the early nineties, she had a lot of school groups to come to our family farm and buy some of our pumpkins and then visit the farm animals. And my mother's one question for these children was, 'Where does your food come from? Where do your clothes come from?' So that was one of the questions that she would always ask these little preschoolers, and they would have to repeat back, 'On the farm.'

'It does not come from the back of the grocery store. This is where the wool is produced off of the sheep. This is where the cotton is produced and how this cotton is turned into these blue jeans that we're wearing, or this cotton shirt.'

Especially today, as years go by, we are more detached—these families, these children, the parents—from agriculture.

**Dee Shore:**

While education is one of the main benefits some farmers see in agritourism, that benefit won't be fully realized this fall. With so many students in North Carolina studying remotely because of COVID-19, the demand for school tours has disappeared.

Some fall festivals related to agriculture—like the State Fair—have been cancelled, and others, like Hendersonville's Apple Festival, were changed dramatically. Instead of bringing thousands of visitors into downtown Hendersonville, Apple Festival organizers encouraged the public to take advantage of pick-your-own and other opportunities available on local farms.

In all likelihood, the pandemic will also take a toll on other agritourism offerings. On September 1, Governor Roy Cooper loosened restrictions related to gatherings. Under Phase 2.5, outdoor playgrounds can operate at 30% capacity and gathering limits were raised from 10 to 25 people indoors and from 25 to 50 people outdoors.

As this podcast was being developed, the state agriculture department was working to gain clarification on how the guidelines would affect fall agritourism activities and planned to share that information with farmers as soon as possible.

Across the state, farmers who offer hayrides, corn mazes and other fall farm activities are sitting on multiple plans, ready to execute those that fit the governor's guidelines.

Tina Gross, of Gross Farms in Lee County, is among them. Her farm is more than a century old, and it includes over 1,700 acres of row crops, produce and forested areas. She, her husband, John, and other members of the family also offer pick-your-own strawberries and pumpkins. For 18 years, they've also hosted thousands of visitors eager to experience their elaborate corn mazes.

**Tina Gross:**

We are holding off any forms of marketing or announcements before we decide how we're going to proceed. There will be a fall season; we're just not sure how that's going to look yet.

We have three different scenarios in mind right now, it's just a matter of which one you're going to implement. This is out of our control, and we're just trying to do the best we can with the hand we've been dealt.

**Dee Shore:**

Gross Farms will be selling pumpkins and fall decorations this year, but at the time we spoke, Gross was holding off on decisions about the corn maze, play area and hayrides.

Annie Baggett of the state agriculture department says agritourism farmers are adjusting, and in making adjustments to protect the public, some will undoubtedly take a financial hit.

**Annie Baggett:**

Farmers are really having to dig deep, get creative and adjust. If a farm has a farmstand, they may have specific hours that they are asking folks to stop by. They may set aside specific hours for vulnerable populations—for elderly or for folks that have preexisting health issues. So those kinds of considerations are happening.

They're also really focused on basically the guidelines that the Department of Health and Human Services has put out and making sure that there are opportunities for folks to visit with their safe groups.

Farmers are really having to look—is this model profitable for me? This is a business—farming is a business, as is welcoming the visitors and welcoming the public. And there are more risks attached to welcoming the public in the midst of a global pandemic.

**Dee Shore:**

While agritourism offerings might be limited, Baggett says this fall might be a great time to consider a retreat to a farm cabin or to go camping or picnicking at a farm.

She recommends downloading the Visit NC Farms app to explore opportunities. The free app gives consumers easy access to farms and fisheries, local food, and outdoor experiences, including information about North Carolina agritourism operations.

Right now, the app covers about a third of state, including areas in the mountains, the piedmont and the coastal plain. Other areas are being added as communities invest in the project.

Baggett explains how the app is organized.

**Annie Baggett:**

It has eight categories which represent the main revenue streams for farms, for agriculture in North Carolina—so farms and fisheries; you-pick operations; farmers markets; tours and trails; local food and drink – so farm-to-table restaurant or a distillery, a winery; farm stays and lodging; special events; farm-to-table events.

So the consumer is able to hop on. They can find the farms closest to them. They can search by activities. So if you're interested in a farm tour or, staying in a cabin or camping on a farm, finding a farmers market close to you, finding value-added products, you can filter and you can find the farms closest to you that are offering those activities.

You can also search by agricultural product. You can plug in 'blackberries' or just push the button and all of the farms offering blackberries in the state will pop up, as will the farms closest to you.

**Dee Shore:**

Baggett says that the best way to find farm offerings that aren't on the app is to search the internet, then check websites and Facebook pages and call ahead to make sure hours or activities haven't changed because of the pandemic.

Wherever you decide to go, Carla Barbieri recommends following safety guidelines aimed at stopping the spread of COVID-19. She also offers tips to ensure an enjoyable visit.

**Carla Barbieri:**

Go open-minded. Agriculture may be a different environment as we are used to right now. We live in a very comfortable environment. If you are going to a farm, you need to wear very comfortable shoes.

It is not a theme park. It's not a stage and agriculture-based theater. It's a real farm. It's working, it's producing, but it's allowing you to go and visit. So have that in mind.

You do also need to go and be very respectful of what are the guidelines of the farmers. So if they ask you not to go to a certain plot, please don't go there. There is a reason for allowing the plants to be growing—also for safety issues.

Try to maximize your experience: Ask questions. One of the wonderful things of agritourism is that farmers like doing it. And if they ask a question to the farmer, they will take the time to respond.

**[Music]****Dee Shore:**

Thanks for listening today, and we hope you'll join us again for the next episode of Farms, Food and You. To learn more about the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and our podcast, visit [go.ncsu.edu/farms](http://go.ncsu.edu/farms). While you're there, share your thoughts. We'd love to get your ideas and to hear what topics you'd like for us to explore in the future.