

**Agritourism Website:
Western Landowners Alliance (WLA)
CRC subcommittee on tourism revenue and working lands
Monthly meeting August 2020 – January 2021**

- I. **Executive Summary:** This group of stakeholders met monthly to discuss the development of technological means to link agricultural producers with tourists. They included members of the following groups: agricultural producers, tour guide operators, hotel owners, school educators (looking for agritourism opportunities), non-profit entities and other individuals. Through facilitated discussion, the group felt that the technological interface developed should be a mobile-friendly website that links tourists with a wide diversity of experiences, educational opportunities, products or accommodations offered by agricultural producers. In order to make the end product fill needs of both producers and consumers of these experiences and avoid duplicating efforts already underway, the first strategy the group recommends is a feasibility and market research study. In addition, the second strategy the group recommends includes NGO groups starting to collaborate with each other and existing agritourism operations on achieving goals as their capacity allows in the near-term.

- II. **Goal statement:** The goal of this effort is to create an efficient technological mechanism to connect tourists and urban public to agricultural communities. By providing economic opportunities to diversify income and sell products, services or experiences from working lands to tourists, this website will also create a shared understanding around the community benefits of local agricultural production and land stewardship.

- III. **Geographic Scale.** To meet the goals of this group, members decided on starting in the Montana portion of the Greater Yellowstone Area (GYA) due to group members' knowledge and contacts in the Livingston, MT and Paradise Valley area. The group acknowledges that to effectively grow a program it may need to start operations within fiscal and legal boundaries, rather than boundaries that represent the biological area of tourism interest (e.g. the state of MT instead of the GYA which includes part of MT, WY, ID). It is the hope of this group that through the steps outlined below, they can thoroughly investigate and develop a system that truly works to benefit information and product flow to tourists and also economic diversity to agricultural producers. In the process we aim to develop a model that can scale up or be applied elsewhere.

- IV. **Characteristics of product:**

There are certain characteristics of the product that the group agreed on, and other decisions that would need to be made after a market research and feasibility study.

The group agreed on:

 - a. The group decided that the most cost-effective technological mechanism to achieve our goals would be a webpage instead of an app due to greater maintenance costs of an app (e.g. app updates are required for each phone update), and the mobile-friendly versions of webpages can work just as well on smartphones while traveling.

- b. The webpage will *not* be a transaction platform (we do not want to spend time reinventing Venmo), but will be a landing page to provide connection between tourists and agriculture.
- c. The webpage will focus narrowly on agritourism, but will include a diversity of experiences (lodging, educational experiences, product purchase, hunting or fishing) to provide a broad topical swath of economic opportunities to producers.
- d. This group identified a timely need for learning for both students and tourists due to Covid-19. In person, pre-recorded or interactive curriculum about topics like food production, wildlife, soil science are in demand.
- e. An important part of website promotion, reaching a broad audience, and education will be video shorts to tell stories of people and working lands.

V. **Fiscal sponsorship and collaboration**

- a. The group discussed fiscal sponsorship at length. There are many options here, and the recommended market research strategy (discussed below) will determine the best economic model for the project, and the group felt that there is flexibility around picking a good fiscal sponsor during the first year of study. However, the findings of the study will hopefully point to the best funding mechanism, organizational structure and / or fiscal sponsor to move forward once the group is ready to build a website.
- b. Part of the feasibility study includes identifying existing regional (and local) agritourism efforts, and strategizing the best method to bring these entities together to produce a more visible, useful product. Potential collaborators in MT include [MT department of Ag](#), [MT Tourism department](#) and [Aero](#), amongst others. All of these sites already have some form of an agrotourism project though they are small and could be more visible or accessible to tourists.
 - i. Jennifer Worland (University of ID Ag Extension) is moving forward with a similar agritourism product in the Teton Valley (ID & WY) watershed. She has conducted surveys with producers and plans to fund an Americorps member that will work in summer 2021. We have the potential to link our work with hers for people travelling through the GYA.
 - ii. This work should investigate the potential to collaborate with MT Ag extension, as this could provide an easy framework for scaling up and out.

VI. **Recommendation 1 – Long term strategy: market research.** The group agreed the most durable path to success would start by applying for funding to hire a contractor position who will conduct a feasibility and market research study before building a website. They felt there is some risk that if this topic is not researched and then built correctly from the ground- up, it may end up as another small project that duplicates other efforts and/or it is not useful or visible enough to be effective. The ultimate risk here is leading landowners to the impression agritourism “isn’t worth it”, or that there is no opportunity for them because the project hasn’t evaluated actual needs and interests of tourists and landowners, and don’t know the best method for advertising.

Questions that need to be answered by feasibility and market research study:

1. What is the best model for a long-term funding mechanism (who pays for the service?) and organizational structure? Is a non-profit or for-profit model (e.g. hipcamp) best? Without this information, the website would not have the capacity to financially self-sustain over time, limiting utility.
2. What is the geographic scale or scope that is needed, or best suited to accomplish goals successfully? This topic needs more research so that a website is built around the scope of utility for tourist consumers. If a small-scale model is successfully created, it could be recreated elsewhere.
3. Identify other successful national or international technological models for making agritourism connections, replicate parts that are applicable.
4. Identify other entities in Montana or the region who are already involved in agritourism and create a plan to collaborate and build on (or around) existing projects, or to identify a niche that is needed to bring everything together so that the user-interface and marketing is improved (e.g. MT department of Ag, MT department of tourism and Aero).
5. Conduct a landowner survey to establish specific interests and what side of the product would be most useful (E.g., Appendix I).
6. Conduct a survey with tourists and visitors to national parks.
7. What is the best strategy to market the product?
8. Once the questions above are answered, the contractor will develop a budget for implementation, including personnel time, website development, and apply for funding or identify appropriate start-up funding sources.
9. The end product for this strategy will direct how a website is built and what it looks like. For example, how much funding is needed to start the project, how/ where startup funding is obtained, how to market the project, the best self-sustaining financial model, and the specific niche that would be useful to producers in the area as well as tourists.

The contractor hired to conduct this study would hypothetically be accountable to a “board” with members from this group and the fiscal sponsor. The board would ensure their vision was achieved.

- VII. **Recommendation 2 – Short term strategy: NGO collaboration.** Group members felt that funding may take a while to organize around market research and it is possible to immediately make progress towards the goals of the group with interested NGOs and existing agritourism efforts regardless of the market research strategy. Doing work of this nature could fit under the goals of existing programs within Western Sustainability Exchange (WSE), WLA and 1MT, so those NGOs could progress the goals of this group in ways that fold into existing programs while funding is secured for a market research study. Additionally, there is a timely opportunity with Covid-19 to work on curriculum and video content while the general public is seeking out alternative and experiential educational opportunities. Rather than being lost over time, the energy created by this group could be channeled now between NGOs to amplify each other’s messaging via social media. Portions of the goals discussed by this group that could be achieved through collaboration include:
- a. Creating video content that highlights good stewardship and share amongst NGOs social medias.

- b. Create a section in WLA's "On Land" to feature different agribusinesses that are open for agritourism.
- c. Utilize other platforms that already have a following to see if people lock on to agritourism (e.g. "Prairie Populist").
- d. Reaching out to already established experiential educational institutions such as [Students Shoulder to Shoulder](#) or [Visions Student Travel](#) as a low-investment way to connect tourists into existing agritourism opportunities with landowners and producers.
- e. Work on online/ digital library of curriculums on different topics.

This collaborative approach would need some conversations and a work flow chart to establish what each group has to offer and how they can work together.

VIII. Conclusions

- a. There is a broad interest amongst a diversity of people in our group in developing a website interface between tourists and agricultural producers. Educators, tour guides, a hotel owner and a number of producers see a need. Next steps dictate investigating the specific nature of that niche before building a website.
- b. To accomplish work towards the goals established by this group in the near term, the group recommends that WLA, 1MT, WSE and others start having conversations about what they each can contribute synergistically together with local producers already involved in agritourism to incrementally achieve the goals of this project.
- c. Members of this group who would like to guide the feasibility and market research study will form a board, apply for funding through a chosen fiscal sponsor, hire a contractor for the fiscal sponsor and supervise that deliverables are met before building a website that accomplishes the goals set by this group.

Appendix I.

Landowner survey: example questions to identify specific need/ niche from producers for agritourism website

1. Name
2. Email address
3. Do you currently offer any services to the public?
4. Are these services offered by you or your employees/ family members; or are they offered through a third party? E.g. outfitter, tour company, other contract.
5. Please explain details
6. Are there barriers to you growing the revenue from your existing business or starting one if you have considered it before?
7. If you answered "yes" above, please describe the barriers that exist to you growing your revenue (e.g. your time, startup money, network with consumers).
8. Do you or your land produce consumable and saleable products? E.g. beef, wool, hay, leatherwork.
9. If the answer is yes, how/where do you currently sell your products?
10. What payment platforms do you currently use for your services or products?

11. Have you hosted educational programs or experiences in the past? E.g. range tours, naturalist walks, sleigh rides, school groups.
12. If you hosted educational programs in the past, were you monetarily compensated?
13. Please briefly describe the programs you hosted.
14. If you haven't done so before, are you interested in hosting educational programs?
15. Do you want to increase purchasing of saleable products, services or experiences?
16. What area do you see the most potential to increase your revenue?
17. Are you interested in having your business show up on a landing page or app for people searching for what you offer?
18. If you do not have a well-established business of this nature, would this landing page/ app allow you to get a business off the ground that you have been thinking about?

Appendix II.

Potential funding sources for agritourism feasibility study

[Park county community foundation](#)

[Greater Montana Foundation](#)

[Hipcamp \(?\)](#)

[Big Sky Trust Fund](#)

[American Farm Bureau Foundation](#)

[USDA local food promotion program](#)

[USDA SAS: Ag & Food Research Initiative Competitive Grants Program Sustainable Ag](#)

[USDA Rural Development-Value Added Producer Grants](#)

[Food & Farm Communications Fund](#)

[Threshold Foundation](#)