

Counties push 'agritourism' as an economic growth tool

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Leaders in two rural counties adjoining Athens are calling on local farmers to catch a rising tide of "agritourism," which allows farmers to earn extra money from tourists and school tours.

"It could be a tremendous boon for our economy," said Madison County Extension Agent Carl Varnadoe, pointing to successful farms in other counties that cater to tourists, such as Washington Farms in Oconee County, where thousands of children and adults visit annually to pick their own strawberries, get lost in a corn maze or visit the farm's petting zoo.

Even boosters like Varnadoe concede that agritourism isn't likely to be a major employer in their counties, but it can help keep farmers in business and help the counties keep their rural character, he said.

"It's a good, clean industry. It preserves open spaces, and those open spaces are maintained," agreed Scott Cagle, an agritourism consultant who helped develop Cherokee County's Cagle Dairies into a major tourist attraction.

Cagle, his father and three brothers began giving tours to schoolchildren in 1993. Now, tourism provides about half the revenue for the dairy, he said.

Varnadoe is planning some public presentations to promote the idea, but in Oglethorpe County, the Chamber of Commerce has taken the idea of agritourism even further. The group is planning a second countywide meeting to develop ways of boosting farm tourism.

Unlike Madison County, Oglethorpe County already has an agritourism model: Goodness Grows, founded by partners Rick Berry and Marc Richardson nearly 30 years ago on the then-unlikely idea that people might prefer buying perennial flowers in containers rather than in seed packets.

Arranged more like a botanical garden than a nursery, the business outside Lexington is a frequent destination for garden clubs tours and field trips from college horticulture classes.

The Oglethorpe County Chamber of Commerce has invited Berry to the chamber's May 25 meeting to tell how the business became a tourist draw - but some of it was luck, like getting major publicity when the business was featured on a popular national TV show called "Victory Garden," Berry said.

Goodness Grows is no longer unique, either. Similar businesses like Winterville's Thyme After Thyme also have become major local attractions with grounds that are as much like parks as a business.

Washington Farms' still-growing tourism success was deliberately planned, said John Washington, who began the business on Georgia Highway 53 in Oconee County 13 years ago with his wife as a "pick your own" strawberry farm. It's grown to include pick-your-own pumpkins, a petting zoo, hayrides and a corn maze.

The Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm near Arcade doesn't yet qualify as agritourism, but might one day, said Susan Chaisson, president of the non-profit corporation that runs the living history farm. Today, it's more of a museum begun by Chaisson's family to preserve land and educate people about farming a century ago, she said.

University of Georgia professor Robert Rhoades' "Agrarian Connections Farm" just outside Crawford might also one day become a tourist draw.

Rhoades has moved several log cabins to his farm and restored them, often teaching UGA students how to use tools and techniques that were popular among Georgia pioneers in the 1800s. Recently, the farm added an apple orchard of more than 100 heirloom varieties.

Rhoades hopes the farm will one day become a kind of living history museum where people can come to learn the way pioneers farmed, or as a temporary refuge from the busy modern world.

That could bring a lot of people, and dollars, to Oglethorpe County, Cagle said.

Groups like the chamber and governments can help boost tourism by encouraging complementary businesses like bed-and-breakfast operations and restaurants, said both Washington and Berry.

Governments can also help by buying development rights to farms, removing the pressure to develop, and with agritourism-friendly sign ordinances, Cagle said.

Member: NAFDMA
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