COLLEGE *of* FOOD, AGRICULTURAL, *and* ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Ohio Agritourism Report

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Executive Summary

Agritourism farms are growing in number across the United States (Noyes, 2015), accounting for nearly $1 billion in sales according to the 2017 Census of Agriculture.

To better understand this industry in Ohio, a statewide industry survey was created and then sent out for agritourism farm owners and operators to complete in Summer 2021. This report represents findings of an initial effort with the agritourism industry in Ohio, designed to better understand the industry and potential programmatic opportunities. Note that survey findings represent data shared by respondents only. While conclusions and implications can be drawn from these data to the respondents as a group, respondent data are not generalizable to the agritourism industry in Ohio, overall.

As a result of the pandemic, operations adapted in 2020 included the use of online ticketing, reducing the number of events and visitor capacity, and increasing attention to health and sanitation. Interestingly, gross revenue exceeded previous levels in 2020 for most operations, and direct sales were the leading sales category of the five categories surveyed. As far as jobs, full-time year-round employment was reported as minimal. Most operations reported 10 or fewer seasonal employees. With respect to ways in which Extension could best support the agritourism industry, assistance with marketing via social media and websites was identified most frequently. Assistance via strategic planning and using trend research to inform decision making was also noted by many.

Introduction

The core of agritourism consists of activities that are deeply connected to agriculture and take place on a working farm (Chase, Stewart, Schilling, Smith, & Walk, 2018). Hall (2020) defined agritourism as “an agriculturally related educational, entertainment, historical, cultural, or recreational activity, including you-pick operations, conducted on a farm that allows or invites members of the general public to observe, participate in or enjoy that activity.” According to Chase et. al., general agreement about the core activities exists. For the purposes of this study, only those agritourism operations that engage the public in on-farm activities were invited to participate. Operations engaging the public as wineries, breweries, and farmers markets were excluded.

Agritourism farms continue to grow in number across the United States (Noyes, 2015). According to the 2017 Census of Agriculture, 28,575 farms offered agritourism and recreational services resulting in $949 million in sales, nationally. Researchers have begun to learn more about this industry and its economic impact and this particular effort aimed to add more to this growing body of knowledge. To better meet educational needs of this economic sector in Ohio and create more awareness around the growing agritourism industry, researchers offer this report to Extension professionals, agritourism operations, and their stakeholders.

Objectives

The objectives of this Agritourism Survey Report were to:

- Create a statewide inventory of agritourism operations in Ohio
- Estimate the economic impact of agritourism operations in Ohio
- Identify programmatic opportunities and needs of the agritourism industry in Ohio

Study Participants

A complete and up-to-date listing of agritourism businesses was not available. To identify operations to engage in this study, researchers used the North America Farmers and Direct Marketing Association (https://nafdma.com/) list in combination with known agritourism farms identified by Ohio State University Extension county-based educators. Only those operations that were known to engage the public in on-farm for activities were invited to participate in the study. For the purposes of this research project, wineries, breweries, and farmers markets were excluded.

Survey Design

A web based Qualtrics survey approach was chosen for data collection. The questionnaire was designed with input from researchers with expertise in direct marketing and economic impact analysis. The questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of experts prior to dissemination. To address the study objectives, the multiple choice and open-ended item questionnaire included the following sections:

- Geographic Location
- Years in Operation
- Seasons of Operation
- Sales
- Employment
- Educational/Support Needs

More specifically, to help in estimating economic impact, respondents were invited to distribute their total annual sales across five categories:

- Direct sales: consumers buy directly from farmers
- Education: learning experiences, such as school tours
- Hospitality: includes farm stays, on-farm dinners
- Outdoor recreation: outdoor farm experiences
- Entertainment: on-farm activities such as festivals

Data Collection

On June 7, 2021, a formal e-mail letter of invitation to participate including a web-based link to the questionnaire and instructions for completion was sent to 330 agritourism farm operators. A follow-up email invite, questionnaire link, and instructions for completion were sent June 15, 2021. Data collection closed June 25, 2021. A total of 60 farms participated in the survey, yielding a response rate of 18 percent.

Survey Highlights

- Each of the nine regions (see map below) of Ohio contained at least one respondent
- Almost 50 percent of respondents were operating for less than 10 years
- Nearly 80 percent of respondents do not charge admission
- Slightly more than 75 percent of sales reported comes from direct sales (e.g., u-pick, u-cut, value added products, farm market sales)
- In 2020 just over one-fourth of respondents grossed less than $20,000 in sales
- One-fourth of respondents grossed over $200,000 in sales
- 25 percent of respondents desire training in social media marketing and management as well as website management

Findings

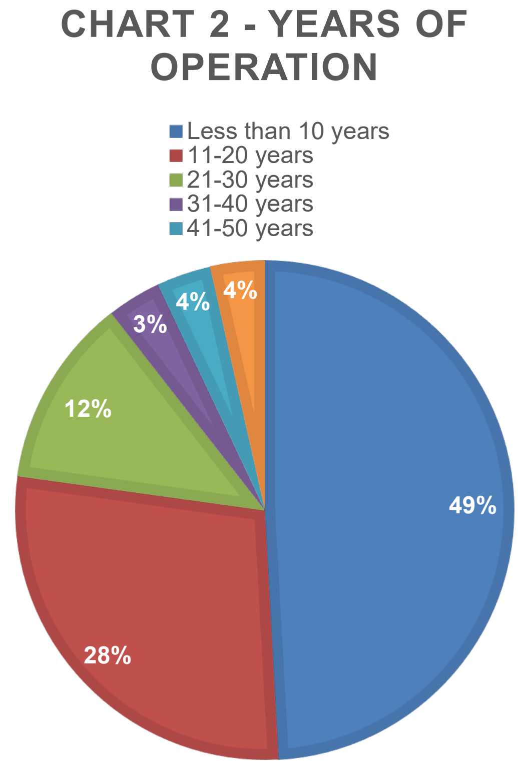
Q1 - Geographic Location

To enable researchers to generate findings reports specific to existing Extension programmatic regions, the state was divided into nine regions. One third of respondents were located in the northeast (region 3), 17 percent of operations were located in the central part (region 5) and 13 percent were located in the southeast (region 9). The two regions with the fewest responses were northwestern (1) and east central Ohio (6). See Chart 1 below.

Region	Percentage
1 - Allen, Defiance, Fulton, Hancock, Henry, Lucas, Paulding, Putnam, Van Wert, Williams	2%
2 - Ashland, Crawford, Erie, Huron, Ottawa, Richland, Sandusky, Seneca, Wood, Wyandot	8%
3 - Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, Trumbull, Wayne	33%
4 - Carroll, Columbiana, Coshocton, Harrison, Holmes, Jefferson, Guernsey, Muskingham, Tuscarawas	2%
5 - Delaware, Fairfield, Franklin, Knox, Licking, Madison, Marion, Morrow, Pickaway, Ross, Union	17%
6 - Auglaize, Champaign, Clark, Darke, Hardin, Logan, Mercer, Miami, Shelby	7%
7 - Butler, Clermont, Clinton, Fayette, Greene, Hamilton, Montgomery, Preble, Warren	13%
8 - Adams, Brown, Gallia, Highland, Jackson, Lawrence, Pike, Scioto, Vinton	12%
9 - Athens, Belmont, Hocking, Meigs, Monroe, Morgan, Noble, Perry, Washington	7%

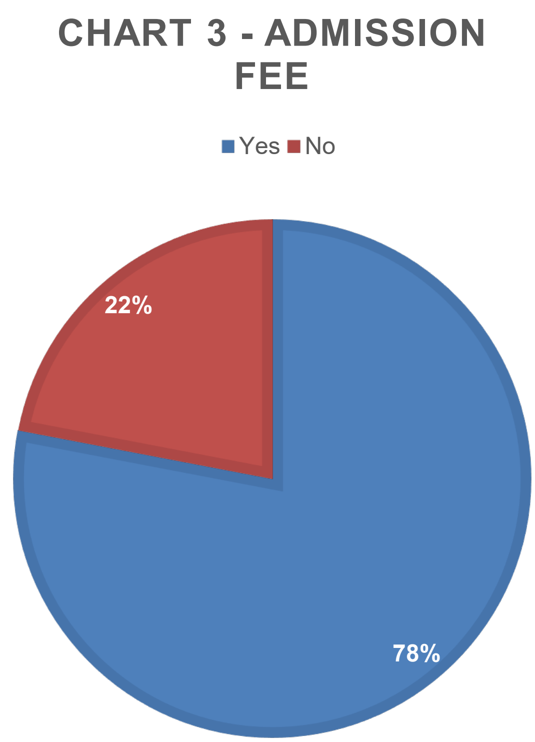
Q2 - Years in Operation

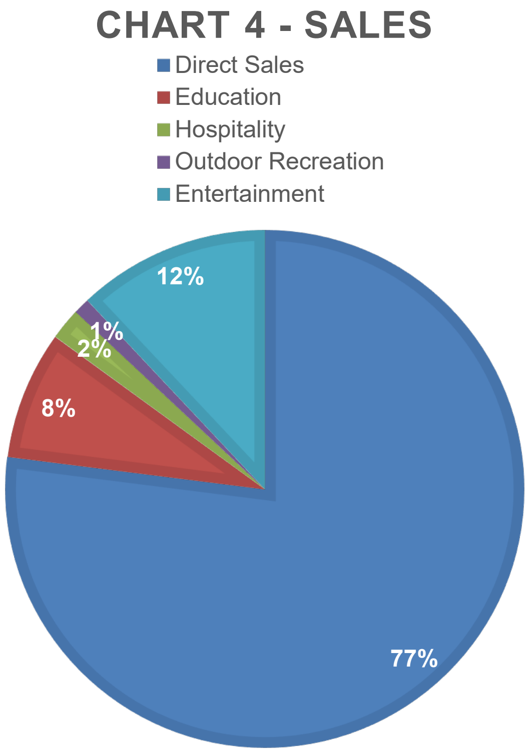
As illustrated in Chart 2, nearly one half of respondents (49 percent) have been in operation for less than 10 years. In addition, over one quarter (28 percent) have been in business between 11-20 years. Roughly one fourth (23 percent) reported operating as an agritourism farm for more than 20 years.



Q3 - Admission Fee

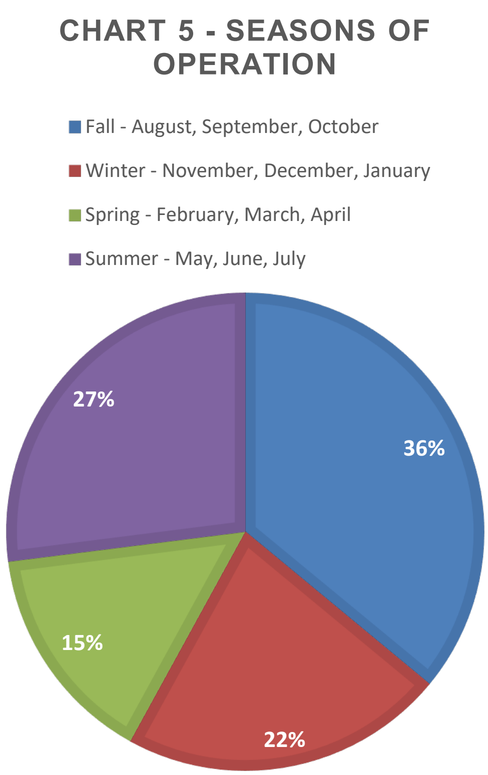
As illustrated in Chart 3, more than three quarters (78 percent) of respondents reported charging an admission fee to enter the farm.





Q4 – Sales

A total of 53 respondents provided sales data. As illustrated in Chart 4, the majority of sales reported occurred in the direct sales category (on average, this category represented 77 percent of total sales for all respondents). The entertainment category represented 12 percent of all sales and the education category represented 8 percent of sales. The hospitality and outdoor recreation sales categories lagged behind the others with a proportion of sales of less than 2 percent each, consisting of 1.7 percent and 1.42 percent of sales respectively.



Q5 - Seasons of Operation

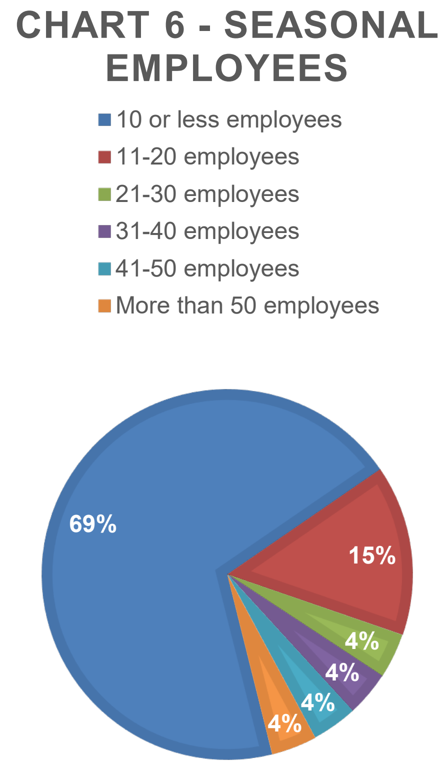
As illustrated in Chart 5, over 35 percent of the farms responding indicated they were open during the months of August, September and October. Over one-fourth (27 percent) reported being open during May, June and July; 22 percent in the months of November, December and January, and; 15 percent reported operating in February, March and April.

Q6 – Employment - Seasonal

As illustrated in Chart 6, most respondents (70 percent) indicated employing 10 or fewer seasonal associates. 12 percent of respondents reported employment of more than 30 seasonal associates.

For the purposes of this report, it was determined that seasonal employees working less than six months per year worked an average of 30 hours per week. The authors realize that it is more than likely that some seasonal employees may have worked up to 70 hours per week during peak times.

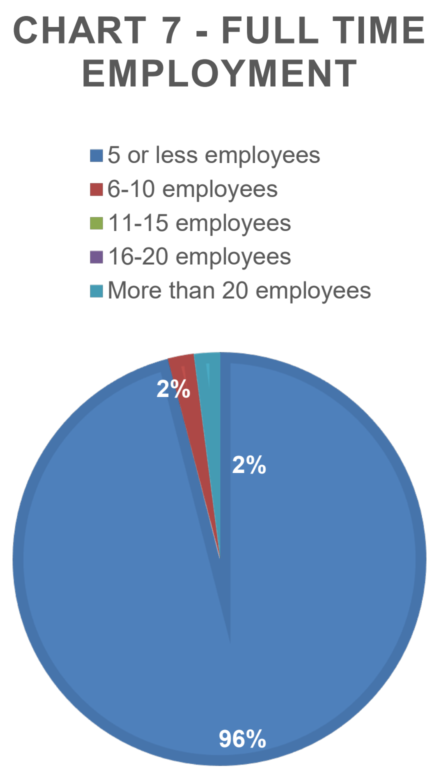
Of the respondents indicating they employed over 50 seasonal workers, 60 respondents reported employing between 155 and 201 seasonal employees that worked less than 6 months per year. Based on the mean hourly wage for farmworkers and laborers of $15.16, seasonal employment for the agritourism sector which ranged from 155 and 201 employees contributed between $1,691,856 and $2,193,955 in personal income to Ohio's economy.[1]

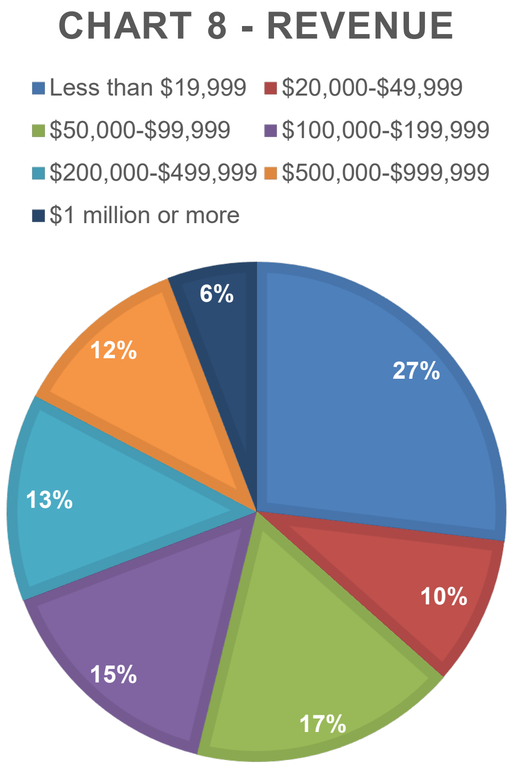


Q7 – Employment – Full Time Annually

The majority (96 percent) of respondents reported 5 (or fewer) full time employees year round, as illustrated in Chart 7.

60 Agritourism businesses reported employing between 7 to 81 full-time employees. Based on the average mean wage of $31,530 for farmworkers and laborers, full time employment for the agritourism sector contributed betwee $220,710 and $2,553,930 in personal income to Ohio's economy.[1]





Q8 – Gross Annual Revenue

Roughly two-thirds of respondents reported that 2020 was a record year for gross revenue. As illustrated in Chart 8, more than one-fourth (27 percent) of respondents reported gross revenue of less than $20,000. Respondents were fairly evenly distributed in gross revenue from $20,000-$1 million, while roughly 6 percent of respondents indicated annual gross revenues of $1 million or more.

Q10 - Educational/Support Needs

Question 10 was designed to identify training and information that would help respondents be more successful. As illustrated in Chart 10, social media, marketing, website creation and management was identified as the most pressing training/support need. Furthermore, 18 percent of respondents indicated they needed additional training in strategic planning, trend research, and decision making.

Chart 10: Education and Training

Social media marketing and management/website management	26%
Strategic planning/trend research/decision making	18%
Human resources/labor management/recruitment	15%
Legal/liability/zoning information	14%
Emergency preparedness/farm safety	11%
Customer relations/customer service/local community relationships	11%
Other	5%

Q11 – Pandemic-related changes or practices adopted

Based on the 2020 pandemic we asked respondents to share some of the practices that they adopted and plan to implement and keep on their agritourism farms. Some of the open ended themes that respondents mentioned they would continue to implement included:

- Reduced events, school tours and capacity
- Online ticketing
- Increased attention to health and sanitation

Implications and Recommendations

Findings from this initial survey of the agritourism industry in Ohio pique the interest in continued survey work and inform potential approaches to programmatic initiatives. More thoughts are shared following mention of specific findings, implications and recommendations.

Agritourism businesses will likely continue to use online ticketing platforms that help minimize cash transactions, reducing wait times and the need for staffing at entrances. Online ticketing also enables operators to gain access to visitor data such as name, home address, contact info, etc. The ability to collect such data and the opportunities of online ticketing is a significant benefit for owners to better understand their customer base.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, more attention has been paid to the health and safety of visitors in terms of reducing visitor numbers, making it easier for operators to manage (e.g. shorter lines, short wait times, staffing needs, etc). The reduced visitor counts also align strongly with overall visitor satisfaction. This pandemic-related change in operations has increased awareness in health and safety that may very well affect future visitor capacity strategies. In general, health and safety awareness resulting from the pandemic will have long-range implications for agritourism operators and society in general.

The pandemic has also impacted customers' behavior. For example, people have had more time for recreation and a desire to be outdoors. Purchasing directly from producers offered consumers a sense of freshness and a feeling of control over their lives in a time when little could be controlled due to the pandemic. This increased awareness will most likely continue to affect agritourism operations, at least until times are such that convenience outweighs other considerations and concerns.

Not surprisingly, none of the operators reported activities year-round, as Ohio weather does not lend itself to a year-round operation. Most agritourism farms offer a significant outdoor experience which draws little visitor interest during the colder months. As such, seasonal employment is tied directly to seasonal production and sales activity (in the warmer months) and this aspect of agritourism in Ohio will likely remain unchanged.

Direct sales provide a way to create a customer base. Direct sales serve as a way to establish a reputation and is typically a sales strategy employed by start-ups and newer operators. Agritourism farms are always exploring other ways to diversify their operations in order to keep visitors coming back, such as new activities. After a relationship is established, an admission fee can be charged and activities other than direct sales such as education, entertainment, hospitality, etc. can be offered.

The consumer and society in general continue to drive the increasing use of social media. These are accessed via smart phones yet users don't call; they chat, tweet, snap, etc. Operators must continue to seek out better ways to connect with these consumers. Operators must continue to seek ways to meet their audiences where they are. Best practices for marketing on social media can include but are not limited to; researching your customer base, posting on the platforms in which they are using, focusing on establishing and then maintaining a voice for your brand, and researching your analytics to find the best time to post on your platforms. Most importantly, respond to your customers promptly. While there are costs to these connection strategies such as time, knowledge and consistency, at the end of the day, having a presence on social media is key. Interacting and engaging with customers is critical to show they matter to you.

Next Steps

Researchers plan to use information gathered from this effort to inform future Extension programming to better understand the agritourisum industry in Ohio. In person outreach and education trainings will be offered in the 'off-season' to cultivate relationships with local producers. In addition, presentations at state and national conferences will reach county-based Extension staff to increase awareness of the agritourisum sector of the economic impact to the state and regional economy. Sharing the initial survey findings with respondents, other industry professionals, their stakeholders and Extension professionals can help increase awareness of growth opportunities and programmatic needs across the state.

Additional survey work is planned as a result of these findings. Based on input gained from this effort, future questionnaires will include items that help to identify:

- Direct sales products (e.g. honey, berries, cider, pumpkins, Christmas trees, etc.)
- Training being used, conducted, and provided by operators
- Employee wage data

An ongoing and continuous survey approach is a key characteristic to consider going forward. As such, researchers plan to engage operators in web-based surveys on an every-other year basis. Doing so should foster an increasing response rate and additional new data to help inform the three overarching research objectives.