

**ORGANIZING**

**A**

**STATEWIDE**

**AGRITOURISM ASSOCIATION**

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# ORGANIZING A STATEWIDE AGRITOURISM ASSOCIATION

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## *Agritourism Is Value-Added Agriculture Adventure!*

1. Farm markets & agricultural tourism are in a unique time of evolution – a time for potential, innovation and challenge.
2. The ‘agritourism experience’ is the intangible product offered by agritourism farms.
3. ‘Agri-preneurs’ are empowered to influence local and state officials to support regulations that are sympathetic to agritourism farmers.
4. The pioneering spirit of agriculture can form a successful marriage of farm & fun through support & encouragement.
5. Collaboration, networking & credibility can cause positive policy changes for the agritourism industry.
6. Take risks, learn from mistakes, & celebrate successes.

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## **BENEFITS**

An “umbrella” partnership of farmers & rural tourism professionals can help agritourism farmers continue to farm, market their commodities and increase their income through agritourism.

## **GOALS**

Provide a forum for ideas & information to be disseminated statewide

Encourage collaboration, networking and partnership

Create central location where information can be disseminated in timely and efficient manner & where resource data base resides

Reach out to potential members & provide examples of model farms

Educate public about value of locally-grown products

Be a recognized, credible “grassroots level” group informed about local, state &/or national farm policy & legislation

Contact local, state & national officials about concerns about existing public policy; work openly for change

Enjoy local respect as experienced community members

Join & participate in local, state & national organizations

Seek ways to promote & assist each other at every opportunity

Publicize all statewide and regional/local conference & workshops

## **I. ASSOCIATION START-UP & ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

*Start-up Task Force Goal: To Establish Guidelines for Statewide Organization*

### ***Planning for the organizational meeting:***

Invite key agritourism & rural service providers to initial meeting to provide core leadership

Develop mission statement and relevant goals based on statewide needs, challenges & expectations

Decide on management: Executive Director full or part-time

Keep attendance record & strong meeting minutes with follow-up actions & deadlines

Solicit state agency financial & administrative support: Agriculture, Cultural Resources, Commerce, Environment, Tourism, etc.

Solicit support from statewide & regional tourism authorities & rural support organizations

Develop plan to show how statewide organization can exist as a resource & facilitator for regional/local groups

Develop by-laws template: research other state organizations

Develop method to maintain central statewide data-collection

Develop officers' & board members' job descriptions

Recruit volunteers to serve as officers and regional reps on Board of Directors for first organizational year

Develop presentation for statewide organizational meetings to describe how statewide organization can assist individual farmers & currently organized regional groups in sharing marketing ideas, administration, communications, etc.

Develop plan for annual statewide conference to include business meeting, educational workshops & farm tours

Hold annual conference each year in different parts of state

Develop template to offer organizational assistance to plan regional workshops with focus on regional needs & interests

### ***Local Informational Meetings Planned & Led by Core Leaders – Goal: Solicit Support for Statewide Organization***

- Hold local meetings of farmers & other tourism service providers to explain benefits & goals of statewide organization
- Hold on day & time of day convenient to farmers & serve meal
- Keep good attendance records & meeting minutes with all pertinent contact information
- Promote networking benefits through attendance at statewide annual conference

### ***Start-Up Funding***

- Determine fiscal year & create reasonable dues structure: Active (farmers), Sponsors (rural tourism service providers), Corporate, Five- & Ten Year members, “Century Farms” free
- Obtain a sponsor: government agency or agencies help with initial funding/in-kind services, other resources
- Executive director with regular job paid by government or other agency can provide neutral direction and assistance
- Decide on non-profit status; register with Federal &/or state agencies as necessary, learn reporting regulations
- Can form as an “Unincorporated Non-Profit” – cannot apply for grants; or 501-c status - more federal reporting required of 501s, but can apply for grant funding
- Membership list divided into geographical districts to facilitate communication, membership records; maintained centrally

## **II. FINANCIAL WAYS & MEANS**

- Charge reasonable, affordable dues with “freebie” benefit (membership card, windshield sticker, discounts, etc.)
- Maintain a healthy treasury & a plan for using funds (student scholarships, subsidies for in- & out-of-state meetings, supporting speakers for conferences, etc.)
- Executive director can handle banking to allow for timeliness of payments & deposits, reconciling bank account, reporting
- Send out dues reminder notices by email or snail mail if not able to handle dues payment on-line or by credit card; give firm dues deadline & penalty for late payment, if any
- Emphasize the benefits of the organization in dues renewal notices; keep non-renewing members in data bank
- Prorate dues when joining two-three months before next fiscal year
- Be creative in providing benefits for joining
- Provide incentives to members who recruit new members (dues discounts, internal recognition, contests, etc.)
- Offer varied levels of membership: Active farmers, Sponsors, Five/Ten year, Corporate, “Century Farms” are free
- Offer free one-year membership or discounts to meeting speakers who are not members as recruitment tool
- Offer small discounts when joining, buying signs, etc. at meetings
- Have sponsor levels for conferences to help with expenses; give benefits to sponsors (exhibit space, recognition)
- Provide conference exhibit space at lower fee levels for members who are in dues categories above

minimum (“higher level”)  
Offer conference registration discounts to higher-level members  
Advertise organization website/contact info in local & regional publications  
Take membership brochures/information/forms to all meetings  
Formalize way to thank those who pay more in dues or give additional resources to organization  
Financially support/sponsor other agricultural, farm, & agritourism programs/conferences & solicit their sponsorships in return

### **III. DUTIES OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR & ASSOCIATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

#### ***Executive Director***

Maintain neutrality & confidentiality at all times  
Communicate necessary information to Board if consensus needed  
Keep Board informed of responsibilities to funding organization  
Efficient management re: timeliness of keeping records, making deposits, reporting to Board issues requiring consensus  
Send copies of all banking & accounting correspondence to treasurer  
Visit as many farms as possible – be an ambassador in the field  
Seek out public speaking opportunities  
Join organizations which can enhance visibility of organization

#### ***Board of Directors’ Responsibilities***

Explain to Board members the importance of their duties: time commitment & participation expectations  
Provide leadership development orientation for Board members  
Represent the interests of members; encourage feedback  
Hold at least two board meetings/year in person &/or by telephone conference call &/or Skype  
Report board actions to members in timely manner via newsletter or other communications means  
Create a way for members to find necessary resources & assistance  
Keep detailed written financial records & meeting minutes with clear ‘action items’ & follow-up actions expected  
Conduct an annual review/simple audit of financial records  
Monitor the agritourism industry through surveys of rural partners & by staying informed of industry innovations  
Join similar associations, serve on boards, or run for public office

#### ***Board Obligations to Members***

Recognize that the association is a support organization for beginning & current agritourism farmers  
Create organization website if appropriate  
Use social media to communicate with & recognize members  
Recruit new members by publicizing seasonal/regional workshops  
Encourage experienced members to volunteer as mentors  
Follow up with new members: mentorships or “farmerbuddies”  
Recruit volunteers for office who understand they will have commitment for a specific time period  
Elect/appoint two district directors in each district/region  
District directors should seek out new agritourism farmers

Form sub-committees for special projects when needed; recruit non-board members to participate  
Remember that not all farmers have &/or use email/computers  
Maintain an atmosphere of open, comfortable communication among members, Board & Executive Director  
Take appropriate action when dissension occurs: Solve it!  
Publish newsletter online &/or hard copy; recognize members  
Maintain & provide an up-to-date membership data base  
Hold annual conference/business meeting for members  
Hold seasonal &/or regional workshops to share information from the annual conference & information of local interest  
Provide meeting “freebies” (note pads, pens, key chains, etc.)  
Continually remind members to renew membership  
Encourage members to seek out new agritourism farmers  
Encourage members to communicate what’s working well for them through the organization, or where weaknesses may exist  
Partner with other states’ agritourism organizations to share regional ideas through list serve & at meetings  
Provide information about workshops of interest to members

#### **IV. STRENGTHENING THE MEMBERSHIP**

Expect members with more years of experience to form mentoring relationships with beginning farmers  
Hold small workshops & large meetings with quality speakers, locations & topics  
Survey members annually before annual conference to determine workshop topics, interests, ideas for speakers, new ideas  
Provide means for recognizing members internally & externally  
Publicize & encourage use of list serve for members to share ideas  
Promote participation in similar organizations’ meetings with exhibits  
If dissension arises within the membership, have formalized plan for resolving; preserve & promote confidentiality  
Provide a venue at meetings & workshops where members can share farm products & gift store items  
Seek out all publicity avenues to promote conferences & workshops  
Offer scholarships funded by sponsorships & treasury  
Publish a newsletter, on-line &/or hardcopy, with regular publication schedule  
Create a members-only list serve for members’ questions, news  
Encourage members to combine farm resources & share ideas to avoid duplicate efforts  
Encourage members to seek out local news media for stories about farms, philanthropy, special events  
Encourage members to share new successful methods & farm activities with other members and to contact media  
Encourage use of Facebook, social media outlets  
Look for & accept speaking engagements to promote awareness of organization  
Train and celebrate farm staff, encourage their good work & reward them appropriately  
Support the goals of your Agritourism Office/sponsoring agency  
Promote agritourism farm goal: Visitors “take home a memory”

## **V. THE VISITOR – EDUCATION, INFORMATION & RECREATION**

- Remember that the traveling public may not know the meaning of the word “agritourism” – “farm fun” is a good alternative
- Promote *Agritourism Is Value-Added Agriculture Adventure!*
- Promote that most agritourism farms direct-market to the public at the farm, at farmers markets, etc.
  - Local = Freshness
- Market “staycations” – Farm weekends or weeks for play &/or work
- Hold summer day-camps or week-long camps for school-age children
- Partner with vineyards: value-added grapes produce wine
- Reinforce that the farm story can be a constant “memory” for the visitor before, during & after a farm visit
- Visitors will spread the word about good farms better than many forms of advertising
- Remember that many visitors have never seen a farm
- Realize that many visitors don’t know the origin of farm products
- Remember that there are 2 – 3 generations who may not be familiar with farm life may not have ever visited a farm
- Educate visitors to “experiential” farm tourism – eco, rural, natural, historical, cultural & recreational

## **VI. AGRITOURISM ORGANIZATION SERVICES & RESOURCES**

- Exhibit at conferences/shows/events to feature benefits of organization & individual farms
- Create & share list of valuable contacts & potential allies
- Form relationships with appointed & elected officials & relevant government & other non-profit agency staff
- Research and follow-up on potential referrals &/or sales information
- Team with local tourism officials to create local tourism board to inventory & promote local rural attractions
- Encourage farmers to become community “influentials,” to be willing to run for public office, &/or be appointed to local & state boards
- Partner with other rural attractions to be part of an “Agri-Cultural Trail” - help develop driving guides for day, weekend, or longer vacations of rural destinations
- Network with other rural venues to share “Ag-Venture” passports, coupons
- Create & support multi-agritourism farm family festivals
- Form relationships with local newspaper, television & radio staff
- Collaborate with county rural professionals to develop county/regional seasonal craft days at agritourism farm(s)
- Be a partner &/or participant in county/regional “farm tours”
- Partner with “locavore” (local foods) restaurants to give visitors coupons to farms in exchange for the participating farms giving coupons to the restaurants’ customers
- Encourage members to join appropriate commodities organizations
- Encourage members to join national organizations such as the North American Farmers Direct Marketing Association (NAFDMA)

**THROUGH A STATEWIDE ORGANIZATION, THE FOLLOWING NEEDS OF AGRITOURISM FARMERS CAN BE MET:**

- Better understanding by local planning & zoning boards
- Better understanding of agritourism by insurance companies
- Better knowledge of how to work a “bureaucratic maze”
- Better “road signing” – recognition of economic value of tourism
- Better funding: more direct-to-farmer grants & loans
- Better political savvy: learning how to influence policy & decision-makers at local, state & national levels