

California Agritourism Operators Share Thoughts & Plans for Fall 2020 Activities

From Wayne Bishop, Bishop's Pumpkin Farm, Wheatland, Yuba County:

It's a different kind of year isn't it?

Our fall agritourism season provides the bulk of our annual income, so we are very anxious about how it will turn out. We do feel fortunate to be in Yuba County, where there has been a low rate of infection and where our local government has taken a leadership role in getting businesses opened up. We have cultivated relationships with our city and county governments over the years and it seems to be paying dividends now. We had a zoom meeting in mid-June with those people and our county health official to discuss the outlook. Subsequently, a team of county staff came out to help us make plans.

The important point in our favor is that we are a business and not an "event". Our business is made up primarily of retail shops, food service with outdoor seating, and u-pick produce. This was pointed out by our city administrator and agreed to by the health official. That is key because it means there hopefully won't be a limit on the number of visitors we can accept. We have yet to work out how we will manage some of our attractions, such as the train and carousel; but the county officials felt it will be possible with regular cleaning and some distancing.

Unless there are new developments, we believe we will be opening with precautions such as more cleaning and sanitizing, more hand-wash and hand sanitizing stations, facemasks encouraged and so on. We have planted the same amount of pumpkins we normally would except for the ones meant for school field trips. We are sure the field trips will be much fewer but we have hopes that families will be hungry for outdoor activities to participate in. We hire over 500 employees for the fall and plan to hire that many plus more for the extra cleaning we will be doing. If the guests do not show up in the numbers we are accustomed to, we will of course cut back on staff.

From Karen Macedo, RAM Farms Pumpkin Patch and Corn Maze, Turlock, Stanislaus County:

We are moving forward, planting pumpkins in the same amount as last year. We're also planting our 20-acre corn maze. Most years we get up to 1000 people in the maze on Friday and Saturday evenings. This year we will attempt social distancing by scheduling 15 or 20 people entering every 15 minutes.

Our farm has been the local gathering spot for junior high and high school kids. They like to visit the maze, then hang out, watch movies and eat popcorn. This year we will set the hay bales further apart and limit some of the activities. We don't have vendors or live entertainment in general, so they won't be missed this year. We will still show movies and have a food truck as a snack bar in the evenings. The biggest change will be the loss of field trips for 2000 kindergarteners from nine Turlock schools. No field trips this year. We will also not do any pumpkin bowling this year. We are planning to go ahead with our "scary shed", geared for elementary school kids, but not sure yet how that will work.

We pick our own pumpkins rather than offering U-Pick to save the plants and allow us to do 2-3 pickings in the field, so the pumpkin selling will all be at our farm stand. We have started offering U-Pick cut flowers, and that has started very well and should pick up. We'll

plant sunflowers late, with two more plantings, so they bloom through September and into October. We will open our small produce stand next week with melons and tomatoes, and start selling pumpkins there in September.

Most years we hire 8 to 10 part-time people, and will hire them again this year, although they may have less hours than in other years. Right now we are moving forward to open on Friday September 25th. We expect that people are looking for something to do, and are hoping for the best. We will decide in November whether or not we will be opening our popular Ice Rink.

From Glenn Tanaka, Tanaka Farms, Irvine, Orange County:

Tanaka Farms, I am embarrassed to say, is doing well. Even though our farm tours and U-pick was shut down for two and a half months, our drive thru produce stand and CSA has made up the difference. Once people started to get out more and go back to work, our produce sales have slowed but we have started our U-pick operation back up. As always, for us the summer months slow down and we prep for our bread and butter season, the pumpkin patch.

This year we will be missing our school field trips on the weekdays. That income will be extremely difficult to replace. We will try and promote school families to come out to the pumpkin patch on their own with a portion of the entrance going back to their school, a fundraising opportunity.

We will have to limit our attendance to about 50% to 75% of last year to allow for social distancing on the farm. We will probably not be able to have our usual games, rides and crafts. We really are not sure yet what we will do to replace those activities.

With the recent uptick in COVID cases and the reclosing of bars, indoor eateries, museums, beaches and the like, my son and I have been discussing the possibility of a drive thru pumpkin patch. That would really make our visitors feel safe but we haven't gone through the logistics and the numbers to see if it would be feasible.

Have to be flexible and be able to adapt and most important of all we have to keep our team and customers safe. Sorry that I don't have any better info, but we just don't know right now.

From Ron Kelley, R. Kelley Farms, Sacramento River Delta:

We have cancelled all tours and group events. We are still opening our farm stand and U-Pick fields this July, with extra caution, social distancing and sanitation, and still selling at farmers' markets. We can't afford the chance of getting the whole operation shut down due to a visitor becoming infected and the contact tracing coming back to our farm and requiring quarantine for the family and staff.

From Deborah Munch & David and Sharon Osteen, Clayton Valley Pumpkin Farm, Clayton, Contra Costa County:

It has been a hard decision, but we have decided to call off all our field trips this year and not open to the public at all this fall. We would need a lot of visitors to make our normal operations worthwhile, and it doesn't seem possible this year for our 6-acre farm. The

largest school district that we usually work with contacted us and is recommending no field trips this year, and we have not heard from the other districts that usually send kids to our farm. In addition, we feel that the personal risk of visitors to our family is not something we can take on; Deborah and David are both in their 70s and Deborah has a new-born baby.

The start-up and set-up costs for our normal operations are astronomical, for us, including insurance and employee and equipment costs. We buy pumpkins, rather than growing our own, which is an additional cost. Most years we hire 40 people to put the structures together, put up signs, act as tour guides, do clean up and animal care, drive trains, staff the food stand, provide customer service and manage parking. Usually we plant ornamental corn, gourds and sunflowers, offer a play area with a tunnel of straw and bean pots for the children and have plastic duck races back and forth between two water tanks. We also usually have hay rides, trackless train rides, vendors for barbecue and kettle corn, and a face painter.

For us, it would have to be all or nothing to be worthwhile, so we will not be open. We also will not be ordering Christmas trees or opening for Christmas season this year. Instead we will try to do something online, promote our online store and celebrate virtually.

From Phil McGrath, McGrath Family Farm, Camarillo, Ventura County:

We have had a pumpkin patch for over 40 years, and the last 20 years its been all organic. We will be taking all the precautions necessary for the Covid-19, but being outdoors with fresh ocean breeze is the best during a Pandemic. It will be open all of Oct, approximately 3 acres, and will host tours.

From Craig Underwood, Underwood Family Farms, Moorpark & Somis, Ventura County:

We think it will be a huge crowd this fall, based on the number of people coming to our farm stand and U-Pick patches. The farm stand is still busy, although down a bit from the first rush in March and April. Most days we have 600 to 700 people out picking, with 2000 or more on the weekends. We planted for a normal year, but Pick Your Own popularity this year is four times what we see in a normal year. People want to get out and enjoy family activities. We're seeing more repeat business, way more than most years.

We're planting our pumpkins now, planting a few less than usual because we don't expect many school tours. We'll be planting the corn for the maze on August 10th or so. We'll be making the aisles wider this year, and restricting the number of people allowed in the maze at one time. We'll have a sunflower field that the wagon will drive through for viewing and photo opportunities.

We met with the county head of emergency services for suggestions, and were told that it should not be necessary to limit the number of people on the farm. We have parking for 2800 cars, and are anticipating a slightly higher turnover than normal due to there being less things for people to do and less entertainment.

Changes due to COVID-19: We don't want long lines for food, so we are spreading the vendors out and increasing the number of spaces. There will be no entertainment show space, but we will have roving entertainment such as musicians on the back of a truck driving around the farm. We still offer wagon rides, but have taken out the middle seats on

the wagon and the drivers encourage people to spread out, keeping groups together on the ride. Everyone will need a mask to enter the farm, to ride on the wagon, and to shop, but not while they're picking. We haven't opened the animal center, and may not open this at all. We're not sure yet. There will be no pony rides, no country games, no tomato slingshot or corn cannons, no theme weekends or tractor parades. We are doubling the size of the area for the public to gather, spreading out tables and adding more tables so people can spread out more.

From Steve Murray, Murray Family Farms, Bakersfield:

At Murray Family Farms we operate in three sectors; tourism, direct fruit marketing through our two freeway retail facilities/off site farmers markets and wholesale fruit sales through other people's packing houses. It is interesting to read how other small farms focused on growing their CSA or their U-pick. We did not start a CSA, shut down our U-pick and canceled spring and summer festivals. Instead our focus has been on our strength in farmers markets and sending the best cherries and organic blueberries that we can grow to the packing houses. The strawberries that we planted for school tours ended up being sent to our farmers markets. It is interesting that small farms report good results no matter which strategy that they focused on due to the spike in demand for local fresh produce. (Blueberries had their challenges due to a huge volume increase in production from Mexico)

We have held our October month-long festival for the past 14 years. It is important to look at what our intentions have been from the beginning. Our mission has always been to improve the quality of people's lives by sharing with our community the flavor, beauty, miracle and wonder of what we get to do for a living while sustaining our family business.

Within our family farm leadership there is not a consensus on whether or not we should reopen our farm in October. There will likely be no school tours. It is anyone's guess at the percentage decrease that there will be in general admissions.

The profitability for the entire ag tourism season will come down to what happens over three weekends. A governmental decree or single on site illness could stop us in our tracks; not to mention how we will enforce face masks and social distancing while implementing our COVID-19 illness prevention plan. Managing the lines, wagon rides, bounce pillow and areas where groups gather will create a new paradigm. The big questions are: can we afford not to open and can we open safely and profitably.

There is a percentage of people that will not come out until there is a vaccine. The biggest concern for the public will be "is it safe?" so face mask enforcement will be a must. Being an outdoor venue with plenty of open space is a plus. People want to return to a sense of normalcy and nostalgia. Kids will most likely be home 3 weekdays. Every day the news is a moving target with bars and restaurants opening and then being shuttered back down. Will there be a fair? Children will be back in school in August for a couple of days a week and there might be a third COVID-19 spike going into October.

We are planting our corn maze, flowers and pumpkins as usual, knowing that if we don't, we will not have the option to open in October. We are considering changing our days and hours of operations to shift our labor hours towards supervising guests, cleaning and sanitizing our facilities. Our hope is to open safely on October 2nd and that we can achieve 50% -75% of the net revenue that we achieved in the 2019 season.