**Fostering an Agritourism Industry**

**Introduction and Background**

From buy local slogans to specialty logos communicating the value of the origin of products, consumers are looking for opportunities to get closer to their growers. This trend in consumer preference may also offer a profitable business opportunity for agritourism operations prepared to take on the challenges. Beyond labeling and rhetoric, a segment of "locovers" and "foodies" are looking to have an on-farm experience to provide a connection to the origin of the product like no other.

Though many Extension programs currently feature limited farm tours organized by Agents in cooperation with growers, a comprehensive plan for delivering such programs statewide is lacking. The Agricultural Awareness Initiative in the current UF/IFAS Extension Strategic Plan seeks to eventually provide some guidance and framework and future statewide efforts are expected to be modeled after existing successful programs.

Within about an hour of both Tampa and Orlando, Polk County is strategically located to benefit from tourist destinations such as Walt Disney World, Busch Gardens and Legoland Florida. Though existing agritourism options in the County are hit or miss and limited agricultural educational tours have been conducted through Extension to date, Polk County may be well positioned to capitalize on the development of an agritourism industry.

**Objectives and Educational Approach**

An April 2014 inaugural blueberry tour conducted by UF/IFAS Extension Polk County featured:

- **Shady Oaks Fruit Farm**, a Lakeland blueberry U-Pick, and W.G. Roe and Sons, a blueberry packinghouse.
- Extension provided the framework for the tour including:
  - Bringing interested operations together.
  - Developing price, promotional materials, and script.
  - Background expertise on blueberry production.
  - Printed information, transportation and insurance.
  - Evaluation and follow-up meetings.

**Outcomes and Impacts**

- Twelve participants, mainly media, attended and several articles were written about the tour in agricultural and general public publications.
  - 100% (12/12) would recommend the tour to others and 88% expressed interest in additional agritourism experiences. Peaches and honey/pollination industry were the most frequent selection.
  - At least 75% rated their experience at the individual farms a five out of five possible points.
  - 83% said the experience affected the way they think about farming.
  - 75% reported they were better informed about blueberry production; direct marketing and processing as well as the farm to plate process, as a result of the tour.
  - 90% planned to purchase more locally grown food and 38% planned to visit more farms as a result of their experience.
  - Additional tours are in the planning stages, with a honey tour planned for the fall.

**Pros and Cons of Adopting this Program**

- **Pros**:
  - Connect with growers and the public to improve agricultural awareness and support the development of a local industry.
  - On farm experiences are generally enjoyable!

- **Cons**:
  - Success not guaranteed
  - May take a significant time commitment
  - Requires existing operations in the area
  - May require a lot of trial and error to find the best pricing fit

**Suggested**

- Transportation is a significant cost and risk. Stage interested stakeholders or supporters to fill the seats in the case of low registration. The experience and exposure will benefit future efforts, and larger groups build the confidence of cooperators.
- Remember Insurance. American Income Life is an insurance provider commonly used by 4-H, and provided coverage for this tour in addition to the cooperative's insurance.
- Travel time can be a real killjoy! Look for locations in close proximity to one another.
- Be sure to develop a script and practice with cooperators to avoid the dear in headlights expression on the faces of inexperienced cooperators.

**Hands on connection and discovery**

**Shady Oaks Fruit Farm**

**True Blue Winery**

**Participants learned about blueberry production and picked blueberries at Shady Oaks Farm.**

**Participants learned the value, marketing and packaging of blueberries at Wm. G. Roe.**

**Wm. G. Roe**

**Photos from top left to right: Polk County Property Appraiser map; highway logos, open access Wikipedia; FDACS blueberry season figure; additional figures and photos, Mary Beth Henry, UF/IFAS are the property of their respective operators.**