

Farm

QUESTIONS? Contact Managing Editor Mario Renteria at mrenteria@ivpressonline.com or 760-337-3453.

Ag-Ventures home and away

BY STEPHANIE COLLINS
Farm Smart

People have become more interested in how their food is produced. They want to meet farmers and processors and talk with them about what goes into food production.

For many people who visit farms, especially children, the visit marks the first time they see the source of their food, be it a dairy cow, an ear of corn growing in a field, or an apple they can pick right off a tree.

Farmers and ranchers use this interest to develop traffic at their farm or ranch, and interest in the quality of their products, as well as awareness of their products.

Agritourism, as it is defined most broadly, involves any agriculturally based operation or activity that brings visitors to a farm or ranch. Agritourism has different definitions in different parts of the world, and sometimes refers specifically to farm stays.

Elsewhere, agritourism includes a wide variety of activities, including buying produce direct from a farm stand, navigating a corn maze, slopping hogs, picking fruit, feeding animals, or staying at a bed and breakfast (B&B) on a farm. Agritourism is a form of niche tourism that is considered a growth industry in many parts

of the world, including the United States. Other terms associated with agritourism are "agritainment", "value added products", "farm direct marketing" and "sustainable agriculture".

Agritourism is widespread in California. Agritourists can choose from a wide range of activities that include picking fruits and vegetables, riding horses, tasting honey, learning about wine and cheesemaking, or shopping in farm gift shops and farm stands for local and regional produce or hand-crafted gifts.

The Small Farm Center at the University of California states that, "Agricultural tourism or agritourism is one alternative for improving the incomes and potential economic viability of small farms and rural communities. Some forms of agritourism enterprises are well developed in California, including fairs and festivals. Other possibilities still offer potential for development."

The UC Small Farm Center has developed a California Agritourism Database that "provides visitors and potential entrepreneurs with information about existing agritourism locations throughout the state."

The University of California Desert Research and Extension Center recently completed its own agritourism event, The 2017 Farm Tour season.

Over a seven-week period, January 18 - February 24, the Center hosted almost 1,000 visitors from all over the U.S., Canada and even local residents for FARM

SMART tours. The program featured a hay wagon ride and research field tour with "u-pick" fresh vegetables and a presentation on Imperial Valley agriculture. The program also included recipe sampling with local produce as well as local honey tasting. Many visitors to the Imperial Valley this time of year are curious about agriculture in a desert region and how water gets here. The FARM SMART tours answer

those questions and more. Feedback from visitors indicated they would like more of these type of activities and they would be back again for the 2018 program. California Agriculture magazine states the potential benefits of agritourism for local agriculture are varied. First, agritourism may generate diversification opportunities for local farmers to increase revenues and enhance the viability of their operations. Second, it may

be an excellent tool to educate the public about the importance of agriculture and its contribution to the county's economy and quality of life.

Third, it may provide economic incentives and reduce friction in the agricultural-urban interface, thus helping to preserve agricultural land in Imperial County.

Finally, agritourism may enhance the appeal and demand for local products, foster regional

marketing efforts and create value-added and direct-marketing opportunities that may stimulate economic activity and spread the benefits to various communities in the county.

See www.calagtour.org and www.visitcalifornia.com/feature/amazing-agritourism-experiences for more information about agritourism opportunities in California and let your ag-ventures begin.