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Agritourism brings folks – and funds – to local farms



The Educational Farm at Joppa Hill hosts educational programs and other events. (Darrell Halen Photo)

This year, Goffstown farmers Dan and Lea Devriendt added a pick-your-own strawberries operation to their business on land they had acquired on Story Road in town.

Someday in the future, they're going to add a corn maze and pumpkins for customers to pick themselves.

Offering customers the opportunity to experience farming life – such as petting zoos and farm-to-table meals – is good business for farmers. The activities draw in customers and provide farmers with additional sources of revenue.

That's what they're looking for – an experience, said Lea, whose business on South Mast Street in Goffstown, Devriendt Farm Products, sells produce, plants and perennials, ice cream, Christmas trees and other products. They don't want to just buy a pumpkin. They want to pick it themselves.

Agritourism, defined broadly, involves any agriculturally based activity or operation that brings people to a farm or ranch.

In New Hampshire, it has become a growing component of the farming business. But there have also been clashes between farmers and neighbors – and between farmers and municipalities – over what farmers should be allowed to do on their land.

According to the state, New Hampshire's farmers have been gradually incorporating agritourism activities into their farms to remain profitable.

It's a trend that has enabled many to diversify their incomes and preserve the state's generations-old family farms, the state says on its VisitNH website. For travelers, the rapid ramp-up of agritourism attractions means that there's a whole lot of fun and deliciousness in store as you explore rural New Hampshire.

According to 2012 U.S. Department of Agriculture census information, there were 190 New Hampshire farms incorporating agritourism, with revenues of \$3.8 million.

The money in agriculture today in the Northeast is not in the commodity produced. It's not like the Midwest where there's row crop farming,said Robert Johnson, policy director for the New Hampshire Farm Bureau Federation in Concord. The money in New Hampshire is not in that kind of agriculture. It's in the experience for the buyer. That's what people want. Even though they're buying a product, they want to go to the farm and experience the farm atmosphere for whatever reason.

At Charmingfare Farm in Candia – a working farm where fields are plowed and planted – visitors can enjoy hayrides, pumpkin picking, concerts, petting and feeding farm animals, and much more.

Recently, Sean and Angie Marshall traveled from their home in South Berwick, Maine, with their three young children to enjoy an afternoon at the farm.

They walked around and saw the animals, enjoyed a horse-drawn wagon ride and ate a picnic lunch. Their two oldest children each enjoyed a pony ride.

A lot of people said it's a fun place to bring the kids,said Angie, who believes she discovered the farm through a mothers' group on Facebook.

In June, Gov. Maggie Hassan signed into law Senate Bill 345, which defines agritourism and permits agritourism activities on any property where the primary use is agricultural. The state Legislature passed the bill, one of two bills it considered, after the state Supreme Court ruled in a zoning case against a tree farmer in Henniker who wanted to hold weddings and other events on his land.

The court had ruled that agritourism was not included in the definition of agriculture under state law, as the farmer had argued, and what he wanted to use his land for wasn't a permitted agricultural use.

The bill that Hassan signed states that agritourism shall not be prohibited on any property where the primary use is for agriculture,but it also states that new establishments and retail expansions may be made subject to applicable special exception, building permit, or other local land use board approval and may be regulated to prevent traffic and parking from adversely impacting adjacent property, streets and sidewalks, or public safety.

The increase in agritourism over recent years has been credited, in part, to a renewal of public interest in locally grown food.

The state encourages farmers who plan to incorporate agritourism into the business to make thorough plans and consider impacts like parking and traffic flow, insurance needs, and safety for visitors and employees.

Allenstown farmer Chris LaValley, who runs a farm stand in Hooksett, said that agritourism is important financially to farmers, particularly those who grow food – because they only have a limited amount of time during the year to make a living. Drawing customers to their land helps farmers cover their expenses, he said.

Roger Noonan, president of the New England Farmers Union and owner of Middle Branch Farm in New Boston, has spoken before land use boards in Gilford to support a farmer's agritourism activities in that community.

Noonan, an organic farmer who runs a diversified family farm, doesn't consider his business to have an agritourism component. But he doesn't intend to close the door to new activities in the future.

We don't want to limit what we can do, and the opportunity, so we've been very supportive of agritourism, said Noonan, who sells food to consumers through Community Supported Agriculture shares.

We don't have a corn maze and that's not in the cards, but we have a couple of events. We have a sugar house event. Technically that's tourism – we're bringing people out to the farm, said Noonan, adding that he's had parties in conjunction with the CSA program.

Noonan would like to add a pick-your-own operation, and said he would consider someday hosting weddings and farm dinners with chefs.

I'm definitely interested in expanding into more events, maybe having weddings here, farm stays, said his daughter, Heather.

According to Drew Cline, chairman of the Educational Farm at Joppa Hill, a nonprofit organization in Bedford, its educational programs, fairs and trick-or-treat event meet the state's current definition of agritourism.

That definition, he said, would allow the farm to hold food festivals, small concerts, weddings, cookouts and other activities to draw visitors for reasons not directly related to farm operations.

There are no plans to hold any of those activities now, Cline said, but said, It is a huge relief to know that the law does not prevent us from holding such fun and creative events to draw new visitors to the farm.

- See more at:

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