

Best Practices & Recommendations

Best Practices and Lessons Learned from Other Jurisdictions

Based on the research undertaken of other jurisdictions, certain important developmental practices may be worth incorporating into the development of BC's agri-tourism industry. Following Nova Scotia's lead, BC has already begun the process of establishing a one-window access point for all permits, licenses and other business regulatory requirements. To date BC has developed an online business registration system (<http://www.onestopbc.ca>) and an online business start-up checklist (<http://www.smallbusinessbc.ca/workshop/checklist.html>). The strength of the Nova Scotia example, however, is that municipal requirements have also been included. As municipal zoning, signage and other by-laws have a significant effect on an agri-tourism operation; municipal involvement in such an initiative is critical.

A best practice taken from the Alberta government is to make available to existing and potential operators a variety of regulatory and business resources to aid their development. A published guide to the regulations provides transparency to both operators and municipal governments in terms of which regulations apply. MAFF in the past has developed a *Guide for Bylaw Development in Farming Areas* for municipal governments. Building off this initiative, the next step would be a *Guide to Regulations for Agritourism Operations in British Columbia*. Financial case studies/worksheets for various agri-tourism ventures (easily adapted from the Alberta ones) encourage potential operators to consider all the business issues (including the cost of regulatory compliance) and treat it as a separate venture from their everyday farming.

Another best practice occurring in Alberta is for parts of the industry to become self-regulating. The Alberta Country Vacations Association has established its own guidelines and accredits members to the organization after being inspected and found abiding to provincial and municipal regulatory requirements. Members then network and share best practices amongst themselves, cooperate with advertising and promotional needs, and add legitimacy to the overall rural accommodation industry. Like the Bed and Breakfast industry, this also requires less government oversight in the industry, as it becomes in the best interest of operators to abide.

As regions within BC vary along an agritourism developmental spectrum, other jurisdictions outside of BC also appear to be at different stages in their life cycle. The Niagara Escarpment region in Ontario serves as a forewarning of issues that may present themselves in BC during the later stages of agritourism development. The major lesson to be gained from the Niagara Escarpment, where the rural and urban interface is in conflict, is to communicate early and regularly with stakeholders like municipal governments/regional districts, farm operators, and the public at large. The focus of discussions should be on identifying shared interests such as economic development and agricultural sustainability and actively guiding the development of the industry to prevent later conflicts.

Recommendations for the Industry

Recommendations for the agritourism industry are based on the experiences of the most successful operators surveyed and research undertaken of other jurisdictions. Before venturing into the agri-tourism industry, farmers should be aware of certain practices learned from other successful agritourism operators.

- **Plan for the Regulatory Requirements**
Before beginning any new agritourism venture, find out what the regulations are, how much it will cost to comply with those regulations and the timeline necessary for obtaining permits, passing inspections and reaching full compliance.
- **Treat Agritourism as a Separate Business Venture**
Those operators surveyed who seemed the most content with the regulatory environment also thought of and treated agritourism as a separate business requiring different skills, resources and attention than their everyday farm practices. In some cases, it may be necessary for potential operators to expand their business knowledge through training courses in certain areas.
- **Expect to Invest in Health and Safety Requirements**
Successful operators are aware that in order to have a feasible and profitable agritourism business, they have to invest in health and safety requirements such as washrooms, sanitation systems or commercial kitchens.
- **Discover that Regulatory Compliance Can Be Good For Business**
Many operators, in the Okanagan and Vancouver area in particular, claim that meeting all the standards is a way of differentiating themselves from other lower-scale operations and therefore is good for business. Further, complying fully and

early on with the regulations can mean less business interruption and cost incurrence later once the business is underway.

- **Form a Self-Regulating Industry Association**

Leaders in the agritourism industry in other jurisdictions like Alberta have come together to form industry associations, which has proven to be a successful initiative. The Alberta Country Vacations Association (and others like the Ontario Country Vacations Association) has developed its own standards and codes of conduct to govern members of the organization. These associations have promoted compliance with provincial and federal regulations, even to the point of requiring this as a pre-requisite to membership. By forming a self-regulating, collective organization, members can also work together to foster positive relationships with municipal and other government agencies. The overall effect of a self-regulating organization is to add external legitimacy and create trust with stakeholders like municipal governments and the public at large. MAFF has already begun the process for the industry in this regard through the Agri-Food Futures Fund, which has earmarked funds towards the development of such an organization.

- **Develop Strategic Partnerships**

Either individually or collectively, agritourism operators should form strategic partnerships with municipalities and communities to assist with regulatory requirements and prevent later conflicts relating to urban/rural interface. For example, an agritourism association in partnership with a community could develop shared commercial kitchens, washroom and other sanitation facilities, or could work together to create a promotional signage program.

Recommendations for MAFF

Survey findings indicate that there are clear regulatory areas that most operators, regardless of regional location or particular business activities consider hindrances to development. These are the overarching regulatory issues like municipal-provincial jurisdiction, ALR restrictions, and transparency of regulations that have been discussed throughout this report. Research of other jurisdictions revealed that British Columbia is unique in terms of the Agriculture Land Reserve and consequently may be experiencing more regulatory conflict than is the case in other provinces. The new regulations for the ALR that are effective as of November 1, 2002 will begin to address some of the confusion between municipal-provincial regulatory jurisdiction. The following recommendations are steps that MAFF can take both in the short and long term to resolve the regulatory conflicts and promote the overall health of the agritourism industry.

- **Continue to Support Provincial Standards for Farm Land Usage**

The Right to Farm Act and upcoming changes to the ALR regulations set a provincial standard for what is permissible on farmland. These are positive steps towards providing a clearer division of regulatory power between provincial and municipal governments. MAFF should further ensure that activities designated as farm use are protected and may be regulated but not be prohibited by any local government bylaw except a bylaw under section 917 of the Local Government Act.

- **Provide Regulatory Transparency & Other Resources**

As mentioned earlier, MAFF can also work towards increased transparency by developing a guide for operators to gain greater understanding of which regulations apply to the agritourism sector. Municipalities should of course be included in this guide. Additionally, based on survey findings of what resources the industry stated they would prefer to have, MAFF may want to consider devoting an employee who can act as an access point for regulatory information to operators. This position could be on a temporary basis until an industry organization is further developed and is able to take on the role itself. Supplementary duties for this employee could be as a mediator between municipal and regional districts and agritourism operators as issues arise.

- **Foster Municipal Government Buy-In**

The City of Chilliwack is a rare example of a municipal government that recognizes the economic potential of the agritourism industry. Through the development of educational resources, awareness publications or tool kits for municipalities, municipal governments will begin to recognize how the promotion of agritourism can become a win-win situation for their community as well.