When Midwest farming and tourism intersect, cautious optimism prevails

By Camille Phillips

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Are Midwestern farmers overlooking an opportunity ripe for the picking?

Farm-based tourism attractions like “u-pick” berry patches, wine tastings, dude ranches and guided hunting trips have operated in the region for years. But California, Texas and Colorado have the lion’s share of this type of business, often called agritourism. Recently, however, Midwestern policymakers have begun planting the seeds to grow the agritourism industry in their states.

And more farmers seem to be recognizing the potential for rural community building and additional income.

Renee Seba and her husband Charlie are among those figuring out how to make a go of it. They own Mule Barn Berries, in Lathrop, Mo., north of Kansas City.

Last year they didn’t have enough customers for their u-pick operation. With bushels of berries rotting on the vine, they scrambled to find other ways to sell the fruit.

“My husband said, well call Lidia’s Restaurant. Let’s pack up fruit and take it to grocery stores and see if they’ll buy anything. It was this panic moment,” Renee Seba said.

But this year they are better prepared. Several area restaurants buy their berries, they’ve made arrangements to sell at more farmers markets, and as a last resort they can call gleaners to pick the remaining fruit. And, of course, they have u-pick.

“U-pick, everyone’s happy,” Seba said. “They come out, they have a great experience. I get to talk to people, which I really like. It’s all win-win-win when it’s u-pick.”

Still, the Sebas aren’t over the hump.

“We hoped to be profitable by the end of this year, but that’s not going to be reality,” Renee Seba said. “We spent too much money. Didn’t budget well enough.”

Even when the Sebas begin making a profit, odds are it won’t be enough to make much of a living. Agritourism businesses in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Kansas brought in an average of $12,344 in 2007. That’s according to the Census of Agriculture undertaken every five years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

As modest as the 2007 Midwest agritourism numbers were, they show a marked improvement from the 2002 Agriculture Census. In the five years between 2002 and 2007, the average revenue
of agritourism businesses in Nebraska, Iowa, Missouri and Kansas increased by almost 260 percent from $3,443 to $12,344.

Over the last few years, state agencies and universities have devoted numerous resources and web sites devoted to agritourism, which may be part of the reason revenue improved.

Missouri, for example, has an AgriMissouri, a program begun in the 1980s to promote agricultural products, designed to help develop agritourism. The 25-year-old program — which producers can join for $50 a year — grew from 350 to 1,400 members last year, following a program overhaul, according to the state Department of Agriculture. More than 400 of those members have agritourism businesses. Now the program focuses on “connecting producers to consumers and consumers to agriculture.” Its new focus is also reflected in a new website, which includes a map of agritourism operations in the state.

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Kansas also has a map of agritourism businesses on its state websites, simplykansas.com and kansasagritourism.com. There are about 350 businesses listed, but among that number include companies that have more to do with selling products such as jams or baked goods than offering experiences such as u-pick or hunting.

Officials in both states agree that their states have barely scratched the surface of agritourism’s potential. Less than 2 percent of farms in the four-state region have agritourism operations, according to the 2007 ag census.

Still, there’s work to be done, said Linda Craghead with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. “It’s new for Kansas,” said Linda Craghead with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. “Even though we passed the law in 2004 to promote Kansas as an agritourism -- as an industry, it’s not something people have just truly embraced.”

That law is the Agritourism Promotion Act, which was passed with the aim of encouraging Kansas farmers and ranchers to get into agritourism. It limits the liability of agritourism operators and aids in marketing via free registration.

Just 350 producers have registered, although 930 agritourism businesses were operating in the state in 2007, according to the Ag Census.

Gieringer Orchards in Edgerton, Kan., is among those who have registered with the state. Owners Frank and Melanie Gieringer said adding a u-pick component to their peach orchard was a natural progression.

Frank Gieringer farms about 1,000 acres and produces corn, soybeans and beef cattle – which is his family’s primary source of income.
But he also has 12 acres of peach trees, a couple of acres of blackberries, sweet corn and five hoop houses full of tomatoes and other vegetables. The smaller acreage of these specialty crops make it necessary to sell directly to the customer in order to make a profit, Gieringer said. As such, inviting customers out to the orchard 10 years ago to pick their own peaches made sense.

In addition to u-pick, the Gieringers sell their produce at a country store on their property, and at several area farmers markets. Going to farmers markets gives them an opportunity to hand out flyers about their orchard, Gieringer said from inside the store. At the same time, their orchard is a big help in selling their produce at the market.

“But when we set up, we only sell what we grow,” Gieringer said. “And we usually put up a u-pick sign too, so people automatically key into the fact that well, they’ve got to grow their stuff.”

Much like the Gieringers, Carolyn Raasch in Liberty, Mo., kind of fell into agritourism.

In 1991 she opened Carolyn’s Country Cousins on her farm to sell the pumpkins and other produce she had been selling at a farmers market. That same year, a school asked if they could bring students out to see a farm. Now 17,000 schoolchildren tour the farm each year.

Raasch has become a sort of ambassador for agriculture, educating the children and adults who come on the tours about farm life.

“People used to be able to go to grandma’s and grandpa’s every weekend or aunt’s and uncle’s,” Raasch said. “And now, we are not one generation removed from the farm, we’re three and four generations removed from the farm. Some of them have never set foot on a farm and just played in the mud and played in the dirt, like we used to all the time.”

But their school tours offer a lot more than dirt. There’s an animal barn, a pig race, a hay bale maze, a slide and jungle gym made of farm supplies, a train ride and to top it off: a u-pick pumpkin patch. Raasch’s sons also operate a corn maze right next to Carolyn’s Country Cousins.

Despite their originally modest intentions, the Raasches have stayed in the agritourism business and expanded their operations because it makes sense for them. It takes advantage of the land, equipment and knowledge they already possess. Raasch and her husband Buddy farm full-time, as do their two adult sons. They use the same farm equipment and expertise to plant their 8,000 acres of row crops as they do to plant the 60 acre u-pick pumpkin patch and corn maze.

Still, traditional farming remains the Raasch family’s primary income.

“Row crop is our number one income. Row crop is our number one income by far,” Raasch said.

While agritourism may provide a limited contribution to Midwest farmers’ bottom lines, there’s yet another way to measure the value: impact on rural economies.

Carolyn’s Country Cousins draws thousands of paying customers each year and employs 150 people each fall. That kind of success can create a ripple effect of economic growth in a rural area.
community, said Sharon Gulick with the University of Missouri Extension. After all, tourists need places to stay, restaurants to eat in, and a variety of things to do.

Gulick, who oversees rural economic development projects in the state, helps identify the potential on a regional basis. Often times, she said, the food of the region is what stands out most.

"And that’s where the unique opportunity comes in, because the wine in Mississippi River Hills is very different than the wine that’s in Old Trails,” Gulick said.

A regional agritourism magnet for tourists? Some state officials think it could happen.

Craghead, with the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks, and Tourism, envisions Kansas farms as vacation destinations.

“But there are so many people that want to experience what we do every day,” she said. “How many people out there have really ever ridden on a combine? Very few. How many people have stood in a grain truck and felt the warm grain around them as it comes out the auger of a combine? Very few.”

A family vacation milking cows or harvesting wheat may never have the appeal of Disneyland. But for the farmers that decide to branch out into agritourism, perhaps the opportunity to share their way of life is enough. Especially when it can help bring an influx of cash to their community and put a few extra thousand dollars in their pocket.

So how big is this industry?

Fully understanding the potential of agritourism in the Midwest and the country as a whole is hampered by two factors: the lack of an official definition of agritourism and the limited amount of economic data available.

The only comprehensive source on the economic impact of agritourism available in the United States comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Census of Agriculture. Every agriculture producer in the country is required to fill out the agriculture census questionnaire, which comes out every five years. However, the questionnaire leaves the definition of agritourism open to interpretation, describing it as “farm or winery tours, hay rides, hunting, fishing, etc.” It depends on the individual producer what they report, and it is possible, for example, that winery owners only reported the amount they received directly from wine tours and omitted money from overnight stays, restaurants and selling the wine itself.

According to the Wine Institute, an organization that represents the interests of the California wine industry, California wine contributed $2.1 billion to the tourist industry in 2006. That’s
$2.07 billion less than what the entire California agritourism industry made in 2007 according to the agriculture census. The Census questionnaire also has a separate section for reporting income received from selling products directly to the customer. That means income from u-pick and country stores may not be included in the agritourism numbers.

Still, here's what the USDA numbers show: