

Wallowa Agritourism: Diversifying the Crop of Visitor Attractions

THEME: Catalyzed by workshops about market opportunities, tours of active agritourism operations and growing local interest in local foods, Wallowa County farmers and ranchers connect to support each other in diversifying their operations through agritourism.

PROJECT IMPACT: Several farms, ranches and tour operators have expanded their focus on attracting agritourism visitors. Products already include: a new bed and breakfast with a pick your own/cook your own kitchen garden for guests; an honor farm stand, beef and brew tour, farm to fork events, sourcing and labeling to local restaurants and brewpubs, and ranch tours. At least three additional restaurants now offer local meat on the menu.

PLACE: Wallowa County is located in the northeast corner of Oregon, abutting the states of Idaho and Washington. Located in the ancestral territory of the Nez Perce Indians, Wallowa County was settled by non-Indian pioneers starting in 1871. The total population (2013) of this rural county is 7,015 people.

Wallowa County is remote. The county seat of Enterprise is 71 miles from the nearest Interstate. The closest major airports are in Spokane WA and Boise ID, each approximately 4.5 hours away. Limited commercial air service is available in Pendleton, OR, Lewiston, ID and Walla Walla, WA, each approximately 2 hours away.

Wallowa County's geographic remoteness is magnified by its rugged topography, which includes world-class recreational areas, including the Eagle Cap Wilderness, Wallowa Lake, and the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area. These areas are managed through the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The wide Wallowa Valley is home to ranches, farms, and the county's four incorporated communities.

The area's economy has long been dependent on natural resource-based activities: agriculture/ranching are the single largest source of export-dependent employment (Oregon State Extension Service). The area was hard hit by the decline of the timber industry in the 1990s, and it still is more economically distressed than the state. Since the early 1990's, tourism-related employment has grown.

STORY: The story of agritourism in Wallowa County is the story of several different threads of entrepreneurial activities coming together, both serendipitously and intentionally: an active Slow Foods chapter, a vibrant farmers market network, growing interest by local restaurants in sourcing local foods, the return home of young people eager to apply their business and creative skills. It's the story of a local nonprofit organization taking on the role of "connecting the dots" to grow a network of entrepreneurs interested in many different types of agritourism. Finally, it's the story of agritourism valued as an asset for communicating and preserving a way of life: not only a potential source of diversified income for farmers and ranchers, but an opportunity to break down myths about modern day agriculture and enable visitors (and residents) to learn about and support good stewardship of natural resources.

In planning for Oregon's inaugural Rural Tourism Studio late in 2008, local stakeholders identified agritourism as one of many topics of interest. The hope was to "build upon the County's reputation as a place of beauty" by integrating high quality local food into the visitor experience through restaurants, purchases and special event offerings. There were already a few entrepreneurs testing or implementing small scale agritourism projects in Wallowa County, and several participated in the RTS agritourism workshop and activities that followed.

Follow up activities were coordinated through the nonprofit Northeast Oregon Economic Development District (NEOEDD). Part of Travel Oregon's matching grant for implementation supported outreach activities to raise the visibility of local foods and agritourism opportunities in the county. The initial work included:

- A film screening ("Ingredients") and discussion with 36 participants
- Food product workshops with 53 participants
- A "fam tour" of local businesses to further engage existing agritourism businesses as well as potential entrepreneurs- 13 participating businesses, and 4 others that could not participate but provided information

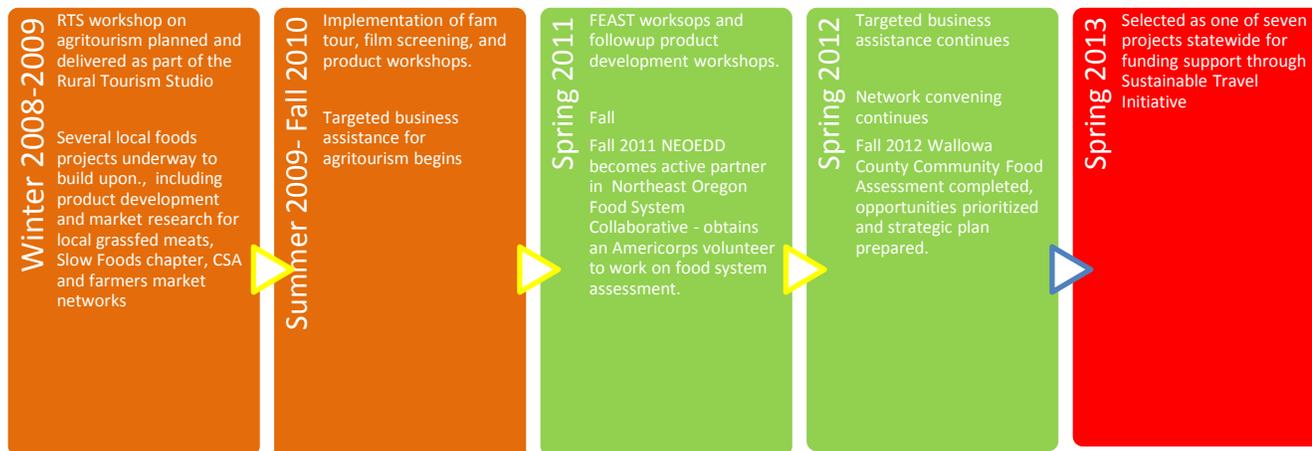
Participating businesses and others who heard about the activities continued to convene semi-regularly, and asked for more opportunities to network with each other. Concurrently, NEOEDD was working on broader regional food system development with some of the same stakeholders. In Spring 2011, NEOEDD sponsored a FEAST (Food* Education* Agriculture* Solutions* Together) food system organizing workshop, as well as an updated version of the food business regulation workshop that had been part of RTS, both of which were well attended.

Examples of enhanced agritourism ventures include:

- Six Ranch, which has an "honor pay" farm stand with its own products (beef, honey, eggs, produce) as well as that of many neighbors—"Lostine carrots, locally baked bread, soap made by a mom and daughter." They are now exploring an AirBnB lodging option that would include lodging for horses, as well as an on-site charcuterie. They are driven by the desire to build relationships with customers and guests to break down myths about farm and ranch life.
- BlueJay Guest House, new B and B opened by a couple who relocated to Wallowa County recently after operating a backcountry lodge and hosting Elderhostel in British Columbia for many years. Guests are free to use anything from the kitchen garden outside their door during their stay.
- Winding Waters Rivers Expeditions- existing river business, has sourced local foods for years, but more recently integrated farm to fork events, pre and post-river ranch tour add-ons. The owners spent their honeymoon at "agriturismos" in Italy, and are enthusiastic about its potential in Wallowa County. They see increased traveler interest, especially international visitors, in learning more about the land and way of life.

Over time, NEOEDD has developed new partnerships and resources to support agritourism development, although it is a constant struggle to fund. NEOEDD received US Department of Agriculture funds through the Rural Business Enterprise Grant program to provide product development and feasibility assessment assistance for value-added meat producers in 2008. NEOEDD is currently a finalist for additional USDA funding to assist businesses in the development of agritourism ventures. NEOEDD and the Oregon Food Bank partnered to bring an Americorps volunteer to Wallowa County in 2011 to help move food system development projects forward. Wallowa County's agritourism development work also received over \$2,000 of funding from Travel Oregon's new Sustainable Travel Initiative, which raises philanthropic dollars from Oregon visitors to reinvest in Oregon communities. NEOEDD will receive additional Sustainable Travel Initiative funds in 2014.

TIMELINE



LESSONS LEARNED:

- Other work in the community around local foods-- farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA) initiatives, Slow Food chapters, farmstands—is complementary to agritourism development. This is because these other activities weave networks among producers, both commercial and informal, that can form the basis for new collaborative projects. Having a critical mass of “food” activity lays the groundwork for agritourism.
- Don’t assume that individual farmers and ranchers know what others are doing, or interested in exploring. The “fam” tour of local operations was an eye-opener for all.
- Don’t get hung up on defining “agritourism” early on. Be inclusive of diverse ideas and activities, as that creates a welcome climate for creative thinking and collaboration.
- It is critical to have a point person to convene and connect the players in an organic way. This is time-consuming and hard for people working the land day and night to take on.
- Having business planning assistance as a service attracts new entrepreneurs into the network.

BUDGET:

The budget for the initial activities immediately following the Rural Tourism Studio was \$1,076 in cash and an additional \$1,020 in in-kind services. The Travel Oregon matching grant for implementation covered \$597 in expenses. The cash balance was raised through sponsorships. NEOEDD has also contributed staff time of considerable value to the project.

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- Agenda for food product workshops
- Press release for fam tours

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