

Wild Rivers Coast: Farm Trail and Networking Events

THEME: In a region grappling with economic decline and food insecurity, a small-scale experiment to connect local food producers to each other, residents and visitors has increased access to local foods and built new partnerships to showcase agritourism through self-guided farm trails.

PROJECT IMPACT: It is too early to capture overall economic impact, but growers report increased visitation and direct sales by both residents and travelers. This effort connected people who had not worked together before, and provided a foundation of contacts on which to build. Locally sourced food is increasingly available, although there is opportunity to do much more over time. Agritourism is now a more visible tourism product through collaborative promotion with the local chambers of commerce. In the words of Julie Miller, Executive Director of the Bandon Area Chamber of Commerce: “We’re helping our producers sell in more venues, and we’re adding more value for our visitors with something local, interesting and delicious!”

PLACE: The Wild Rivers Coast region holds the most isolated of Oregon’s coastal communities in terms of distance from major population centers. From the southern part of Coos County at Bandon, it extends south through all of Curry County to the California border. Uniquely located between diverse coastal landscapes and true wilderness, the terrain varies from long, flat beaches and sheltered harbors to churning rivers and dramatic promontories. This topography has helped shape these strongly independent communities.

As traditional natural resource sectors of fishing and timber have declined, tourism has gained importance as a current source of employment and a driver of future growth in the region’s economy. But only recently has tourism become a true focus for a regional economic development strategy.

STORY: Driven by a combination of poverty and lack of local food distribution mechanisms, local and nutritious food has been surprisingly hard to find in this region, which is rich with agricultural land, rivers and sea. As a result, prior to the start of the Rural Tourism Studio (RTS), a diverse collaboration was already driving several projects to strengthen the local food system and reduce food insecurity.

The idea of agritourism as a destination development priority during the initial planning for the RTS was somewhat unexpected. While the area was known for some crops, especially cranberries and other berries, the production lands and facilities were generally inaccessible to the public. Locally caught fish was rarely featured on local menus, and agritourism had never been a marketing priority for the region to date. However, a 2013 visitor survey presented during the RTS revealed strong interest in local, fresh, culinary, and agricultural experiences. Visitors were actively looking for this. As Cathy Boden, Foodshed Program Coordinator for the local watershed council, noted, “We realized that we have two things to offer: outdoor recreation and culinary/agritourism. And we hadn’t developed the latter, but we could.”

During the RTS program, an “Eat Fresh and Local” action team was one of four teams formed to implement follow-up projects. Cathy served as the initial convener in the spring of 2014. With nine members, the action team itself was quite small, and it was difficult for farmers to leave their farms to participate in meetings. Several project ideas were floated, including development of a “Buy Local” brand and logo, but the options were

overwhelming at first. The part-time “coach”, provided through Travel Oregon, helped the team sort through the options and select a starting point for action.

The team was inspired by the success of the Hood River Fruit Loop as an iconic self-guided farm trail in Oregon, and by the willingness of folks from Hood River to provide how-to advice and support. Armed with this support, the idea blossomed to engage farmers and other key stakeholders to launch a broader discussion of agritourism opportunities. The goal was to foster productive connections among farmers, chefs, retailers, economic development organizations, the community college and others. The outreach strategy was creative and successful.

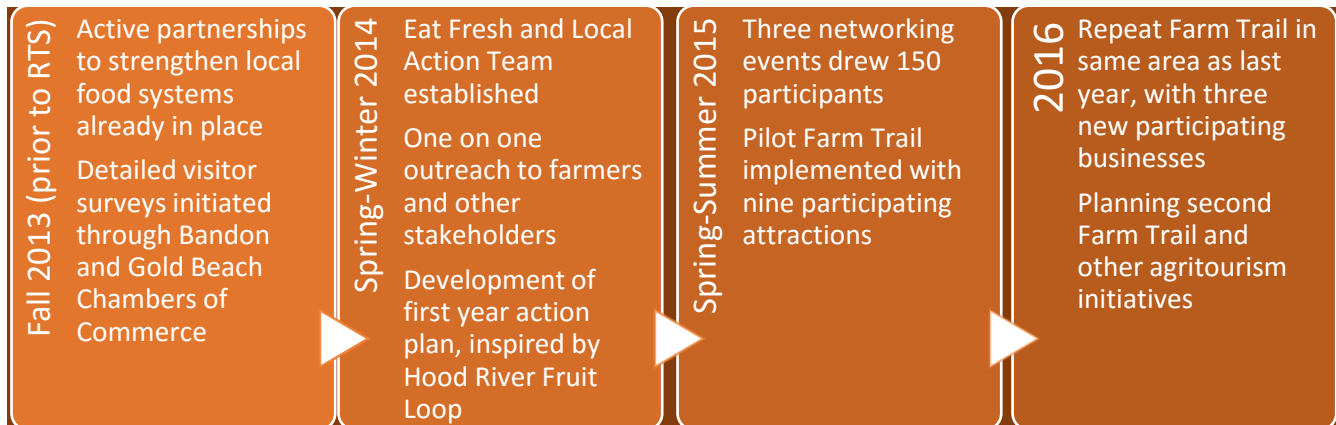
First, there were many one-on-one conversations between action team members and individual farmers, chefs and others. Then, the Eat Fresh and Local team sponsored three larger networking events with a consistent format, held in Langlois, Gold Beach and Brookings between March 29 and April 28, 2015. Over a locally catered meal, participants discussed what they do and how they could help each other. As Julie Miller of the Bandon Area Chamber of Commerce recalls, “I met people I didn’t know I needed to meet!” And Jenine Manning from Dragonfly Farm notes, “I was just so excited by the idea of a Farm Trail! We saw Travel Oregon videos about agritourism and it was so inspiring to see how it benefitted the community.” Participants toured various farms to learn about gaps getting product to market and ways to bridge a gap by providing tourism experiences for the public. Far exceeding the action team’s expectations, 150 people attended these events, and the initial Farm Trail project rode this momentum.

Less than three months after the final networking event, the pilot Farm Trail opened to visitors: it featured six farms and three farmers markets along 27 miles of Highway 101 from Bandon to Port Orford. The team designed the rack cards with a map of the trail on one side and a description of participating farms and markets on the other. These rack cards were distributed in local visitor centers and at each participating business. The Bandon Area Chamber of Commerce embraced the project as a priority, and provided extensive in-kind support for marketing. Local press enthusiastically promoted the activity to community members as well. Finally, each participating business paid for a road sign (approximately \$200) to indicate when they were open to visitors. The Oregon Department of Transportation is consulting with the community on revising regulations to accommodate signage for attractions like the Farm Trail.

Participating farms and markets reported steady visitation all summer, and three new businesses have joined the Farm Trail for 2016. The Farm Trail is the first of four planned agritourism pilot projects to be implemented over a five-year time period. An additional Farm Trail is also planned for southern Curry County in the near future. Guided farm tours and farm dinners are potential future activities.

Like other RTS projects, the effort to date has generated unplanned spillover benefits. The initial networking events drew participation from Agness, a remote community 32 miles inland up the Rogue River over a rough road not easily traveled. The community has several historic lodges and wanted to highlight its annual Tomato Festival as a new agritourism draw. The Eat Fresh and Local action team worked with Gold Beach-based Jerry’s Rogue Jets to offer a jet boat shuttle service and overnight package to Agness throughout the summer, including for the festival weekend.

TIMELINE



LESSONS LEARNED:

- For some tourism development opportunities there can be great synergy between what will strengthen the destination and what will strengthen community livability. There is a powerful link here with stakeholders concerned about food security and access.
- Start small, with a kickoff that brings key stakeholders together to explore opportunities for helping one another. This project allowed stakeholders to vet and participate in a concrete event, without having to attend multiple planning meetings. These events generated momentum for action.
- Continue small with a test run of new visitor products, limited in time and budget, to test the idea.
- Have a well-networked and passionate local person who can coordinate and advocate for the project. Having this point person be knowledgeable, and yet not tied up full-time with day-to-day farming or fishing, is a critical factor for success with agritourism.
- A volunteer action team coordinator (for the first time in an RTS project) received a \$7,000 stipend to cover her time. The coordinator reported that this budget did not cover full coordination costs for this time-intensive project, but it did help to sustain energy to move the project forward.
- Leverage the relationship with Travel Oregon and the RTS to engage with other agencies as needed to advance projects. For example, ODOT is working to permit the farm trail signs as a result of the strong local collaboration.

BUDGET: Total budget includes coordinator time for all Eat Fresh and Local Action Team work (see list in expenses, below), which includes more than the Farm Trail and networking events. It is difficult to peel off the expenses strictly associated with the featured project, as all of the work is interrelated. For a community that has already done some of the related work (e.g. agritourism product inventory), the costs listed below should be lower.

CASH REVENUE:

	Cash
Travel Oregon Matching Grant for RTS	\$ 6,000
Local match (Wild Rivers Coast Alliance)	\$ 6,000
Additional match to fund coordination work from Meyer Memorial Trust and WRCA	\$ 2,000
Portable road signs paid for by participating businesses for Farm Trail	\$ 1,800

Total Revenue \$15,800

CASH EXPENSES:

Local Coordinator/Convener stipend for: \$7,000
 Farm Trail coordination
 Action Team coordination
 Inventory of agritourism product
 Coordination with marketing entities
 Networking events \$ 6,000
 Portable road signs \$ 1,800
 Other, including brochure printing \$ 1,000

Total Expenses \$15,800

IN-KIND CONTRIBUTIONS

Julie Miller, Executive Director of the Bandon Chamber of Commerce, worked closely with Cathy Boden, the local coordinator. Miller estimates that the chamber contributed in-kind resources of \$7,500 to the effort, including her time, as well as sub-contractor time for brochure (\$1,000), and access to the chamber’s discounted rates for map making and printing (\$1,500).

TOOLS/RESOURCES:

- [Invitations for 2015 networking events](#)
- [Wild Rivers Coast Farm Trail 2016 Map](#)
- [Wild Rivers Coast Farm Trail brochure](#)
- Bandon Chamber of Commerce [Landing Page for Farm Trail](#)
- Media:
 - [Farm Trail Shows the Way to Eat Fresh](#), Bandon Western World, July 23, 2015
 - [Road Trip: Wild Rivers Coast Farm Tour](#), Gary Hayes, Oregon Coast Explorer for Travel Oregon, March 16, 2016
 - [Culinary and Agritourism Success Stories: Farm Trail on the South Coast](#), Jim Moore for Travel Oregon
 - [2016 Wild Rivers Coast Farm Trail](#), Bandon Chamber of Commerce

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