



Ag Adaptations

Trading a traditional approach for out-of-the-box ideas may help small beef producers boost their opportunities and income.

Commentary by Kindra Gordon, field editor

A common mantra in agriculture is that the industry is diverse and always changing — and for those who are able to adapt with the times, the opportunity to add new income sources awaits.

Agritourism is one such example. It has been a buzzword growing in popularity during the past decade, and as consumers' appetite for agritourism continues to grow, there are many opportunities for the next generation of farmers and ranchers to help reconnect the public with America's agricultural heritage. How can beef producers tap this trend? Here are some ideas.

Consider a CSA

Farmers' markets have become commonplace throughout many communities in the United States. People support them because they desire

► **Right:** Many CSA farmers add hoop houses to extend their growing season and protect their produce.

► **Inset photo:** A week's CSA share could include bell peppers, okra, tomatoes, beans, potatoes, garlic, eggplant and squash.





fresh meats and produce, and they want local. They are interested in knowing who raised the food they are eating.

However, farmers' markets can also be a little cumbersome. Do you want to spend every Saturday at the farmers' market?

Instead, another model that links farmers with customers is emerging. It is called Community Supported Agriculture, or CSA for short. Through this concept, individuals purchase a membership for a specific amount of time, such as a 24-week summer period. Then they receive weekly baskets full of fresh produce from the CSA farmer.

I had the opportunity to visit one such farm just outside of Nashville, Tenn. In the past 10 years this family operation, Delvin Farms, has transitioned from growing traditional crop commodities to now growing more than 80 varieties of fruits and vegetables. They've added hoop houses to extend their growing season and protect their produce. They've also focused on being organic, fresh and locally grown.

For 2013, Delvin Farms CSA customers were paying \$700 for their 24-week membership. The farm had 800 customers. Admittedly, this farm still has a lot of hand labor, but this new model now allows for three families to live and work off of this 220-acre farm.

While organic is a big selling card for the produce that the Delvins offer, they acknowledge that the even bigger selling point is the fact that customers want to know the producer of their

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► **Above & right:** Farmers and ranchers can provide bird-watching towers for birdwatchers and nature photographers, who will pay for an opportunity to get the "shot of a lifetime."



PHOTO COURTESY USDA

► Bruce Hoffman says photographers will pay as much as \$250 per day for a photo outing.

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food and occasionally have the chance to visit that farm.

The Delvins say social media — particularly Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest — has also been integral to their ability to communicate and connect with their customers. The Delvins are also planning to add an agritourism aspect to their farm in the future. They note that children are especially removed from the process of how food is grown, and parents want their children to have that experience and knowledge — and they are willing to pay for it.

For the future, I foresee the CSA concept being applied to beef producers who want to sell local. Because many urban folks don't have ample freezer space, it is sometimes difficult to sell a whole or half beef. But, as a different example, throughout the summer grilling season, "grill packs" of burgers and steaks could be offered to customers on a biweekly basis over a three- or four-

month period, and then less frequently during the winter.

Online innovation

Another unique twist on the traditional farmers' market is the idea of an "online farmers' market." More than 30 farmer members in Arkansas offer their wares — fruits, vegetables, eggs, poultry, beef, pork, lamb and dairy — via a website (<http://conway.locallygrown.net/>). This allows customers to order what they want, in the quantities they want, from the farms they want.

The format is the brainchild of Cody Hopkins, who is himself a farmer, but he also collects 13% of gross revenue for his



PHOTO COURTESY USDA

► Farmers' markets have become commonplace in many communities, but not everyone wants to spend every Saturday finding fresh, local food.

Working together to make agritourism work

Colorado is one state aiming to do more to help bolster agritourism efforts. An initiative was launched by the Colorado Tourism Office and the Colorado Department of Agriculture this spring that will assist existing and developing agritourism programs and bolster efforts to promote these opportunities to tourists. Funding for the new three-year initiative is being tapped from the state's unclaimed property tax fund.

Wendy White, with the Colorado Department of Agriculture, explains that the objectives of the initiative are threefold:

1. To put a spotlight on Colorado agritourism businesses that are visitor-ready;
2. To stimulate the development of fresh and new high-quality agritourism experiences for travelers; and
3. To support regional clusters of businesses that are working together to develop and promote agritourism.

Efforts will include developing a peer-mentor program among agritourism businesses, enhancing signage for agritourism entities in the state, and implementing a public-relations and social-media campaign that will keep rural people and places in the media. Agritourism is also being given a more robust presence on the state's tourism website colorado.com, including a link to coloradoagritourism.com where a directory of the state's agritourism businesses is available.

She adds that agritourism tends to appeal to three market segments — outdoor recreationists, families with children, and foodies and education enthusiasts.

White shares that from the research Colorado has conducted, they've also noted that the agritourism businesses that are most successful are typically located near an urban population center, located near a cluster of additional tourism activities so that travelers have choices, and the agritourism business operators have a broad network of partnerships.

Some additional examples of agritourism clusters include Oregon's network of "farm loops" developed outside Greater Portland. These are businesses — from wineries and cheese mongers to nurseries — working together in their promotion and events they offer.

Similarly, in Northern California, the Sierra Oro Farm Trail hosts a "passport weekend" each fall, which features specialty farms, boutique wineries and shops who are all open 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, offering tastings, tours and many other goodies, including live music.

Farm dinners are also becoming popular. Here, tickets are sold for an evening "on farm" event. From appetizers and local wine, to a short farm tour and dinner created on-site by a local chef, many consumers are lining up to meet the farmers who grow their food. Some of these events also donate a portion of their proceeds to a local charity as an extra benefit.

efforts in coordinating the online market.

Hopkins, who was recently recognized in *Forbes* magazine, reports that the business model has been successful and it is helping support small farms and local economies.

Nature niche

Bruce Hoffman, who operates a ranch near Corpus Christi, Texas, while also working off the ranch, has found nature photography to be a viable third income.

Hoffman reports that while hunting seems to be hitting a plateau, nature photography and bird watching is just beginning to boom. He says people who want to take photos will pay for the opportunity.

Hoffman has placed photo blinds in strategic wildlife locations on his land to help photographers get that "shot of a lifetime." As a result, Hoffman says people will pay as much as \$250 per day for their photo outing. Hoffman says if you add lunch, dinner or a lodge for them to stay, the income potential goes up from there. Holding a "photo clinic" with a highly regarded photographer is another option for increasing the value of the experience.

Hoffman says that in Texas, many community visitors' bureaus are beginning to promote nature activities such as photography or birding to potential visitors.

Hoffman concludes, "It's economically viable, and it's also a means to educate the public that these plants and animals are the reason to leave some lands wild and privately owned and managed."



Editor's Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, SD.