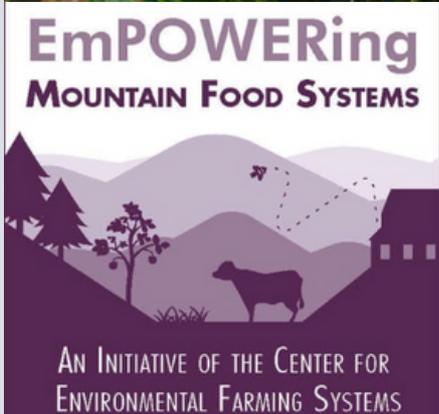


Strategies to Strengthen Agritourism in North Carolina's Western Region

Images courtesy of Buy Haywood



Report Produced by:

Whitney Knollenberg, PhD

Carla Barbieri, PhD

Chloe Riley

Sofia Lappas

Alyssa Stroker

North Carolina State University
Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management

**As a part of the EmPOWERing Mountain Food Systems Project
May 2022**

Other images retrieved from:

[pexels.com](https://www.pexels.com)

[ncstatephotos.photoshelter.com](https://www.ncstatephotos.photoshelter.com)

[unsplash.com](https://www.unsplash.com)

Introduction

The Western region of North Carolina (Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain counties and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians) is home to a rich agricultural heritage and beautiful farmland. These resources, along with the region's unique foodways and experiences related to agriculture, hold great appeal to visitors. These existing resources provide the region with the opportunity to utilize agritourism to capitalize on the public's growing interest in local food and tourists' desire for one-of-a-kind experiences.

Agritourism, visiting working farms for the purpose of education or recreation, provides many benefits to rural communities. It can "pull" visitors to these communities, serving as an attraction that showcases unique natural and cultural resources. These visitors spend money on the farms they visit as well as in other local tourism businesses, such as hotels, restaurants, and other attractions. In addition to being a "pull" factor for tourists, agritourism helps farmers diversify their revenue streams, sell products directly to consumers, increase demand for their products in other markets, and create opportunities for family members to continue working on farms.¹

This report provides an overview of the marketing and infrastructure resources that Western NC needs to help its agritourism operations thrive. The summary of resources and recommended actions included in this report is informed by insights from local agritourism operators and tourism and economic development leaders (see Appendix A for details on data collection). The prioritized actions which conclude the report provide short, medium, and long-term strategies for establishing Western NC as an outstanding agritourism destination.

[1] Xu, S., Barbieri, C., Rozier Rich, S., Seekamp, E., & Morais, D. (2014). How beneficial is agritourism? North Carolina farmers and residents respond. Agricultural Publication AG-797 (Factsheet). North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, Raleigh, NC. Available on-line at: <http://content.ces.ncsu.edu/how-beneficial-is-agritourism-north-carolina-farmers-and-residents-respond.pdf>

MARKETING & BRANDING

This section organizes the marketing and branding findings following the 7Ps Marketing Mix, which includes: Product, Place, Promotion, People, Physical evidence, Price, and Process.² Thus, the 7Ps add external factors, such as participants and the setting that creates the service environment, to traditional marketing aspects like product and place.



Used broadly for almost any product or service, the 7Ps can help to improve marketing and branding of tourism destinations and agritourism operations. Thus, we used the 7Ps to identify 13 ways in which tourism destination leaders (denoted as L in the quotes below) and agritourism operators (denoted as AO in the quotes below) in Western NC can improve their marketing and promotion efforts.

[2] Khan, M.T. (2014). The concept of 'marketing mix' and its elements. *International Journal of Information, Business, and Management*, 6(2), 95 - 106.

PRODUCT

PRODUCT is the good or service that a business offers to the market. In the context of agritourism, products are the mix of farm crops and animals, value-added products (e.g., jams), or the experiences offered to guests (e.g., tours). We identified three lessons that can improve the agritourism PRODUCT in Western NC.

Lesson 1: Design agritourism experiences to create customer delight

Satisfaction occurs when a customer's expectations are met. Customer delight occurs when expectations are exceeded and an element of surprise is achieved. When a customer is delighted, they are more likely to be loyal and share their positive experiences with others³. Thus, delight helps to retain current customers and attract new ones.

Those we interviewed gave several examples of how to create customer delight. One way to do this is to provide an unexpected experience, like photographs, and follow up with visitors:



"I take pictures of the guests along the way because it's very difficult for guests to do selfies while they're holding an alpaca... At the very end of the tour...I'll edit the pictures and send [them to] people, thanking them for visiting." (AO-11)

Customizing the experience allows to accommodate each visitors' needs, providing them with a unique experience that they are more likely to share with others through word of mouth:



"Most folks spend an hour and a half to two hours with us. Some are longer because they just are having fun...We pretty much let people dictate rather than us dictating." (AO-12)

[3]Crotts, J. C., Pan, B., Raschid, A. E. (2008). Research in brief: A survey method for identifying key drivers of guest delight. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 20, 462-470

Lesson 2: Cultivate Western NC stories in agritourism experiences

Western NC should incorporate their rich stories and those who tell them (storytellers) into their agritourism products. Sharing these stories with visitors increases the value of the agritourism products and help preserve the traditions endemic to this region for future generations. Stories that have considerable potential to make agritourism an attractive experience for Western NC visitors are those that highlight heirloom crops and heritage livestock breeds. An example is the story of one heirloom varietal, Candy Roaster Squash:



"North Carolina Candy Roaster would be an Appalachian variety. In fact, my neighbor saw it and he said, 'I haven't seen that in years now'. I think he's 72. He said his mother used to raise those and put them in the corn crib, cover them up with corn and then would send one of the kids out and tell them to go dig in the corn crib and bring her one of the Candy Roasters and then she would make a pie... So he got some seed from me and now he's growing them." (AO-2)

This example shows how the unique story, of an heirloom crop, can enrich the overall the agritourism experience either by expanding the opportunities for different offerings (e.g., lessons on making Candy Roaster squash pie) or for the direct sale of farm products (e.g., heirloom crops; value-added products).

PLACE

PLACE is the availability of the product (e.g., experience) offered and how easily it can be distributed to the consumer through its strategic location. We found that there are opportunities to package agritourism experiences with other tourism attractions in the region. Doing so can increase the number of places where agritourism experiences are promoted and purchased and can help to build the overall brand of Western NC as an agritourism destination.

Lesson 3: Package agritourism with existing attractions

Packaging experiences is one way to make a place more attractive to customers. Agritourism operators can utilize existing attractions to pull more people into their area. Our study participants identified potential strategic partners in the region that can optimize the placement of their promotional materials and increase the number of potential visitors.



"We don't want folks coming here just to go to a casino. We want our tourism to be developed in a more thoughtful, impactful way that's going to bring people that's going to come to this area... [They're] bringing all this traffic in. There's where agritourism could benefit." (L-6)

This partnership can help agritourism operators to increase their visitors and expand the recreational opportunities for casino guests:



"We have some property that could be set up to do events, pumpkin picking, hayrides, or anything like that... Some of the complaints that we get when people come to our casinos is that the husbands go golfing, and their wives get bored." (AO-6)

Another existing attraction that can be used to package agritourism experiences is the Bryson City Train. The railroad and agritourism sites are already established, they just need to be connected. Packaging these experiences would bring in new visitors to the area, while also promoting agritourism operations:



"Thousands of people ride it a year. It runs right through the farm. We could easily broker a deal with this railroad, to have the train stop...There could be all kinds of events." (AO-6)

Lesson 4: Incorporate Christmas tree farmscapes into agritourism experiences

Western NC has a strong and successful Christmas tree industry. Incorporating these farmscapes into the offerings (e.g., tours) and promotion (e.g., portraying them in advertising) of agritourism can increase the overall tourism appeal of the region.



"Those Christmas tree farms are a beautiful way of pulling in clientele from all over the place." (L-10)

PROMOTION

PROMOTION makes customers aware of the product (e.g., experience) offered. Thus, promotional strategies should identify the most suitable messages to entice the visit of potential customers. Our findings indicate that Western NC can improve the agritourism promotion by leveraging existing branding resources and strategizing the regional promotion around authenticity.

Lesson 5: Improve cross-promotion of agritourism with other Western NC experiences

Western NC can expand the promotion of agritourism in a diversity of places that already receive a steady number of visitors. Our interviewees identified several of these places.

Farmers markets are an existing asset agritourism operators can leverage to connect with customers who have an interest in local foods. The farmers market can serve as a designated space for promotion through educating market staff or volunteers about regional agritourism experiences:



"Just being able to have somebody there that can meet them, greet them, and tell them a little spiel about the place, and then hopefully they'll come back." (AO-1)

Restaurants featuring local products are a prime location to connect with a wide range of visitors, thus expanding the target visitors that agritourism operators usually reach. For example:



"Then [restaurant customers] get turned on to the local restaurant, and then they might learn about another local farm is raising rabbits or something here. Then they go and tour that farm." (AO-7)

Restaurant menus could utilize informational logos or language to educate guests about local food sourcing to help agritourism operators leverage restaurants as a promotional channel:



"We've really worked closely with our local chefs to highlight the farms right on their menu as a mutually beneficial relationship..." (AO-9)

Designations like logos help local farmers and restaurants. They can serve to promote agritourism to visitors who are not aware of these regional offerings and even encourage them to consider locally grown choices in their daily purchasing habits⁴. Also, promoting locally grown ingredients help restaurants to build their brand based on authenticity.

Lesson 6: Utilize marketing tools to illustrate regional opportunities

Marketing tools promoting the numerous and diverse agritourism experiences in the region, such as the Visit NC Farms app, are very valuable:



"I think maybe an interactive mapping system that showed how many... even, with a collaborative group between counties. That there's some working group that illustrates how many farms are doing agritourism may be a good sign." (AO-6)

The VisitNC Farms app lists agritourism operators so visitors can find them. Yet, its value depends on agritourism operators updating it. Regional Tourism Development Authorities maintain many marketing tools, such as newsletters, that can feature agritourism in the region.

Lesson 7: Connect destination brands with agritourism experiences

Several Western NC destination communities (such as Jackson County) have built their brands on outdoor recreation and health/wellness activities. There is potential to integrate agritourism into these existing brands by connecting outdoor recreation and health/wellness to local food:



"They come here for health and wellness, which tangentially connects to good locally sourced foods." (L-1)

[4] Brune, S., et al. (2021). *Cultivating Local Foods Consumers: Using Agritourism to Promote Local Foods*. NC State Extension Publications, 1 - 4. Access at <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/cultivating-local-foods-consumers-using-agritourism-to-promote-local-foods>

Connecting agritourism with Western NC brands requires an orchestrated regional effort. Tourism destination leaders should integrate farms' authentic experiences into their promotional strategies to attract visitors to the area. In turn, agritourism operators can align their offerings with existing destination brands by hosting outdoor recreation or health/wellness activities, such as hiking or yoga, and even promote existing off-farm outdoor recreation activities:



"Of course that is also a great attraction for people once they realize that there's so much hiking... You don't have to just stay here all the time. Go out and take a waterfall hike or go whitewater rafting, which isn't that far away. There's lots of opportunity for things to do in the area to get out in nature." (AO-8)

Lesson 8: Develop unique identities for agritourism within the region

When tapping into an existing regional brand (e.g., outdoor recreation, health/wellness) it is important that agritourism operators find their own identity. Our study participants identified a few potential unique identities.

Agritourism operators could focus their experiences and brand identity around experiential education. Providing unique agricultural experiences for families can appeal to the large market segment of families visiting the region for its outdoor recreation:



"When they're here on the farm we actually give them chores to do, at times...depending on the season. The kids really appreciate that... When we let people go into the henhouse, we do let the children collect eggs, and they get to bring home those eggs for free." (AO-11)

Agritourism operators could also build their identity on food and beverage experiences when tapping into the health and wellness regional brand by focusing on producing food that supports a healthy lifestyle. One tourism destination leader illustrates how agritourism operators could partner with a local restaurant to help with promotions:



"Another thing we have, it's not so much agriculture, but it's sort of related in culinary is people trout fish daily here. It's like, 'OK, we've just got this beautiful trout. Can we take it to a restaurant and have it combined with local ingredients and served that night?'" (L-1)

Some counties in the region (e.g., Jackson, Haywood) already feature agritourism in their branding efforts. One county utilizes agritourism to emphasize the connection between food, health, and wellness as a part of their destination brand.



"We have only two businesses in town that are franchises. The rest are all mom and pop... That all fits with agritourism and just that whole embracing nature, and healthy living." (L -3)

Agritourism operators in Western NC can build their brand uniqueness by acknowledging and amplifying the cultural heritage of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in various ways. For example, emphasizing the importance of the 'land' itself as a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indian noted:



"Where we have our farm, the main part of the farm is the Kituwah Mound. That's the birthplace of all Cherokee people. Every Cherokee person, ever, came from that original town...That's a really big historic site." (AO-6)

Agritourism could educate visitors and locals alike on the role of agriculture and food in the culture of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians:



"The things that I like growing are culturally connected to not just the tribe, but the mountains in a lot of ways. The things I like to grow are the things people eat here. There's certain things that we like..." (AO-6)

Using agritourism to convey the value of the land, agriculture, and food can provide visitors with a greater appreciation for the history of the Western NC region, and how the Cherokee natural, agricultural, and cultural heritage has contributed to the outdoor recreation and health/wellness experiences currently available.

PEOPLE

PEOPLE includes the personnel and employees responsible for the customer experience. The quality of service offered to customers largely influences their satisfaction, which in turn informs their intention to revisit and recommend an experience. Our findings identified key PEOPLE who can support agritourism in Western NC.

Lesson 9: Leverage existing organizations to manage regional agritourism marketing

Agritourism operators have limited time to focus on marketing and branding their operations, which can best be addressed by utilizing existing resources:



"How do we compile resources, not reinvent the wheel, create a singular resource for all these things? Everything's so piecemeal that it's difficult..." (AO-5)

For example, the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project (ASAP) is an organization that offers a unified suite of resources to assist agritourism operators in marketing their farms. Many in the regional farming community recognize ASAP as a key agritourism contributor:



"I think they're a success story. I think that their infrastructure's good. I think it's easier to take what they've already created and start a branch here than it would be to start from scratch." (AO-8)

Lesson 10: Create agritourism ambassadors

Frontline employees across the tourism industry, such as restaurants servers and hotel front desk staff, can contribute to visitors' agritourism experiences by recommending visits to local farms.

Creating learning opportunities for front line employees to become agritourism ambassadors will help them promote these experiences to their guests. For example, an agritourism operator describes the benefits of bringing frontline restaurant staff to their site:



"... big restaurants that have brought their staff here before to take the tours, I would say their sales go up 25 percent or more immediately after and usually sustain that level." (AO-7)

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE is composed of the elements in the operation space (e.g., background music, signage) that influence a customer's experience. This influence begins from the first encounter with the provider, which often occurs in a digital environment (e.g., website, social media). Our findings indicate that improving agritourism operators' digital environment can enhance the customer experience.

Lesson 11: Increase agritourism operators' capacity for digital marketing

Agritourism operators recognize that their website and social media channels are a major asset because they are the first point of contact for many customers. Thus, many operators are seeking opportunities to improve their digital marketing efforts:



"By not being able to use the computer and do social media, you kind of get left behind. I almost feel like it's a form of illiteracy." (AO-2)

Agritourism operators can seek out existing organizations, such as the region's Small Business Development Centers (SBDC), to improve their digital marketing. The SBDC offer free classes for those new to web development and social media marketing. Although print promotion is still relevant in Western NC, improving website and social media channels is important to reach a wider audience:



"I think a lot of tourists get their information from rack cards. I think for this region a lot of that is still paper-based. Not completely social media savvy. The young ones are... if we're trying to attract millennial tourists, social media for sure." (L-7).

PRICE

PRICE is the amount of money charged for a product, such as an agritourism experience, and can influence consumers' expectations of quality. If a consumer is lacking information about the product (e.g., no website, few reviews), they may rely on price to decide about the quality of an experience.

Lesson 12: Increase agritourism operators' capacity for digital marketing

Our findings indicate that some agritourism operations struggle to price their experiences appropriately. Different pricing strategies work for different operations, but the issue is many operations are charging too little for their experiences:



"They're giving people the time of their life for an hour and charging 10 bucks per person. There needs to be conversation on what's the right price to charge. Another woman had a whole class of kindergarteners at their house, didn't charge them a thing." (L-7)

While agritourism operators may be concerned about overcharging or may not want to charge for the experiences they provide, the low –or lack of– price could lower potential visitors' expectations to the point that they don't visit at all because they may anticipate a low quality experience. Thus, operators should utilize resources to price their experiences at a level which will attract the maximum number of visitors:



"I think there's a balance in regards to if people look at something free, 'Oh, it can't be much there,' and if you're charging too much they're like, 'What is this about?' There's a balance. There's certainly a balance." (AO-12)

PROCESS

PROCESS is how an experience is delivered, which could be the promptness to serve customers, the attitude of employees, or how user friendly a website is. It is important that agritourism operators optimize their online ordering processes to ensure customer satisfaction.

Lesson 13: Optimize online ordering systems to diversify agritourism customers

Agritourism operators could reach a greater number of customers by creating a more effective way to order their farm goods online. Farm visitors could become loyal direct customers after their agritourism experience if a friendly online system is in place. Also, selling farm products online can entice customers to visit the operation and participate in their agritourism experiences. However, it is important to recognize that using an online ordering system to sell their products directly to consumers could be challenging for operators, particularly in the busy season:



"Traditionally, I have updated our website. In the winter, that's easy. I can update it every day if I want to. Once spring breaks and stuff gets crazy, I hadn't touched it in two months..." (AO-4)

Developing an effective online ordering system can be especially attractive to local restaurants:



"I think [local food system organization] is even working on online ordering, which is if you're a restaurant to be able to go online to a portal and say, 'Hey, I need this, this, and this.'" (L-1)

In turn this system could also facilitate restaurants to promote products grown on agritourism operations more easily (Lesson 5) and become ambassadors of Western NC tourism experiences (Lesson 10). Collectively, this improvement can strengthen connections in the local food system and diversify revenue streams for agritourism operators.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure findings have been organized into seven community capitals: social (both bonding and bridging), human, built, financial, cultural, natural, and political. The seven community capitals provide a framework for Agritourism Operators and Tourism Economic Development Leaders to establish and grow agritourism within Western, NC communities.



Collectively, the seven capitals contribute to entrepreneurship, community development, and overall quality of life⁵. Each community is endowed with its own mix of capitals, some of which are well established and others that need investments. In our findings we demonstrate how tourism destination leaders and agritourism operators can utilize the mix of capitals in Western NC to support the further development of agritourism.

[5] Jacobs, C. (2011) *Measuring success in communities: Understanding the community capitals framework*. Extension Extra. South Dakota State Cooperative Extension Service: Issue 16005 (Revised April). Access at: https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1516&context=extension_extra

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bonding

BONDING social capital includes connections between individuals who share common interests such as a profession or recreation activities.⁶ Agritourism Operators can utilize their existing community of other agritourism operators to share resources, particularly when they are a part of the same region as Western NC.

Lesson 14: Strengthen connections between agritourism operators

Operators in the region can benefit from building strong connections with other industry leaders. Agritourism operators can support others in the field by offering products from their farm or by pointing visitors in the direction of other agritourism experiences:



"Well, if the farmers work together like [Agritourism Operator A] he actually had a store. Okay, so if he worked with [Agritourism Operator B], the one that I got the bees from that sells the honey. I mean, if he worked with [Agritourism Operator B] you know, said, oh, I could use some blueberries at my store. And I'm like, Oh yeah well you know what, I could sell some beef at mine." (AO-2)

Collaboration like this strengthens connections between agritourism operators and creates benefits such as diversifying the range of products they can sell to visitors.

Many operators indicated the need to nurture stronger connections between existing operators and those looking to establish new agritourism ventures. Both generations could learn from one another, but current operators see limited opportunities for these groups to come together:

[6] McGehee, N. G., Lee, S., O'Bannon, T. L., & Perdue, R. R. (2010). Tourism-related social capital and its relationship with other forms of capital: An exploratory study. *Journal of Travel Research*, 49(4), 486-500



"...there needs to be enough overlap for those who want to get into it now, regardless of their age to be able to learn from you and everything you've done and sort of vice versa. To that they might have some ideas." (AO-3)

There needs to be a panel or an open forum where these two groups can meet and exchange ideas. Exchanging information and collaborating with one another will increase support for new and existing agritourism operators. Supporting agencies, such as Cooperative Extension, could facilitate such networking efforts.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bridging

BRIDGING social capital refers to the ties between groups that are distinct, but aim to achieve similar goals. Establishing bridging ties contributes to the development of solid bonding ties and expands opportunities for a stronger network of support. Agritourism operators would benefit from bridging social capital because it can bring an influx of new ideas and resources to their business.

Lesson 15: Expand agritourism operators' external network to create new partnerships

There are outside resources that operators can use to expand their market reach. Two groups that would benefit from increased connections are agritourism operators and restaurant/brewery owners. Our findings suggest a way to bring them together:



"I think having that guide of 'This is what you can get locally. This is the time of year.' We could get that out to every brewery. They'll be like, 'Really, you can get that here?' That could be an online database, here's the farmers' offerings. Here's when they're available. The restaurants log in or just go to a simple website." (L-1)

An online database would streamline the ordering process for restaurants making it easier for them to buy local products. The database illustrates the benefits of bridging social capital because it could connect agritourism operators to opportunities outside of the immediate network. This could translate into sales that may not have otherwise happened.

Having external connections can also help agritourism operators and restaurateurs promote unique experiences in the region, which can attract more visitors. Our findings illustrate what these partnerships can create:



"The most notable recent one was a weekend mushroom foraging adventure for four couples... I took them all through the farm and went through identifying mushrooms and a lot of other wild species of plants, the educational aspect... my chef friend would cook what we foraged and incorporate that into meals along the way." (AO-5)

Lesson 16:

Leverage networks to improve knowledge about operational informational

Agritourism operators need more information about insurance and liability, a fundamental operational information that tourism/economic development leaders recognized:



"Most farmers are working off farm, they're living paycheck to paycheck. They're worried about getting sued. They're worried they don't have the money to pay for that comprehensive insurance. I don't even know that it is that expensive, I just think people have this idea that it is. Education around the specifics of how much it costs to get coverage [is needed]." (L-7)

Investing in bridging social capital would expand agritourism operators' network to include professionals who can address specific concerns and provide technical information on a variety of topics, such as managing conservation easements:



"At the time that our conservation easement was done, agritourism was not yet a thing... I have corresponded numerous times with our conservation -- the agency or the organization that holds our easement -- to discuss provisions and things." (AO-5)

Conservation easements can be another challenge to operators wanting to expand to agritourism. A workshop or panel of experts, including outsiders and providers who have overcome that challenge, would be beneficial for providers.

HUMAN CAPITAL

HUMAN capital includes the people that support a community or business and their knowledge and skill sets.⁷ Our findings indicate that major investment is needed in human capital to sustain agritourism businesses.

Lesson 17: Increase investment in staff for all stakeholders

The study data indicate that many agritourism operators struggle to find people willing to work in a labor-intensive environment where hours may not be consistent:



"Obviously, labor is always a hot topic issue on any kind of farm. Figuring out a way to build a business where you don't have a ton of turnover. That you can keep people around, not just seasonally, but through the winter, doing whatever it may be, selling Christmas trees for someone else, growing greenhouse crops, or whatever." (AO-6)

Likewise, extension agents and tourism/economic development leaders could also use more staff to support agritourism operators:



"[Regional Extension Agent] is a really great special extension agent. He's a specialty crop extension agent with NC State Extension for Western North Carolina. He's also spread thin." (AO-5)

Filling farms' labor needs, ranging from manual labor to website maintenance/building, can allow agritourism operators to increase their focus on marketing, promotion, and business expansion. Increasing staff within Extension and tourism/economic development offices could allow dedicating more time to support agritourism operators in their marketing and product development, and to invest more time in regional initiatives.

[7] Beaulieu, L. J. (2014). *Promoting community vitality & sustainability: The community capitals framework*. Purdue Extension, 1-7. Access at: <https://pcrd.purdue.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Community-Capitals-Framework-Writeup-Oct-2014.pdf>

BUILT CAPITAL

BUILT capital includes the infrastructure (e.g., public space, roads) that support a community and its business enterprises. Agritourism Operators can expand through investment in infrastructure. Destination leaders could support agritourism growth through investment in built infrastructure such as signage.

Lesson 18: Maximize existing built infrastructure to support agritourism

Existing infrastructure such as farmers markets, are important places for agritourism operators to promote their experiences to potential visitors. While there are many existing farmers markets in the region, agritourism operators feel that some could be improved:



"The farmers market is not very well supported. Okay, a farmers' market has to be supported, say like through the Extension office would be a start." (AO-2)

Staff from support agencies, like County Extension and tourism/economic development offices can provide technical assistance on how to best utilize farmers markets as a promotional space in a mix of topics ranging from selecting strategic markets to promote agritourism to how to set up booths.

Other existing infrastructure, such as spaces set aside for public events, proved to be a valuable way to increase agritourism visitation:



"There's a lighting of the Christmas tree and a concert on Friday night... Saturday, I have the farmers' market and then we have a Holiday Market in a different place where I run both of them at the same time. It's more of a craft market but the food can go up there. That's a whole weekend that the market is in." (L-8)

Events, especially those spanning multiple days and during holidays, can bring in new visitors and foster return visitation. This in turn boosts sales for agritourism operators, and traffic to their farms.

Community kitchens and canneries could help improve agritourism experiences by increasing the offer of regional value-added products, which in turn amplify the sales and revenues of agritourism operators. With such a vision, there is a cannery in Western NC seeking to extend their operation:



"We're in the process right now of securing a grant to upgrade the cannery and make it a little bigger. A lot of these things that we talked about earlier. They'd be turned into value-added products like pickled corn..." (AO-6)

Lesson 19:

Assist agritourism operators in expanding their built infrastructure

Most agritourism operators in Western NC are in need of assistance for building or updating their on-farm physical structures such as driveways, bathroom, farm stores, and barns:



"...We don't have asphalt driveways. We certainly don't have concrete driveways. We're lucky if we've got gravel, most of the time it's mud and you've got to have a place that you can get in and out safely." (AO-2)

Many Agritourism Operators also see new infrastructure, particularly lodging facilities (e.g., cabins, bathhouses for campsites) as a way to diversify their income streams. Many operators noted that there is a lack of this type of lodging option in the region:



"They're coming out of a cabin to come see us from [the Blue Ridge Parkway] or wherever. They ask us, 'Are you guys going to put accommodations here?' We do have the real estate to do it and it's a beautiful setting, and we just got to figure out when we're going to build..." (AO-11)

However, agritourism operators need technical support to plan and move forward (e.g., getting permits, grant seeking) with their interest in building new infrastructure, especially related to on-farm accommodations.

FINANCIAL CAPITAL

FINANCIAL capital refers to the availability of funding for programs and physical infrastructure. Agritourism Operators need to be able to access these resources to advance their business development goals.

Lesson 20: Increase Access to Grants/Funding

Grants can be used to address agritourism operators' physical infrastructure needs. However, our data show that farmers are unaware of grants' availability.



"I think the biggest downside has been participation, but part of it's word of mouth also. When I started farming that was part of the problem of getting this information. I had no idea about ag option grants." (AO-8)

Beyond supporting farmers to identify grants opportunities, they do need support to ensure they qualify for them and successfully apply for them. We found evidence that some agritourism operators could be a good resource for other operators:



"I'm the one who let [agritourism operator] know, she didn't know about all this money that was available on all these grants. That's how she helped build her business because I finally told her, 'Oh, yeah, you got to go talk to this guy and that guy, you got to talk...' It's been word of mouth mostly." (AO-20)

In brief, we found a need to develop a stronger network to spread the word about funding opportunities for agritourism operators. It is also imperative that funders orchestrate efforts to widely share opportunities that may be beneficial to agritourism operators. Finally, more resources should be available to support agritourism operators to who are applying for grants (e.g., WNC AgOptions grants), especially in writing and editing their applications.

CULTURAL CAPITAL

CULTURAL capital provides connections to values, traditions, and beliefs of the community that can be shared to bring people together. Agritourism operators can sustain the culture that make this region unique by providing experiences that feature current and past cultural elements. Support agencies, such as the Mountain Heritage Center identify traditional agricultural practices that can enrich agritourism experiences.

Lesson 21:

Emphasize cultural connections to agriculture and the land

Western NC has a rich culture that agritourism can highlighted. Their tourism/economic development leaders are working to highlight the importance of culture in food systems:



"It's a beautiful culture and I'm trying to blend the local food right now but also a good time to blend the Appalachian culture, the old and the new." (L-8)

Agritourism operators and tourism/economic development leaders can increase awareness and preservation of Western NC heritage. The regional cultural history is so engrained in agriculture that should support unique agritourism experiences and their narratives, particularly for agritourism operators who are a part of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. To do this, tribal leaders need to be involved in the agritourism conversation, which can help raise cultural awareness and expand agritourism to new areas:



"... I think the only way we're going to be successful, whether it's agriculture, agritourism, with the tribe and our division, is through collaboration. That's going to be paramount. Our collaborators, our supporters. Going back hundreds of years, we've had folks that have supported the tribe, that have been interested in the tribe, and are genuine about it..." (L-12)

NATURAL CAPITAL

NATURAL capital comprises the regional landscape including farmland and other natural resources (e.g., rivers, forests) that Agritourism Operators display at their operations. Most importantly, the natural amenities and recreational activities that come along with natural resources create a better quality of life that are essential to human life and ultimately influence investment in other capitals.

Lesson 22: Ensure agriculture contributes to the natural landscape

One of the greatest assets of Western NC is its natural beauty and farms are an integral part of its scenery that visitors seek and enjoy:



"I would say one more thing which is that when people come to the mountains and they go, 'Oh, It's so beautiful.' One of the things they think is so beautiful is that there is all this rolling farmland, and you see barns and that kind of thing." (AO-10)

Preserving the farmland in Western NC is key to perpetuate the overall beauty of the landscape. Likewise, protecting the natural elements of the region enriches agritourism experiences.

POLITICAL CAPITAL

POLITICAL capital refers to the relationships and access to those in positions of influence within the community. Agritourism Operators should network with these individuals to have a voice in the decisions that positively and negatively influence their business.

Lesson 23: Improve political relationships

Our findings document entrenched beliefs of a challenging relationship between the agricultural community of the region and the government:



"Altogether, if you look historically in the Appalachians, you know that the Appalachians don't really have a good historic relationship with the government. Most of the time when the government's intervening in the mountains, it turns out bad. That stigma still exists today. People are very wary of the government." (AO-6)

Stemmed from this perceived broken relationship, agritourism operators feel that they do not always get the representation they need when it comes to policy decisions, which can have a major impact on their operations:



"It seems the way that our culture and our government have decided to support farming doesn't seem to be helping smaller farms exist and thrive and produce food for their local community. It seems like it's helping something else happen... [We need to educate] lawmakers because small farmers don't have a big lobby or something..." (AO-10)

These findings indicate the need for greater advocacy efforts for agritourism operators and that more investment should be made in getting their voices heard by policymakers.

Marketing Priorities

Our findings suggest taking the following prioritized actions to foster the success of agritourism in Western NC: **Short-term actions** (next 6 months, in green); **mid-term actions** (next 1 - 2 years, in yellow); and **long-term actions** (next 2+ years, in red).

PRODUCT

Design agritourism experiences to create customer delight

Cultivate Western NC stories in agritourism experiences

PLACE

Package agritourism with existing attractions

Incorporate Christmas tree farmscapes into agritourism experiences

PROMOTION

Improve cross-promotion of agritourism with other Western NC experiences

Utilize marketing tools to illustrate regional opportunities

Connect destination brands with agritourism experiences

Develop unique identities for Western NC agritourism

PEOPLE

Leverage existing organizations to manage regional agritourism marketing

Create agritourism ambassadors

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

Increase agritourism operators capacity for digital marketing

PRICE

Ensure pricing reflects quality of agritourism experience

PROCESS

Optimize online ordering systems to diversify agritourism customers

Infrastructure Priorities

SOCIAL- Bridging

Strengthen connections between agritourism operators

SOCIAL- Bonding

Expand agritourism operators' external network to create new partnerships

Leverage networks to improve knowledge about operational information

HUMAN

Increase investment in staff for all stakeholders

BUILT

Maximize existing built infrastructure to support agritourism

Assist agritourism operators in expanding their build infrastructure

FINANCIAL

Increase access to grants/funding

CULTURAL

Emphasize cultural connections to agriculture and the land

NATURAL

Ensure agriculture contributes to the natural landscape

POLITICAL

Improve political relationships

Appendix A:

Methods

Interviews were conducted with 25 agritourism stakeholders in the western-most counties of North Carolina (Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain) and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. The interviews captured both, the perspectives of agritourism operators (n = 13) and tourism and economic development leaders (n = 12). Each county in the region had at least one participant included in the study.

A comprehensive online search of agritourism operations and tourism/economic development offices in the region was used to identify potential participants. Potential participants were invited to join the study via email. Additional participants were identified through chain referral sampling during the interview process (i.e., participants were asked who else should be contacted to participate in the study).

With consent from the participants, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes and was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. The resulting data were manually coded in NVivo software to reveal themes within the data. All open codes were allowed to emerge from the data and axial codes were created based upon the definitions of the 7P's Marketing Mix and the 7 Community Capitals frameworks. Multiple interviewers, coders, and peer debriefings were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the data.