Preparing for an Agritourism Event

A CHECKLIST

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Agritourism is of growing importance in Virginia and offers great benefits to local communities and visitors. In addition to their ongoing operations, many agritourism businesses periodically hold special events. Adequate planning for these events helps ensure their success. This factsheet provides a checklist for agritourism firms to use to ensure that key aspects of preparation for the event are addressed. The publication is intended to help an existing operation host a special event – it is not intended as a resource for starting an agritourism business.

Before you start your preparation, you should consider a few questions that will affect your event. While you might not have specific answers for these questions at the outset, having realistic estimates or ranges that you can work with is essential for effective event and contingency planning.

Questions you need to answer include:

1. What activities will be the focus of your event? Will it have a specific theme?

2. How many people do you think will come to the event, how long might they stay, and how many can your farm accommodate?

3. Who will come and what needs are they likely to have? Families with young children, senior citizens, people from out of town, and other groups all have different needs for accommodations, food, rest places, etc.

4. What can you budget for the event, and how much profit would you like to make on the event?

A well-planned and well-executed agritourism event will meet five criteria. It will 1) be effectively advertised and promoted; 2) meet customers' needs for comfort and safety; 3) comply with all relevant regulations and minimize liability risk; 4) cause minimal disruption to, and even enjoy the support of, community and neighbors; and 5) be well organized and have adequate contingency plans in place. The following discussion treats each of these areas.

Advertising and promotion

Will your event be based on a specific theme? Some businesses host agritourism events around holiday or seasonal themes such as a haunted forest at Halloween or hay rides in autumn. Publicizing and building on a theme can be a central aspect of your advertising and promotion activities.

Advertising activities should be planned and executed well before the event. Have an idea of who you think will participate in the event so that you can target your advertising to reach those groups.

Keep in mind, too, that there may be a need to "promote" the event to people who will not be guests at it, namely neighbors, local businesses, and local government. It is worthwhile to do a little research and find out if this sort of event, or something similar, has ever been held before in your community, and how it was received. What sorts of issues arose and were any members of the community opposed to it? If an event of this sort has not been held in your community it is helpful to ask such questions of others who have held similar events in their communities, so that you can address any issues proactively. For example, neighbors hearing of the event might assume that it will be disruptive to them – if you anticipate this possibility, you can work with them to schedule the event or provide them with information that will mitigate their concerns.

Caution: advertising can become very expensive – develop a budget. Record advertising activities as you contract for them. Keep track of your spending, and stick to your budget (a simple budget template is provided at the end of this document).

- Post fliers at your farm, at local businesses, in schools, and at local community, tourist, and visitor centers. Be sure to get permission from the appropriate people first. Fliers take time to put up and can be difficult to protect from removal or defacement. They are best used to recruit local participants and should be renewed frequently and removed after the event.

- Press releases – Announcing the event, with relevant information, in a press release to local media such as newspapers and radio and television stations can provide free publicity. You may also want to invite the local press to cover the event.

- Radio and newspaper advertisements – These are higher cost advertising activities. You should plan carefully to advertise only in those outlets that reach the people you would like to attend your event. Talk to radio and news-

How to write a press release

Start with your name, contact information, and that it's a press release. Write a headline of about 10 or fewer words that will get the editor's attention. The first paragraph should include who, what, when, where, why, and how and one factual thing that makes people want to read more. The body of the text should be an inverted pyramid – the most important information first followed by less important information. The closing paragraph repeats critical information including the name of the contact person, phone number, and e-mail address.

Many advertising possibilities exist. Advertising should always include information on the nature of the event, when and where it is being held, directions to the location of the event, costs for activities or entrance fees, and contact information.

paper advertising departments for suggestions on the best time to run the advertisements and the type of advertisement that will best meet your needs. Ask about a place on a morning radio talk show where you can promote the event as an item of local interest.

- Another possibility is to partner with local radio stations and offer free tickets as contest prizes, or even as the "consolation prize" for someone who doesn't win another contest – this provides free advertising for your event and helps to boost participation.

- Work with your local chamber of commerce and tourism bureau to get free advertising or piggyback with other events in the area.

- Semi-permanent signs at key places along the road can also be used to advertise your event in the weeks preceding it. Contact the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) to determine what sort of roadway advertising is allowable if you don't already know.

- Word of mouth – Talk up the event with current customers and neighbors and ask them to spread the word.

- Keep your website updated about the event and other activities being held.

Ensuring your customers' comfort

Comfort has both physical and psychological aspects. Physical aspects include protection from sudden change in weather and access to restroom facilities and refreshments, among others. Meeting your customers' psychological needs for comfort rests largely on minimizing the stress and uncertainty they experience. For example, a customer who gets lost on your farm or can't find his or her child might be physically fine but psychologically very uncomfortable! Ensuring your customers' comfort is the area that will account for much of the logistical preparation you do for your event. Key areas to address include making ample information available to your customers, ensuring good traffic and pedestrian flow on the farm, and the availability of refreshments, toilets, and handwashing facilities.

Getting there and around

The first thing your customers will need to do when they arrive is park. Be sure you have more than enough parking for the number of cars you expect and signs indicating where customers should park. Possible parking areas include mowed grass, along farm roads, and along state and county roads. Keep in mind not only how many cars each area can hold, but also the need for turning, clearance to allow other cars to pass, and how unpaved parking areas will fare in the rain. Use signs and parking attendants to indicate parking areas and minimize confusion, liability, and annoyance to neighbors.

Parking attendants are particularly helpful at the beginning of the day to establish proper parking patterns and keep the parking as neat and tight as possible. Depending on the location of parking, have people available to direct traffic. If people park off-farm, be sure to check with the highway department and neighbors to be sure that your plans are appropriate and legal. If customers are parking off-site, provide a drop-off area that is closer and/or a shuttle to the parking area. Provide some easy-access parking for any handicapped customers. Be aware that as the areas get full, people will park in entrance lanes if they are not directed to park elsewhere. Pay youth groups or off-duty police to provide this service if you don't have sufficient employees to use for parking and directing traffic. Consider having a parking area for bicycles.

Once customers are on the farm, they need to get around. Depending on the size of the farm and the mobility of your customers, driving personal cars, walking, or providing shuttles (such as golf carts, hay wagons, or other vehicles) are good ways for customers to move around during your event. If people are allowed to drive their own vehicles on the farm, be sure to post maximum speed signs and clearly differentiate between pedestrian and vehicle pathways.

Look for possible bottlenecks that might occur. For example, if you only have one wagon hauling folks around, will customers be waiting for a ride and for how long? If possible, try to organize your activities so that people will be able to move themselves around the farm. If you do provide transportation, locate drop off and pick up locations within walking distance of each other, if not at the same point.

Information availability

Facilitate people finding their group, activities, and assistance. Be sure to have ample information available to customers as well as workers to assist them.

- When customers pay their entrance fees or register, provide them with a handout that has a simple map of the farm, a schedule of activities, and directions for how to get assistance when needed.

- Have clear signage covering details that customers will need to know, such as maps, prices, parking and no parking areas, and clear indications of areas that are off-limits to customers. Posting signs with maps that indicate "you are here" will help people find their way around the farm. Posting signs with pictures will also help solve any language problems that might arise.

- Post "No Smoking" signs in appropriate places. Be vigilant in enforcing no smoking rules, particularly in high-risk areas such as on hayrides.

- Provide a central meeting place like an information booth and a lost-and-found.

- Be sure workers are dispersed throughout the farm to assist when needed. They should be easily identifiable with badges, shirts, caps, etc.

- Make it easy for people to find help. Imagine that one of your customers misplaces a purse, loses contact with a child, or suffers an injury. Though incidences such as these will be infrequent, you must deal with them effectively and efficiently. Having information on a handout given as customers arrive and strategically placed workers will help deal effectively with such situations. Have first-aid kits strategically placed at main events so that you can treat minor injuries or bee stings.

Provide clear guidance to both customers and workers about limits on customers' behavior and implications if these limits are violated. *Communicate these limits if possible*. Post lots of signs, including limited liability signs, and if possible, rope off areas where guests are not allowed. While simple signage and verbal reminders ("please stay off the machinery") will be adequate for many, plan for those who will not respect these signs. Lock any buildings that you don't want people wandering into, don't leave keys in machinery, and have all hydraulic equipment in the lowered and locked position.

Written signs will not be effective for children or people who don't read the language. Include simple pictures, and consider using signs in languages that customers may commonly speak, such as Spanish. Regardless of how clear you think your signs are, don't rely on them totally. Take adequate precautions to prevent damage and accidents. In the event that individuals or a group behave inappropriately, be prepared to deal with them politely but firmly. Unruly customers are a threat not only to their own safety and that of your equipment and animals, but also to the safety and comfort of others.

Facilities and refreshments

- Food and drinks should be available at most agritourism events. Refreshments can be a moneymaker or a service. Either way, providing refreshments is essential if you are to keep people on the farm for any significant period of time. A covered picnic area provides an excellent way for people to continue enjoying themselves while taking some weight off their feet and enjoying their refreshments. Make drinking water readily available at sites where you have major activities.

- Restrooms and hand-washing facilities are also essential. While you may already have some in place, you will probably want to expand what you have if you are expecting many more people for your event than you normally see. Renting portable toilets is a simple and cost effective way to provide additional facilities. Keep in mind that you need to accommodate handicapped people, too. Be sure to have workers frequently check the cleanliness and functioning of the facilities and keep them stocked with necessary products. Many portable toilet companies also offer hand-washing facilities. Put hand-washing stations or containers with wet wipes wherever you have food, animals, or toilets.

Estimate of number of portable toilets needed by number of customers and hours of event

People attending/ hours	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
0 – 50	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
50 – 100	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	3	3	3
100 – 250	3	3	3	3	4	4	4	4	6	6
250 – 500	4	4	4	6	6	6	8	8	8	8
500 – 1,000	6	6	6	8	8	8	12	12	12	12

Source: *http://www.toilets.com/index.htm*

- Provide adequate trash disposal and have workers empty full bins and dispose of loose trash throughout the day. Place trashcans in parking areas and near major events, refreshment areas, toilets, and washing stations.

- Be sure to provide ample protection from sun and inclement weather.

Workers

- Have plenty of workers on hand, especially if it is your first time hosting an event and you are not certain what labor needs will be. Be sure workers are clearly identifiable (for example, farm t-shirts, caps, name tags, or aprons); are well briefed on their tasks; know who to go to for issues that are beyond their immediate capabilities; and have a way (such as walkie-talkies) to communicate with one another and you. Workers should also be versed on how to deal with "problem" customers and know who to call if they cannot deal with a situation effectively.

Consider hiring temporary labor to help in the following areas:

- Clerks: work cash registers, take tickets, lead tours, and supervise activities;

- Directions: where activities located, where to park;

- Trash patrol: make sure trash cans are emptied before they overflow and pick up trash around farm;

- Monitors: to keep people out of off-limit areas;
- Shuttle drivers;
- Parking attendants; and
- "Floaters:" to help out wherever they are needed.

Regulatory compliance and liability minimization

- Notify local law enforcement agencies well before your event and ask for their assistance with traffic control and potentially unruly customers. You may have to pay for their services.
- Communicate with your insurance agent well before the event and ask for a "liability audit." Be upfront, clear, and comprehensive in describing what you plan. Separate event insurance may be needed or desired. Consider inviting three or four people from different agencies and asking them to visit the farm as part of a "safety audit" team.
- Post limited liability signs. These signs are available through associations such as the Virginia Farmers Direct Marketing Association (www.vfdma.org) or you can make them up yourself (specific requirements exist regarding content, placement, and letter size). Don't let the presence of such signs lull you into a false sense of security, however. They do not protect you from your own negligence or that of your workers, and they do not protect you from getting sued by a guest who might be negligent. They merely help provide a defense should such a suit occur.
- Be proactive – have a standard operating procedure in place in case an accident occurs. This procedure should include an attorney who can help you in case of problems and preliminary press releases to minimize adverse publicity in case an accident should occur. Have only one person designated as spokesperson and instruct all other employees to refer questions to the spokesperson.
- Move, lock, or otherwise make inaccessible all equipment and machinery that might attract people. Rope off all areas you don't want customers to explore. Post "keep out" and limited liability signs. Keep all hydraulically operated equipment, like buckets, in the down position so that they can't be operated without a key.
- Contact the health department at least one month in advance if food will be served. Regulations may require water testing as much as one month in advance of the event. Be sure that any catering businesses you use for the event are licensed and insured.
- Consider having an ambulance at your event or on "stand by" depending on the location, number of people, and types of activities. At the very least notify EMTs that your event will be taking place and the sorts of activities it involves.

To ensure compliance with zoning and regulatory requirements, be sure to cover the following bases:

- Health department – be aware of both state and local requirements;
- Ensure that local zoning codes will allow for your event;
- Obtain appropriate "special event" licenses if required;
- Check with your accountant or the IRS to be sure what regulations apply to hiring temporary workers;
- Check with your accountant or Virginia Department of Taxation to be sure what sales and use or other state and local taxes, such as an entertainment tax and litter taxes, might apply;
- Consult with the highway department regarding your plans for signage and parking on public roads; and
- Work with Alcoholic Beverage Control if alcoholic beverages are being served.

Ensuring community support

- Notify your neighbors well in advance of the event. A "dear neighbor" letter notifying your neighbors of the upcoming event, with an invitation to participate and perhaps a special discount can ensure the goodwill of people who will be most immediately affected by the event. Send the letter early enough so that your neighbors can respond with any questions or concerns. Follow-up with a reminder a week before the event.
- Check for other local events. Your event can either be planned around other local events to avoid conflict or in conjunction with them to increase visits to all events. If events will be held in conjunction with each other, be sure to contact other events' hosts to discuss logistical issues and explore possibilities for joint promotion.
- Involve other businesses in the area. You can reduce your planning and preparatory burden and increase community support and benefits if you involve other local businesses in your event. Examples include providing other local firms opportunities to sell their products in a vendor's area, contracting with a local bakery or restaurant to provide food, and contracting traffic control and other tasks out to local civic groups as a fund-raising activity for them.

Organization and contingency planning

Many of the organizational aspects of event planning – workers, parking, safety, and information, for example, have been addressed in preceding sections. Starting well in advance to organize and prepare for the event can help make sure that all the bases are covered, as can having clearly defined tasks and responsibilities for different people who are helping to plan and organize the event. Being well organized also puts you in a good position to respond to any unanticipated needs – in fact, one of the most important parts of organizing for an event is contingency planning; that is, anticipating and planning for "what if…" There are an infinite number of scenarios you could imagine – focus on the ones that are most likely, as well as the ones that might not be so likely but that will have serious consequences should they occur. Start by thinking about what you can do to reduce the likelihood of them happening, then think about what you can do to mitigate their impact if they do happen. Make contingency planning part of your early planning activities.

- Decide in advance how you will deal with inclement weather (rain, excessive heat, etc.) or accidents. If you will hold the event regardless of weather, anticipate how it will affect parking, moving around the farm, planned activities, etc. and make contingency plans.
- Identify feasible alternatives for potential disruptions to your plans – for example workers not showing up, a service provider canceling, or a key event manager getting sick.
- Develop protocols to respond to emergencies such as guests getting hurt or sick.

Timeline checklist

No matter how well you plan, you will always have last minute things that need attention. Below is a suggested timeline that you can look to as you count down to the event.

4 to 6 months before the event

❏ Decide on theme and/or activities.

❏ Identify your target audience and related needs.

❏ Decide on the distribution of activities and facilities around farm; develop a logistics map to lay out the activities as well as the movement of people.

❏ Develop an event budget that covers costs and revenues that you anticipate. Run alternate budgets to look at how changes in costs or participation will affect profitability. Determine break-even pricing and consider whether your expectations are realistic.

❏ Contract and schedule outside providers of services and activities.

- Food and/or food vendors
- Traffic control and emergency services
- Portable toilets, hand-washing facilities
- Tent supplier
- Other (specify) _____

❏ Estimate maximum participation for the event, and project the number of participants from high (capacity) to low.

❏ Identify appropriate advertising approach, and develop an advertising budget

3 months before the event

❏ Firm up or review service and activity provider agreements.

❏ Contact insurance agent.

❏ Update website.

❏ Develop procedures to deal with accidents. Also notify county or municipal police or EMTs as to when the activity is going on.

❏ Check on other local events scheduled and contact hosts to discuss working together.

2 months before the event

❏ Map out logistical plans relating to event registration, parking, on-farm movement of people, identification of workers, communication among workers.

❏ Contact regulatory agencies.

- Health department
- Virginia Department of Taxation and IRS or your accountant
- Virginia Department of Transportation
- Local planning and zoning
- Special events permit
- ABC board if serving alcoholic beverages

❏ Check on placement of road signs, etc.

❏ Contact morning talk show hosts for time on their programs – discuss how far in advance will give you best advertising results.

- ❏ Contact radio, TV, and newspapers for best time to place advertisements.
- ❏ Develop brochures for distribution.
- ❏ Talk to newspapers for best time to send press releases.
- ❏ Write press releases for distribution.

1 month before the event

- ❏ Notify neighbors.
- ❏ Post road signs advertising event.
- ❏ Develop handouts for customers and employees.
- ❏ Mow grass parking areas and walkways.
- ❏ Identify and move nonessential equipment.
- ❏ Buy radio and TV advertisements.
- ❏ Distribute press releases.
- ❏ Arrange signage.
  - Parking and no parking
  - No smoking
  - Off limits, keep out
  - Limited liability
  - Prices
- ❏ Line up additional help.
  - Off-duty law enforcement
  - Clerks
  - "Floaters"
  - Other extra employees
  - _____
- ❏ Arrange for hauling trash to dump or having special pick-up.

2 weeks before the event

- ❏ Send reminder to neighbors.
- ❏ Have handouts copied.
- ❏ Contact all outside providers to be sure you are on their schedule and that they have no questions about what they are providing.
- ❏ Train all nonregular employees about the farm, the jobs they are likely to be responsible for, whom to contact with questions, etc.
- ❏ Check first-aid kits and replenish and purchase additional ones if needed.
- ❏ Purchase products that will be needed the day of the event such as paper products, trash can liners, etc.

Week of the event

- ❏ Mow parking areas.
- ❏ Rope off all off-limit areas.
- ❏ Post signs on farm.
- ❏ Move all machinery and equipment not needed for event.
- ❏ Set up centralized information booth.

Day before the event

- ❏ Place trash cans.
- ❏ Be sure all hydraulic equipment is in lowered and locked position.
- ❏ Make sure you have plenty of change on hand.
- ❏ Have all maps and information sheets available at several places.

References

Porta John Industries, Inc. "How many units do I need for my event?" Event rental. Found at *http://www.toilets.com/index.htm*.

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Developing event and advertising budgets

Write down ALL the assumptions you make and any changes you make to them as you make adjustments to the budgets. You will save yourself time and aggravation. The following budget is a SAMPLE ONLY. You will need to develop one that fits your special event. If you charge by activity, you may also need to develop enterprise budgets.

Sample Budget for Special Event July 4, 200Y			
Item	**Number of potential customers**	**Charge per activity ($)**	**Total revenue ($)**
Activity 1	500	5.00	2,500
Activity 2	450	7.00	3,150
Activity			
Activity			
Activity			
Total all activities			

	Cost per unit	Total cost
Advertising		
Labor		
Insurance		
Licenses and permits		
Printing and postage		
Portable toilets/washing stations		
Signs		
Training for part-time employees		
T-shirts, name tags, etc.		
Trash removal		
Extra supplies (trash cans, first aid kits, etc.)		
Legal fees		
Contingency 10% of budget		
Total costs		

Advertising budget			
Item	**Number**	**Cost per item ($)**	**Total cost ($)**
Fliers			
Travel			
Newspaper ads			
Radio spots			
Television spots			
Signs			
Postage			
Total cost			

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