

Agri-Tourism a Possibility for Region

At a career fair last week, a group of 8th graders was asked if they thought people would pay to come to the Great River Region to look at farms. They said no. In fact, they scoffed, rolled their eyes and pooh-pooed the very thought of it!

What do you think? Would people pay to learn more about agriculture in Iowa? Particularly Southeast Iowa? Would they pay to gather eggs? Ride a horse? Milk a cow? Operate a planter? Tractor? Combine? Would they pay to tour the ethanol plant? A grain processing facility? A hog confinement? Would they pay to learn about American farm history? Go to a rodeo? A fair? A corn maze? Would they sign up for classes at a nursery?

Are you rolling your eyes? Some of these things they already pay for – some of these things are things YOU would pay for—right? The US Forest Service estimates that 62 million Americans took part in some sort of Agri-Tourism activity in 2008. How much of that pie are we getting in the Great River Region (GRR)?

At a recent tourism meeting, members of the GRR Partnership broke the Agri-Tourism industry down into these broad categories:

- Traditional Row Crop Farmers
- High Tech (wind farms and suppliers, solar & geothermal businesses)
- Manufacturing & Processing (large equipment, ethanol, grain)
- Agri-Tainment (fairs, festivals, museums)
- Horticulture (farmers markets, u-pick gardens, nurseries)
- Livestock
- Natural Resources (parks, rivers, hunting, fishing)
- Research & Education
- And “Other” (corn mazes to honey production)

They then focused on identifying and listing the businesses that provide those products and services in the region—there are more than you think! And the potential for helping them promote their businesses as “tourism and learning” opportunities is there.

Yes, despite what your average 8th grader thinks, there are people from other parts of the United States and other parts of the world that will pay to drive a combine, tour an ethanol plant, meet a farmer who can produce 200+ bushels of corn off an acre, pick some apples, gather eggs and then eat a farm-cooked meal. And in addition they will stay in hotels, buy gasoline and purchase memorabilia in our local businesses.

Agri-tourism is just another card in our hand of economic development opportunities but one we should play more often, and in a concerted and well-planned fashion. We live in the “Mecca” of agriculture and as the attention of the world turns to food production, alternative energy, protection of natural resources and nostalgia for the joys of days gone by, we stand to provide information, education and entertainment in all these areas.