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Arkansas Agritourism Initiative provides face, voice to economic opportunity

(Eds: With art)

LITTLE ROCK – Giving agritourism a statewide presence and a stronger voice are key advantages of the Arkansas Agritourism Initiative, say those who operate rural attractions.

Organizers launched the initiative July 12 at one of the state's biggest agritourism attractions, Little Rock's River Market.

"The time is perfect for this initiative," said Stacey McCullough, a community and economic development instructor for the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture.

"Urbanites are seeking an escape from the city within an easy, short drive.

"Meanwhile, our countryside counterparts have so many unique opportunities for exploration," she said.

In the Natural State, agritourism encompasses a wide variety of activities, including farmers' markets, U-pick farms, trail-riding facilities, farm tours, Christmas tree farms and some eco-tourism ventures.

"Agritourism is a way to build a bridge between rural and urban Arkansas," McCullough said.

Linda Cochran, who operates The Farmstead Bed & Breakfast in Paris, sees the group as a way to spread the word about attractions in a way single entities cannot.

"Anything the initiative can do to put a name on our industry is really good for us," said Cochran. "As individuals, we are scattered out here like grains of sand.

"I see this whole initiative and everything they are doing collectively ... to promote us on a higher level than we as individuals can promote ourselves," Cochran said.

The Arkansas Agritourism Initiative is growing out of a partnership among:

- Arkansas Agriculture Department
- Arkansas Farm Bureau
- Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism
- Dale Bumpers College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences
- National Agricultural Law Center
- Winthrop Rockefeller Institute of the University of Arkansas System
- University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture Public Policy Center
- University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service

One of the initiative's first actions will be to undertake a study of agritourism in Arkansas and its effects on communities and the economy. The study will be conducted by McCullough and Dr. Daniel Rainey, an associate professor of agricultural economics and agribusiness at the University of Arkansas.

Agritourism is a growing industry in the United States. The Agriculture Department estimates that 2.5 percent of all U.S. farms earned income from agritourism in 2004. More than half of all farms receiving recreational farm income were located in the South.

The economic impact of agritourism is pegged in the millions. In Vermont, income from agritourism grew from \$10.5 million in 2000 to \$19.5 million just two years later. In California, wine rules the agritourism roost, bringing in nearly 20 million visitors with \$2 billion in annual expenditures.

For more information about the Arkansas Agritourism Initiative, visit www.arkagritourism.org or email info@arkagritourism.org.

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