

# MEETINGS & CONFERENCES

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## For farmers across the region, tourism is the latest cash crop

**Facing uncertain futures, farmers across New England turn to tourism to stay viable**

By Stephen S. Howie  
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Two years ago, Rhode Island dairy farmer Louis Escobar faced a difficult dilemma. Dairy prices were plummeting, and his herd wasn't big enough to cover the bills. All around him, dairy farms were going under.

Escobar considered two unappealing options: dividing his 98-acre farm into smaller lots or doubling his herd. Instead, he went with a third option: He called a corn

maze designer from Utah whom he'd heard about. "Make me a cow," Escobar told him.

The resulting 8-acre "Moolennium Maze" was so popular, Escobar had to hire "corn cops" to make sure the 14,000 visitors it attracted didn't damage the maze or his crop.

Last year's rendition of a "Rhode Island Red" received similar adoration and brought thousands of people to Escobar's Highland Farm in Portsmouth, R.I.

"Agritourism won't make a farmer rich, but it will help the farm stay viable," says Escobar, a leprechaun of a man with a thick Santa Claus beard, who likes to refer to himself and his farm as "endangered species."

"I'm like an oasis in a desert of houses," Escobar says.

Escobar is one of hundreds of New England farmers who, faced with uncertain commodity prices and rising health insurance and property taxes, are looking to cut out the middleman and attract tourists and customers directly to their farms.

In late 2001, the crunch took on new urgency for dairy farmers — dairy prices dropped by 25 percent the last four months of the year. Then, to make matters worse, legislation that had been protecting New England farmers from large drops in milk prices, the Northeast Dairy Compact, expired at the end of September, leaving farmers to fend for themselves.

The going has been equally bleak for Northeast apple growers, who have seen the apple market cornered by Chinese imports and who have watched apple prices plunge so low that it is often more cost-effective to cut down the trees than to pick the apples that grow on them.



Sleigh rides by Belgian draft horses are one example of agritourism that helps the Adams Family Farm in Wilmington, Vt., supplement its income.



This 8-acre "Moolennium Maze" brought 14,000 visitors to a Rhode Island dairy farmer's property, which helped keep the farm operating.

Faced with an uncertain future, many New England farmers are turning to farm-based tourism as a way to keep their farms "visible and viable," according to Beth Kennet, chairwoman of the Vermont Farms Association and organizer of the New England Agritourism Summit, which was held Feb. 11 and 12 along the banks of the Connecticut River in Fairlee, Vt.

Kennet hoped to use the conference, which attracted 50 farmers and officials from all six New England states, as a springboard to devise a regional approach to agritourism. The summit will be followed by a second conference this October, scheduled to be held in Vermont.

Agritourism already provides substantial income for New England farmers. In Massachusetts, farmers pulled in \$10 million from pick-your-own pumpkin patches, roadside farm stands, corn mazes, sleigh rides and other farm-based attractions in 2000, the most recent year for which figures are available. Vermont brought in similar revenue, with 2,100 farms reporting an average of \$5,000 each from agritourism that year.

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## New England family farms are attracting tourists for viability, visibility

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The concept is relatively simple — the closer a farmer can be to the consumer, the higher the price his products will garner. But the shape and style that farm-based tourism takes is as varied as the New England farms and farmers that promote themselves.

Jan Wentworth decided several years ago that she preferred to attract an older clientele to her 10-acre Warren Farm and Sugarhouse in North Brookfield. When she started offering tours of her heirloom fruits, flowers and vegetables, she set up tents, thinking her elderly visitors would need to rest in the shade. The tents remained empty.

"They were walking down the nature

trail, looking at the herb garden, talking about things they used to grow," Wentworth says. "That's when we realized what agritourism was about — we weren't just educating them, we were getting something back."

Wentworth gets back more than good feelings and shared memories from her visitors. Every time a tour group steps into her gift shop to survey the selection of 75 products, Wentworth estimates she makes between \$80 and \$150.

In contrast to Wentworth, the Adams Family Farm in Wilmington, Vt., is family oriented, with its own theater for puppet shows, a petting barn that looks like a holding area for a circus and a two-story gift shop featuring handmade quilts, sweaters, slippers and an assortment of

farm-made food products.

Each fall, the Adamses host "Haunted Hayrides" that feature a stop in a barn for hot chocolate and New England ghost stories. Each winter, sleighs take visitors through beautiful, snow-covered hills behind majestic Belgian draft horses.

"There's all different scales of agritourism," Jill Adams says. "Some rent farmhouse rooms, some will do sleigh rides and others will do farm stands to sell garden produce. The reason our farm works is because we're located in a tourist town. For farms to get into agritourism, they have to be really creative."

The creativity and marketing savvy of New England farmers was on full display at the Agritourism Summit. Three tables featured everything from maple-syrup

samples to photo albums of weddings at Freund's Farm in East Canaan, Conn. Another table, flanked by stuffed and mounted baby emus, proffered bottles of emu body lotion and oil from Vermont Prime Emu Producers in Lerby Line, Vt.

Anneli Johnson, a marketing specialist with the Mass. Dept. of Food and Agriculture, says it's only natural that farms tap into tourist revenue, which amounts to a \$16 billion business in Massachusetts alone.

"After all, farms are the ones that provide the scenic settings and pastoral look to the milieu that is enjoyed by all tourists," Johnson says.

"It's a very valuable component to the tourist industry that farms keep all this land for us to enjoy." ■