

Conducting Farm and Ranch Tours

In our highly urbanized society, people are interested in getting back to their roots and learning how their food, fiber and flowers are produced. Urban and suburban people also often view farmers and ranchers as experts, and are eager to learn skills they can use at home in their gardens and kitchens. Educational programming can include tours, classes, demonstrations, workshops, summer camps and participatory experiences - for adults as well as for children and teens.

Appropriate planning is essential if you want to present a positive image of your farm and of agriculture as a whole, and to be well prepared for a group visit. Farm tours should not, generally, be conducted in an ad hoc manner.

It is important to think about what kinds of images you want your visitors to take with them when they leave (impressions, experiences, knowledge, facts, products). Here are some considerations to take into account when assessing your state of readiness for a farm tour:

- When is the best time of year for you to provide tours? Is the weather generally good at that time of year? Are unsightly chores like manure spreading or machinery cleaning occurring during that time?
- Will you charge a fee to offset the time and labor expended on the tour and to provide an economic return? If so, what will be your fee schedule?
- Will you offer products to eat at the end of the tour? If so, check with your local health department regarding regulations concerning your ability to feed guests.
- Can visitors safely tour your facility? Remember, safety is your responsibility!
- Is your farm relatively clean and in good repair? Do you practice good pest and waste management programs? Are you prepared to answer probing questions about your practices?
- Will your tour present a positive image of agriculture as a whole? Are there opportunities to demonstrate resource sensitivity, for example by providing habitat for wildlife such as hedgerows, ponds for waterfowl, etc.
- Is your farm accessible to persons with disabilities? If not, you may need to make this clear before the tour.



Preparation

- Develop rules for photography. You need to decide whether visitors can take pictures of everything they see or only in certain areas. Consider providing a specific location for group/family commemorative photos where pictures can be taken beside a farm sign, farm product, or some other piece of memorabilia.
- Be sure you have given adequate attention to hygiene. Assess the adequacy of your bathroom and hand washing arrangements, especially if visitors will be handling animals before they eat.
- Provide for adequate amounts and locations of garbage cans in the eating areas.
- Public Relations: Call your neighbors to let them know about the planned tour.
- Esthetics: Ensure that dead and injured animals or discarded products will not be on display during the tour or visible to your guests.



The Tour Schedule and Presentation

- Develop a tour program and a verbal presentation that can be modified to fit the interests and backgrounds of the audience.
- Post signs that clearly outline safety requirements.
- View your operation through the eyes of a visitor. Point out the obvious and explain the reasons behind specific operations.
- Emphasize a theme throughout the tour (for example, recycling, sustainable agriculture, food quality, animal welfare, agriculture and the environment, and conservation).
- Discuss your production systems, following the path of products from conception to consumption; from seed to tomato sauce, from cow to milk and cheese, from lamb to wool. Talk about the diverse markets your products serve, including by-products.
- Select three to five points of emphasis that you want to reinforce throughout the tour. What would you like guests to have learned by the end of your tour? Whenever possible, make it an interactive, hands-on, experience. For example: If you are touring an apple orchard, show pictures or point to trees in different stages of growth. Describe the production cycle. How much it will produce at peak yield (relate the yield to something your audience can understand, such as "as much as two children weigh"). Discuss why you grow apples here (soil, weather, and water). Describe the steps the product goes through before reaching the market. Explain the challenges and uncertainties you deal with when producing apples (pests, changing regulations, labor force issues, market). But don't bore your audience with your pet peeves. They are there for recreation, relaxation, and education.
- Have safe, organized, hands-on opportunities for children (touch the seeds, lambs, the warm pipelines in the milk barn and the cool milk tank, put feed samples in a bucket for touching, etc.). For younger children (pre-school to 3rd grade), use body language to accompany your verbal explanation to help them learn and keep them involved.

- How many people can you comfortably accommodate in a group and still conduct an effective tour? Practice the tour with other staff who will also be leading groups. Organize the tour so different groups will not get mixed up.
- Practice the tour program with a person who is not involved in your operation and get their feedback.
- Walk your tour. Check off how long it takes. Is the terrain level and well drained?

Tour Contact

- Ascertain the general age and abilities of the members of the tour in terms of the approximate number of adults and children and why the group wants to visit your farm. Establish a comfortable ratio of chaperones to children and youth if you feel it is necessary.
- Discuss parking and provide directions to parking facilities.
- Suggest clothing that enhances safety, for example closed-toe, low heel shoes and comfortable clothing. Suggest people bring hats and sunscreen in the summer, and warm clothing in other seasons.
- Discuss meals. Will the group be eating on your property? What will meals cost? Are your picnicking facilities adequate, if that is an option?



Picnic facilities must be adequate if provided.

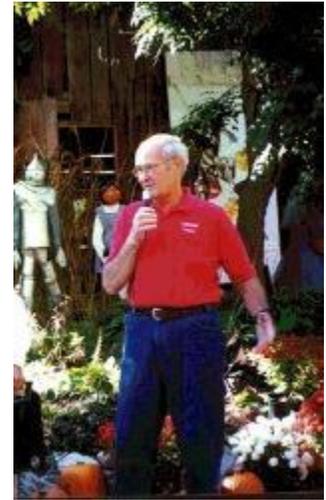
Briefing the Group

- Greet your visitors on the bus if they arrive by bus. Some tour buses have a PA system that you might use to address your audience.
- Introduce yourself and firmly but politely establish expectations regarding conduct and behavior (appropriate for the age group).
- Remind visitors that your farm is a working, production-oriented operation, not an amusement park.
- Children should be advised to: walk, remember that rocks stay on the ground, stay with the group, be good listeners, and raise their hands when they have questions.
- Prepare visitors for regular farm environmental hazards such as odors, flies, dust or loud noises. However, to the extent that you can, take steps to mitigate these environmental irritants.

Conducting the Tour

Greet your guests when they arrive. If you are addressing a large group, consider using a microphone or the tour bus PA system

- Walk at a pace appropriate to the group's size and age.
- Have a responsible person at the rear of the group to assist with keeping the group together.
- Discuss what the group will see before entering a noisy area.
- Children should be encouraged to repeat new words and concepts as you explain them.
- Be sure to explain any agriculture terms that may be foreign to your guests. Think of ways to relate concepts and terms to everyday life, for example, feeder mixer wagons are blenders on wheels, etc.).
- Answer only questions about what you know and limit your comments to your farm. Avoid ideological debates with guests or customers.



Concluding the Tour

- Allow plenty of time for questions.
- Review the main concepts you introduced and refer to the key theme(s). For children's groups, use a fill-in-the-blank method, encouraging the children to participate, thus reinforcing the information.
- Samples of the product (empty containers, pictures, or actual products) provide a great ending. Provide information on how/where they can purchase your product.
- Escort the group to the bus or parking area, thanking them for their visit. Encourage them to return.

Post-tour Review

- Ask for an evaluation from the tour contact. What did the visitors like? What would help the group to better assimilate the information? What suggestions do they have for improving the tour?
- Establish and update a file of these notes. Review this feedback information with other tour staff before the next scheduled tour.

Resources for on-farm education:

- Guide: [Agritourism Best Practices; How to Develop a Farm Tour](#), one of many great guides from the [Vermont Agritourism Collaborative](#)
- Guide: [Agritourism Best practices: How to Host Summer Camp](#), one of many great guides from the [Vermont Agritourism Collaborative](#)
- Presentation: [The Live Earth Farm Discovery Program](#), by Jessica Ridgeway, Live Earth Farm, Watsonville, CA
 - Worksheet: [Farm Based Education Program Planning](#), from Jessica Ridgeway, Live Earth Farm Discovery Program

- Association and Website: [Farm Based Education Network](#)
 - The FBEN is a free member network established to strengthen and support the work of educators, farmers, and community leaders who provide access and experiences on working farms.
 - There are currently over 2,750 FBEN members from 48 states and 28 countries.
 - Member farms are nonprofit, for-profit, and community-based, producing vegetables, animals, fiber, timber, and other living natural resource products.
 - Member programs serve all ages from infant visitors with their parent, through K to 12 grades, to university students and adults throughout their lives.
- Non-profit: [Soil Born Farms](#) - Urban Agriculture & Education Project in Sacramento
- Directory listing of [California Farms offering Educational Experiences](#), from www.calagtour.org



Bring on the bus tour!

Selling your agricultural tour to tour groups



"You are taking care of someone else's customers. 110 percent of the tour must shine! If something goes wrong, I didn't just lose that senior group, I lost the confidence of the tour company for the next three years."

Denise Skidmore, director of education and public relations for [Hilmar Cheese Company](#), spoke to the Merced County Ag/Art/Nature Tourism group about marketing to tour group organizers, and to the tour companies who offer the tours to groups. She markets Hilmar Cheese Visitors Center educational tours, packaged with an olive oil tasting and a stop at one or two other agritourism operations, to tour companies who offer the tours to groups of seniors and other potential visitors. Visitors to Hilmar Cheese learn about the cheese-making process by touring the processing operations, enjoying hands-on educational displays that Skidmore has created and tasting samples, shopping and eating lunch in the gift shop/deli. She hosts about eight to ten groups per year. Denise Skidmore offered a few tips to others thinking of attracting bus tours of visitors to their operations:

- Make sure everything is well planned, that all facilities are extra neat, clean and attractive and that all staff are ready and attentive to the visitors' needs.

- If you are offering packaged tours with stops at several operations, set one price for the tour company and arrange among the operators how to split the fee among the different operations on the tour.
- Host free tours for group leaders who book tours, such as leaders of senior groups, so they can see what is offered.
- Have enough restrooms for a busload of people who all want to go at once. Ten toilets may be right for a bus carrying 40 people. Be sure some of the toilets are handicapped accessible and that all facilities meet accessibility codes.
- The visit is often short, so there may be a time crunch. Make the itinerary of the tour pretty short. You may want to have a driving tour for seniors, on the bus they came on. It takes 10 to 15 minutes to tour the 40 acres of Hilmar's operations on a bus.
- Be aware of steps and walking hazards, particularly when hosting seniors. Don't expect seniors to do much walking for the tour; think of riding options.
- Take them on the tour before you feed them, so they don't fall asleep while you're talking to them.
- Set up different itineraries for different seasons or different months of the year, featuring seasonal harvests and activities, and be clear about the available dates and prices for each different tour.

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