

Agritourism -- a means for farmers to increase profitability

by Carolyn Lucas_*West Hawaii Today*_ clucas@westhawaiiitoday.com _Sunday, January 14, 2007 8:07 AM HST_

A professor and economist for Michigan State University declared Friday that much of what is heard about agricultural tourism is simplistic, incorrect, anecdotal, and undocumented.

"Ag-tourism is often viewed as something cute done by people in the hills and not something of value," said Ed Mahoney, the keynote speaker of the fifth biennial Agtourism in Hawaii conference. "It's not even identified in the Farm Bill."

Agritourism can be an effective means for Big Island farmers to increase profitability, reduce risks and keep rural areas alive. But it is not for everyone, Mahoney said.

At the Outrigger Keauhou Beach Resort, Mahoney and six other speakers discussed the various aspects of developing an agritourism attraction and association.

Agritourism can help farmers restore cultural heritage and make money off it, as well as educate a new generation of food consumers and agricultural stakeholders, Mahoney said. However, barriers exist, such as the "unscientific, uncoordinated, nonbeneficial regulation" and "the effort to homogenize and regiment the diversity right out of agritourism."

Mahoney repeatedly told audience members to never form an organization that limits options. Attention must be placed on the values of the members and the association.

Agritourism must embrace a diversity of products, markets and values; generate net revenues; be cooperative; add value and fun for the visitor; develop future stakeholders; and contribute to sustainable tourism product lines, Mahoney said.

Before entering the industry, Mahoney advised farmers and agencies to identify their target market, determine how certain enterprises fit with their business, and list the values, benefits and results. The biggest fallacy, he said, is formation of unneeded partnerships.

Mahoney encouraged participants to forget their Marketing 101 classes, where they learned the four P's: product, price, place and promotion. The marketing mix for agritourism includes: sustainable farms and ranches, community development, resource stewardship and numerous diversification enterprises.

Following a 25-minute premier of the "Agtourism in Hawaii" DVD, Kent Fleming, professor and extension economist for the University of Hawaii College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, led a panel discussing its keys to having successful agritourism businesses and the challenges along the way.

The panelists and stars of the film were: Chef Peter Merriman, Hawaii Regional Cuisine

co-founder and Merriman's Restaurant owner; Monty Richards II of Kahua Ranch; Lani Weigert and Alii Ching of Alii Kula Lavender; Jim Reddekopp, Hawaiian Vanilla Co. owner; and Gus Brocksen, Pele Plantation owner.

Located on a 10.5-acre farm in Maui, Alii Kula Lavender grows 45 different varieties of lavender, of which seven bloom year-round. The farm offers a walking tour and 75 unique quality lavender products, including Lavender Poha Jam, Lavender Coffee, Lavender Honey, Lavender Scone Mix, Lavender Potpourri and Lavender Pet Shampoo.

Alii Kula's innovative business model involves partnerships with local manufacturers. Weigert said the company prefers to "empower" rather than compete against local businesses that offered similar products. Its marketing strategy focuses on the local community first, particularly the elders.

"You really have to examine your values and live them out. If something is not pono with the community, it's not pono with us," Weigert said. "Agritourism is about reconnecting to the land and each other, not about chasing the dollar. Sometimes, you have to be strong to say no. As long as it's the right thing to do and there is good intentions, progress will be made."

Audience members asked whether the panelists ever receive complaints from neighboring farmers, who want to preserve their quiet rural lifestyle away from tour buses and rental cars.

Reddekopp replied "no" because his neighbors are capitalizing from his business located in Paauilo. Hawaiian Vanilla Co. is the first commercial vanilla farm in the United States. Besides the tours and tastings, it offers a gourmet luncheon at the mill. For that meal, Reddekopp only buys food produced locally, including from his neighbors.

Reddekopp stressed the importance of educating the community. He said his business is helping Paauilo to become a hub of agricultural bounty.

Merriman also uses fresh locally grown products to create his signature dishes. Pictures of the farmers and farms hang on the walls of his Waimea restaurant.

"There are a lot of winners in this system, and no losers," he said. "The farmers get markets, the distributors get quality supplies, the restaurants get top quality produce, the customers get a fantastic dining experience and Hawaii gets to keep it all at home."

Last year, Merriman started offering four-hour excursions to some of the farms that supply his ingredients. The farms are Loeffler Farms, Hirabara Farms, Big Island Goat Cheese, Lokelani Gardens and Kahua Ranch. Along the way, participants meet the farmers and discover how they grow the products.

"It's a chance for people to gain more appreciation for the life of the farmer and to make a connection," Merriman said.

For more information, visit <http://www.ctahr.hawaii.edu/agtourism>.