

# Agritourism brings reality home

by Jared A. Wiley, Ardmore, Okla.

Reality TV has let many individuals in the United States gain their 15 minutes of fame. These programs allow people to become pop stars, live with strangers, go back to college or even be “real” cowboys, but one of the newest reality programs is not on television.

Like a reality show, agritourism allows people to participate in reality, the reality of agriculture, and Oklahoma has plenty of opportunities to experience agriculture.

Want to see how a reining horse is trained? Head south from Oklahoma City on I-35 to Purcell, Okla., the Quarter Horse Capitol of the World. Cattle ranches and beef operations dot the Oklahoma map and offer plenty of new experiences.

If you want to know something about growing and harvesting crops, Oklahoma is fourth in the nation in wheat production. A variety of producers allow tours of their ranches and farms.

If you are interested in horticulture, the state is home to several vineyards and nurseries. Oklahoma is waiting for you to enjoy its newest reality: agritourism.

## Agritourism: crossroads of agriculture and tourism

Agritourism, like its name suggests, is

agriculture involving tourism or vice versa. The agritourism program in Oklahoma is a joint effort among the Oklahoma departments of agriculture, food and forestry, tourism and wildlife conservation.

Francie Tolle, Oklahoma’s director of agritourism, said the potential this industry has to serve as a solid revenue source for rural and primarily agricultural parts of the state is limited only by the imagination.

“Agritourism can help a producer diversify his or her income while adding attractions to the rural community,” said Tolle about the future of agritourism.

Activities and tours range from farms and ranches to hiking trails and hayrides. Tolle said tours may offer hands-on activities, entertainment, meals or even a chance to spend the night.

Most people haven’t thought about going to a rural town as a form of tourism; they think about the Caribbean Islands, Cancun or Las Vegas as their tourist destinations. But Tolle said the agritourism industry is one of the fastest growing segments of tourism in the United States.

Agritourism started on the coasts in California, Vermont and North Carolina and spread from there. The United States is not the only country offering agricultural

tours; Italy, Australia and New Zealand are known as global participants in the agritourism industry.

Oklahoma’s program is designed to help current and new businesses.

“Our primary job is developing resources to help producers,” said Tolle. “Some people have been in business for 15 years, and our goal is to help them market and expand their businesses.”

Oklahoma agritourism is still in its infancy, but Tolle said the program is encouraging interested and active parties to fill out a questionnaire on the Internet to build an inventory database.

“We are compiling information from an online questionnaire to know what programs are being offered,” said Tolle. “We have some opportunities posted on travelok.com under activities and attractions, but we expect the number to increase.”

Agritourism is a new buzzword for some businesses that have been part of the industry for several years. Corn mazes and pumpkin patches are examples of businesses in Oklahoma that have long been a part of this “new” industry.

Jerry and Mary Jahn have been running a pumpkin patch in Cyril, Okla., for the past four years.



*The Access Tour II joins a herd of cattle at Bill Jacobs’ Ranch after riding an Oklahoma State University “BOB” into the pasture. (photo by Jared Wiley)*



Ed Miller (left) and D.C. Coston discuss Oklahoma grapes at Greenfield Vineyards. Oklahoma is home to more than 30 vineyards. (photo by Jared Wiley)

“We started our patch with a grant from the department of ag but didn’t know about the state’s agritourism program,” said Mary Jahn.

Individuals or groups can participate in tours. Jahn said some individuals do stop at their patch, but elementary schools are the primary visitors.

Students, however, are not the only ones participating in agritourism. The Oklahoma State University Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources hosts a statewide agri-tour every spring for faculty and agricultural professionals.

### Out of Stillwater and into the state

The DASNR Access Tour made its first departure in May 2004 and its second voyage in May 2005. The tour is a two-day agritourism journey across the state with several stops along the way.

This year, the group of 45 participants made stops at Shawnee Mills, Jerry Wells’ horse farm, the Noble Foundation and Bill Jacobs’ ranch on the first day. The second day the group traveled more than 160 miles from Davis, Okla., to Stillwater, Okla., stopping at the Murray County Extension Office, Cedar Valley Liners, Wintersmith Park Lodge and Greenfield Vineyards.

The stops were informative and gave the group a chance to see the diversity of agriculture in Oklahoma, said D.C. Coston, coordinator of the 2005 tour and former associate director of the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station.

The tour’s purpose has been to get university people into the state to see what

is happening agriculturally, said Coston.

“We have a variety of individuals on this trip,” Coston said. “They are students, faculty and administrators for the college, and we also have extension agents, wheat commissioners and a representative from Farmer’s Union. Just about any job that deals with agriculture, there is someone here who does it.”

Each informative stop had something different to offer the participants. Greenfield Vineyards in Chandler, Okla., gave the group a glimpse at a working winery and the grape industry in Oklahoma.

Even a cattle ranch proved to be different than a normal operation. At Bill Jacobs’ 12,000-acre ranch, the tour bus joined a roundup. Chris Morgan, assistant professor in agricultural education, said pulling the bus into the middle of 1,200 cattle was amusing and a reminder of his days as an agricultural education teacher.

“We pulled the bus into the field then people unloaded and started taking pictures of the calves with their cell phones. It reminded me of picking out animals for kids to show, just with a much larger selection of calves,” Morgan said, with a laugh.

Morgan, who is not only new to the university but also to the state, said the trip was educational. He said he found out about the trip through an e-mail and was encouraged to participate.

“I didn’t know what to expect because I did not know much about the state, but Dr. Bill Weeks said he thought I would enjoy it,” said Morgan.

“This trip was well-organized and was an enjoyable experience,” said Morgan. “I would encourage anyone, especially those interested in this state’s agriculture, to take part in the Access Tour.”

The trip is funded by the OSU Agriculture Alumni Association, OAES and various other sponsors. Oklahoma Pork Council and Oklahoma Beef Council were co-sponsors for the 2005 tour.

The Agriculture Alumni Association not only funds the trip but also came up with the idea of the Access Tour, said Ed Miller, CASNR associate dean and a two-year participant with the tour.

“The ag alumni have always been involved with teaching programs and the students here on campus, but they wanted to be more involved with getting research results from the campus out into the state,” said Miller.


Miller said the Access Tour achieves one of the university’s primary missions.

“Extending knowledge is an important part of the university’s primary mission,” said Miller. “Extending knowledge makes us unique in the state.”

To extend this knowledge across the state, the tour uses “BOB,” OSU’s big orange buses, for transportation.

With two down and many more to come, Miller said the future is bright for the tour.

“I think we have been very successful with our first two tours,” said Miller. “The only thing that could make it better is increased public involvement at the stops and more public awareness about our tour.”

So, mark your calendars for May 2006 and start your summer with the Access Tour, a group of people taking an active part in Oklahoma’s new reality program: agritourism. 

### My point of view: Access II

When I participated in the Access Tour II to write this story, what started as an assignment turned into deeper appreciation and pride for my university and college.

The first day of the trip I watched the participants interact, scribbled notes at each stop, took pictures and amassed a database of information. The second day I concentrated on the people who surrounded me. As I thought about the experience, I realized the purpose of the tour: extension.

Extension is multifaceted and not limited to the formal dissemination of knowledge to the public. Extension, as I now see it, is the people who call Oklahoma State University their alma mater. Before Access II, I only knew “extension” by the “county agent” title; now, that impression is as broad as the state, and I know extension by the people, not the titles.

The tour made me realize I will be an extension of OSU. Everyone who has gone before me has made a path that crosses Stillwater at some point, and I look forward to adding another trail to the OSU map.