

# Agricultural Tourism in Cochise County

## Survey Results Show Promise for Local Economy

EVERY YEAR, TOURISTS FROM TUCSON AND other Arizona towns travel to farms in the Willcox and Benson areas in south-eastern Arizona to buy produce. They bring baskets and bags for picking their own fruits and vegetables in the fields. A lot of the visitors stop to have picnics, and to buy homemade apple pies, jams, cider and other products.

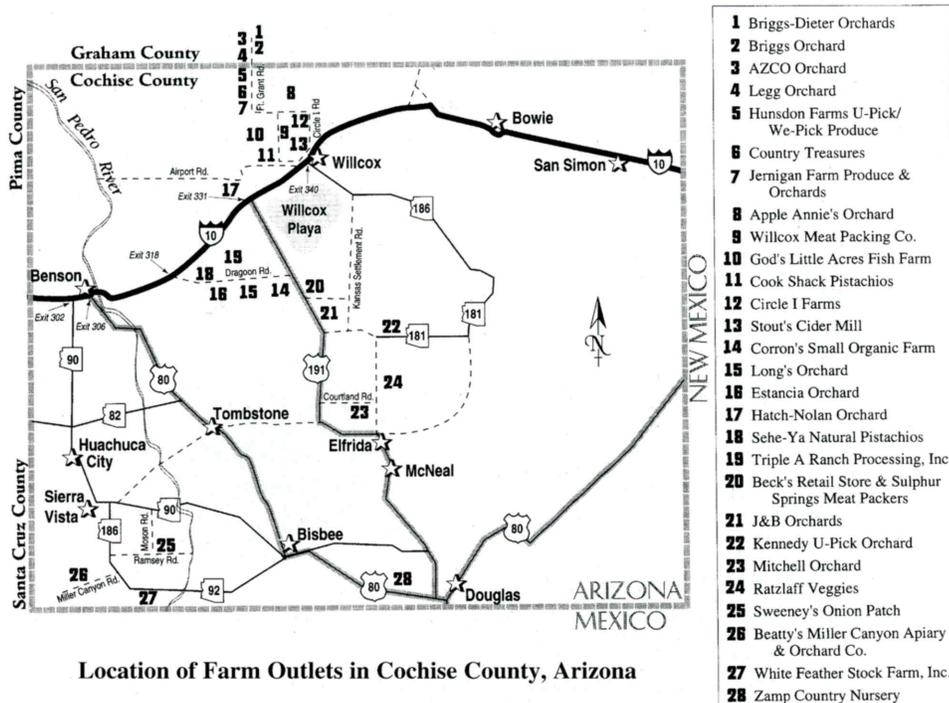
Many of the tourists visiting Cochise County want not only produce, but a farm experience as well. They go to spend the day in a country atmosphere, and they reward the county economically for the opportunity. In 1993 alone, "agri-tourists" spent about one million dollars in the area, according to University of Arizona researchers.

About 28 fresh-farm outlets currently operate in Cochise County, and compared to states in the Midwest, Arizona has very few on-farm produce businesses.

"In other states — Illinois or Wisconsin, for example — more than 1,000 direct marketing enterprises exist in farming areas," said Julie Leones, an agricultural economist in the UA Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics. "These include roadside stands, bed and breakfast establishments, and other outlets. Here in Arizona, we'd be hard-pressed to come up with a list of 60. Yet our study shows there's clearly a growing demand for more of this."

The window of opportunity for Cochise County farm tourism is the fresh produce season, which generally runs from July through October, and includes apples, corn, tomatoes, pumpkins and squash, string beans, pistachio nuts and other crops. Farms selling produce devote between two and 153 acres to fruits and vegetables. Each farm surveyed offers one or more of the following: roadside stands, haywagon tours, U-pick fields pre-picked produce, baked goods, preserves, plants, arts and crafts, honey, meat, fish, picnic facilities, restrooms, drinking water, shade trees, and snack bars.

To assist agricultural producers and local business people in attracting more customers, the Cochise County Cooperative Extension wanted to measure the number of visitors at fresh farm



produce outlets and the amount of money they were spending. The project, funded by the Arizona Cooperative Extension, had two main objectives. First, a survey based on interviews with customers and the operators of U-pick and fresh farm outlets would document the visitors' economic contribution to the area. Second, the information compiled from the survey would be distributed to help outlet owners learn more about their customers.

Four UA faculty collaborated on the project: Leones; Doug Dunn, Cochise County extension director; Rob Call, Cochise County horticulture agent; and Marshall Worden, then assistant director and community economic specialist with the Drachman Institute for Land and Regional Development Studies. Stephen Klump and Kristina Smith, students in the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, personally interviewed the farm customers.

In addition to interviewing fresh-farm outlet owners and managers, and 904 customers, the research team gathered road count data and examined visitor registries. This information helped them identify trends and suggest opportunities for business enhancement in the area.

The heart of the project was the customer survey, conducted from mid-July through October, 1993. Using laptop computers to enter responses, researchers personally interviewed customers at Cochise County fresh-farm outlets. Seventy-nine percent of the people they approached agreed to participate in the study.

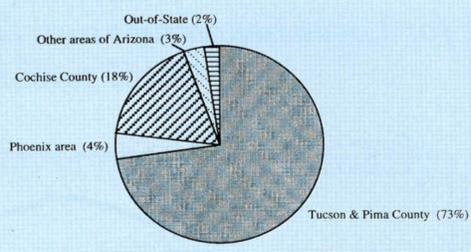
Surprisingly, the survey showed that the average customer had driven more than 80 miles, primarily from Tucson, to visit farms in Cochise County. More than 44 percent said they came for the farm or rural experience as well as the produce. They viewed the experience as a family outing rather than an excursion primarily to buy produce for canning. This is a definite trend away from farm visits even a decade ago, when women were the primary visitors, searching for produce to preserve. Only 55 percent of the customers in the survey were women.

"It's not your typical U-Pick activity," Leones said. "We've been talking to people in other states who also see an increase in the number of people coming out to have an experience and to have a family weekend. Fewer people are canning and buying in bulk, and they are willing to buy more value-added products."

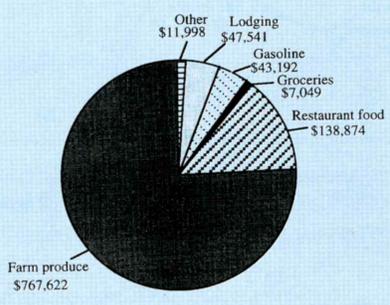
Results of this 1993 research, including a farm visitor survey conducted in Cochise County by UA College of Agriculture extension faculty, indicate that agritourism is on the rise, offering a new direction in agricultural development for the area. (For the purposes of their study, the researchers defined agritourists as "out of county visitors who come to the area primarily for the purpose of purchasing on-farm produce.") Although it takes more work, interested communities can increase their income by enhancing their farm facilities for both produce sales and recreation.

The report based on the agricultural tourism survey is available through the College of Agriculture Publication Distribution Center, 4042 N. Campbell, Tucson, AZ 85719.

**Origin of Visitors to Farm Outlets**



**Estimated Total Expenditures by Out-of-County Visitors**



Out of the estimated 81,450 out-of-county visitors who flocked to the area between July 15 and November 1, 1993, nearly 80 percent said the farms were their primary destination. A large number were new customers.

"One third were visiting for the first time, and they overwhelmingly expressed an interest in coming back again," Leones said. Most visitors had learned about the area by word of mouth and had planned their visits, which usually lasted one day. Ninety-seven percent said they would be back. Impulse visits off the highway were few, probably because only a few signs advertised the opportunity to buy produce.

"We're not catching any of the traffic off I-10," Leones said. "I think there's a lot of opportunity not only for Willcox to tie this into its tourism activities, but for other farmers in other areas to tie it into their own operations." The survey indicated benefits to non-farm enterprises: visitors spent \$230,000 in restaurants, gas stations, hotels and other businesses, an average of \$40 on the farm and another \$18 off the farm. If they stayed overnight, they would spend more money. Less than ten percent of the tourists spent the night in 1993, but those who did spent an average of \$130 per visit compared to an average of \$54 spent on a day visit.

The opportunity for increased business does have drawbacks for the community. More tourism requires more preparation and organization on the part of the farmers, and produces more traffic in the area.

"Some recommendations that came out would change the local lifestyle," Leones admitted. For example, three-fourths of the visitors come on weekends, but do not go to downtown Willcox because the store hours are limited. "The community wanted the customers to come downtown, and we suggested they extend their hours during this three-month period. But most stores are still not open on Sundays, and many are closed on Saturdays as well."

Another idea the researchers suggested was to encourage people to stay overnight in the area. Motels would need small refrigerators in rooms to store produce, and would have to entice visitors to stay. "But people aren't yet willing to promote convenient weekend hotel packages," Leones said.

Yet by cooperating on advertising and marketing, many Willcox area residents, growers in particular, have been able to attract customers and have been satisfied with the results. The Willcox Chamber of Commerce and Agriculture, and The University of Arizona Cooperative Extension have assisted outlet owners with these efforts.

"They know they're selling the experience, not just the product," Leones said. "They've gotten good support from the Chamber of Commerce. We've had meetings with the economic development council, and we've noticed that the farm community is more excited than the business community. Within a month after the report they were changing their advertising. Based on customer suggestions, they put up new signs and established a telephone number to call for produce availability."

As far as produce choice, Leones said customers chose apples and corn as their top preferences, and said they would like to purchase strawberries, an item not yet available in the area. This has led to suggestions for other crops as well, and Rob Call has been working with growers to determine crop varieties that would do well in the region.

The survey and its response from the community has encouraged the extension faculty to sponsor a workshop for farmers interested in direct marketing. A manual, the Direct Agricultural Marketing and Tourism Handbook, has been produced through the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics, and is available through the Arizona Department of Agriculture.

Possibly the greatest benefit of agritourism is the understanding people gain regarding the value of agriculture. Very few people live on farms now, and in a time when criticism of farming and ranching has run high, personal contact with the farming community could make a difference, Leones said.

"So far, best advertisement for the value of agriculture in the state is people who will jump into their car and drive 90 miles to see a farm and talk with farmers," she said. "That understanding is lost unless there is some type of direct contact."

— Susan McGinley

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