

Draft Notes from Ag Community Forum Zoom Webinar

July 23, 2020 from 9:00-10:30am

Purpose: To convene representatives of the Skagit Ag Community to discuss the issue of Agritourism in an open and transparent way and record the farming and Agritourism community. To provide input from this forum with Skagit County Planning and Development Services.

Participants

Don McMoran (WSU Skagit County Extension); Gary Jones (WWAA); John Sternlicht (EDASC); Tim Knue (SPF Board); Rob Wingard (WDFW); Leo Roozen (WA Bulb); Kim Rubenstein (SPF Board); Andy Schuh (Schuh Farms/WWA); Jen Schuh (Schuh Farms); Ron Extract (Garden Path Fermentation); Robin Crandall (Horton Road Organics); John Anderson (SPF Board President/farmer); Belinda Rotton (WDFW); Jennifer Smith (SPF Board/farmer); Everett Chu (Azusa Farm & Gardens); Andrew Miller (Tulip Town/farmer); Rachel Sorrels (SPF Dev. and Admin.); Terry Sapp (Hoehn Bend Farm); John Roozen (Board member of SPF and Save Fam Farming); Peter Gill (Skagit County Planning & Development Services); Allen Rozema (SPF); and Lyn Wiltse (facilitator, PDSA Consulting)

Action Items

- All: Let Allen know if you have suggestions for additional participants for these Agritourism forums. Also let him know if interested in being a member of the Tourism Advisory Council that SPF is forming.
- Allen: Send out notes from this meeting to participants, Skagit County Planning and Development Services, and the SPF Board, along with a Doodle Poll for a mid-August follow-up webinar.

Opening

Allen Rozema kicked off the meeting by thanking the participants for taking time and attention to participate in this webinar. He further explained that this is the first of several listening sessions SPF is planning to host on the topic of Agritourism. In sending out invitations to join this meeting, his aim was to get a broad and diverse representation of the Skagit ag community.

Lyn Wiltse also thanked participants for their participation in the meeting and acknowledged there is currently a lot of angst and uncertainty in our world. She expressed hope that all are finding time to enjoy summer fruits and vegetables, while also finding creative ways to breathe deeply and calm hearts and minds. She then reviewed the remote meeting norms for the meeting and emphasized that her role in the meeting is to ensure broad participation, and that time is spent in an efficient and effective manner. She will also produce notes from this session, which will be shared with participants, Skagit County Planning and Development Services, and the SPF Board.

Welcome by John Anderson, SPF President

John offered a warm welcome and thanked everyone for their time and reiterated that this is the first in a series of listening forums that SPF is pleased to host. The topic of Agritourism has come up repeatedly over the past few years. The county is growing. We have a vibrant business advocacy community here with EDASC (Economic Development Alliance of Skagit County).

Skagit farmers are trying to make a living, and, with changing economic times, are looking at making changes that would add value. SPF sees itself as conveners/collaborators in support of Skagit County Agriculture. To that end, the purpose of this meeting (the first of many) is to gather information and ensure all the voices that represent the business and ag interests in the County are heard. He thanked Peter Gill From The County for joining this meeting. Peter who has filled the Sr. Planning position vacated by Stacy Pratschner near the end of last year. The official County process for this will kick off next year. The hope is to be able to provide them with a good base of information from key stakeholders between now and then.

The Ag community, business community and County Planning and government need to work together over time to ensure the planning is in place to allow us to keep the ag community vital and also benefit the people of the county as much as possible. There will be many discussions and lots of compromise. For that reason, SPF has decided to host these community forums. Information from these sessions will inform all stakeholders around this important issue.

Context and Definitions

Allen explained that the focus of this meeting was on ag-NRL (Natural Resource Lands). These are the prime farmland areas as defined by the County. He also projected the following Agritourism-related definitions for consideration:

- **Rural tourism** is by no means well defined and is subject to a number of interpretations. Most commonly, rural tourism is associated with the “*country vacation*” where a tourist spends the vast proportion of their vacation period engaging in recreational activities in a rural environment, on a farm, ranch, country home, or the surrounding rural areas.
- **Agritourism** could be thought of as the crossroads of tourism and agriculture. Stated more technically, agritourism can be defined as a form of commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or processing with tourism in order to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or other agricultural business for the purposes of entertaining and/or educating the visitors and generating income for the farm, ranch, or business owner. Agritourism is often used to describe all tourism activities in rural areas, more frequently either term relates to tourism products which are “directly connected with the agrarian environment, agrarian products or agrarian stays.
- **Farm Tourism** is explicitly farm-related and most usually associated with tourism involving staying in farm accommodation and/or seeking experiences from a working farm operation.

Regardless of the exact definition or terminology, any definition of agritourism should include the following four factors:

- Combines the essential elements of the tourism and agriculture industries;
- Attracts members of the public to visit agricultural operations;
- Is designed to increase farm income; and
- Provides recreation, entertainment, and/or educational experiences to visitors.

He looks forward to hearing different views on a broad discussion of tourism activities by large and small operating farms large and activities operated by non-farmers residing in that Ag-NRL Zone. How should farm vs. non-farm operations be treated when engaged in a tourism activity.

John Roozen reminded all that we aren't the first to try to figure out how to deal with these issues. We can benefit from hard lessons learned elsewhere in the state.

Poll Questions: Results and Discussion

Note: The percentages listed behind each response are based on 14 participants who voted.

1. Which tourism-related activities should be allowed in/on the Ag-NRL zoned lands in Skagit County? (*Include all that apply.*)

- Farm stands (seasonal and/or permanent) (100%)
- Retail stores (seasonal and/or permanent) (58%)
- Farm experiences (e.g., corn mazes, hayrides, farm dinners) (92%)
- Agricultural-related education classes or learning experiences (100%)
- Non-agricultural related learning experiences (e.g., painting classes, writing, weaving, etc.) (42%)
- Weddings, concerts, or other on farm events/festival (67%)
- B&Bs / Farm Stays (e.g. Airbnb, RV camping, tent camping, etc.) (83%)
- Restaurants / Food Service (33%)
 - There was broad agreement that we don't want to allow large chain restaurants to be allowed in ag-NRL zones.
 - Ron Extract suggested there be zoning laws that allows small restaurants to operate serving food that was grown on the land, showcasing those ingredients in the dishes they serve.
 - John Anderson replied that it could be helpful to consider what percentage of the food such a restaurant would serve would qualify that restaurant to operate onsite.
 - Gary Jones notes the current code allows for the use of home-based business would prevent large restaurants from moving in. The business carried out by those residing in the dwelling can be up to three people. This code would limit the big corporate restaurants from coming in. This is a valid starting point in thinking about tourism.
- Hunting, bird watching (42%)
 - Jen Smith suggested splitting these two into separate polling questions as people engaging in these activities are very different in terms of asking up-front permission from the property owner. By a virtual show of hands, the vote was nearly evenly split between hunting and bird watching (10 vs. 9 respectively).
 - John Anderson explained that regardless of the activity, the landowner has to give permission!
- County-wide festivals/events (e.g. Family Festival of Farms, Tulip Festival, Birds of Winter, etc.) (58%)

Ron also expressed concern that this small poll represents only the views of a small group and it should not be represented to the County as the broad opinion of all stakeholders on this issue. Allen agreed and noted that SPF is looking to broaden putting together a

Tourism Advisory Council to further discuss these issues. He also reminded all nothing SPF is doing now will replace the County's process which will include public hearings. The intent is to get as many voices to the County as possible prior to that process.

Lyn assured that in sharing the notes from this initial listening forum will be shared with the County along with a list of the participants and which organizations they represent. This is just the first of many listening sessions. John emphasized that SPF wants to get a broad representation of various stakeholders in the ag and business community.

2. How should agritourism be treated?

- As an accessory use to an existing farming operation (79%)
- As a permitted use (not necessarily tied to an existing farm operation) (21%)

3. Which issues need to be addressed related to tourism activities within Ag-NRL zoned lands? (Include all that apply.)

1. Permanent conversion of farmland (100%)
2. Incompatible uses with neighboring farms (Right-to-Farm Ordinance) (93%)
3. Traffic (86%)
4. Parking (79%)
5. Sanitation (86%)
6. Noise and hours of operation (57%)
7. Signage (64%)
8. Other (43%)

There were no specific examples given of what issues might be included in "Other."

4. Should all tourism-related activities within the Ag.-NRL zoned lands require a permit?

- Yes (36%)
- No (7%)
- Maybe – depends on scale (57%)

5. For tourism activities within the Ag.-NRL zoned lands, how long should a permit be issued for?

- Permanently (in perpetuity and transfers to new owner) (13%)
- Programmatically (requires renewal after a specified period) (87%)

6. Should tourism related permits be allowed to automatically transfer to new owner/operator?

- Yes (7%)
- No (21%)
- Yes, only after a review/renewal at the time of transfer (71%)

Gary reminded all that sometimes the transfer is difficult/ not well executed, depending on the circumstance.

Allen reported that SPF has received numerous comments about code compliance and enforcement around illegal, non-conforming uses and noted that in Skagit County code enforcement is complaint driven. Some of these questions in this poll were developed to try to see if there is a tolerance for requiring permit renewals as a way for better compliance over time. SFP would like to tackle the topic of co-compliance to reduce conflict among neighbors.

7. Should tourism activities be limited to a percentage of a farm's gross sales? (Include all that apply.)

- No, not at all (45%)
- 20% (0%)
- 30% (9%)
- 40% (9%)
- 50% (18%)
- 60% (0%)
- More than 60% (18%)

Ron explained that it is unclear what counts as “tourism activities” in this context (ag vs. non-ag).

Gary suggested that on-farm sales be encouraged if selling what they grew there on the farm. This activity should not need to be regulated as it can be distinct from tourism,

Andy Schuh said we need better ways (other than sales) to monitor volume. Few would be likely to want to share their income. It may make more sense to tie this to production.

John Sternlicht agreed that defining the measure is difficult and getting it right matters. If we stick with measuring only the percentage of gross sales, we might not address what we are trying to prevent or allow. He also suggested folks consider how to handle cases where the farmer had a disastrous year in crop production and there is a greater need to make money from other resources.

Tim Knue suggested a key in that description is “products that come from your farm.”

Allen thanked everyone for these comments. This input is very helpful in sorting out what we think we want to do vs. what really makes sense. Many of these questions are those that SPF received from the ag community fairly frequently. These conversations are very helpful as SPF seeks to advocate on their behalf.

8. Should tourism activities be limited to certain areas of the Ag-NRL zone?

- No (57%)
- Yes, only land with existing structures (barns, house, etc.) (36%)
- Yes, only lands that are 1 acre and larger (0%)
- Yes, only lands that are 2 acres and larger (0%)
- Yes, only lands that are 5 acres and larger (7%)
- Yes, only lands that have access to PUD water (7%)

John Roozen reminded all that farmers have tight windows in which to perform critical tasks. This is what makes production ag viable. It makes a big difference if the tourism activities occur at the edge/border of the farmland or if they are in the middle.

Summary of Discussions

There is a need to clearly define what is a tourism activity vs. bringing folks onto the farm to make sales.

Areas of near complete agreement:

- Agritourism needs to be subordinate to the primary agricultural use
- There needs to be permitting
- Permits to be programmatic and subject to periodic review
- Permits cannot automatically transfer to new owners

Areas needing a deeper dive:

- How to limit tourism activities relative to the primary use of the farm operation?
- In what areas of the Ag-NRL zone should agritourism activities be allowed/excluded?

John Anderson thanked everyone for this initial discussion and acknowledged that Zoom meetings are not as effective as meeting in person. The questions in the poll, especially the last one are difficult to address and multiple-choice questions don't allow for perfect responses. He also reiterated these discussions are just the starting point. Allen welcomes suggestions of other organizations who should be included in these forums.

Meeting Evaluation

- Pleased that we kept to the agenda and still got out early
- It didn't feel rushed
- Technology worked well for the most part – appreciate everyone's patience with the process
- This was a great initial discussion
- Next time, participants are encouraged to identify themselves with their organizations in addition to their names
- Next time have the meeting norms include the use of the Chat function for participants who are more comfortable providing comments in written form.
- Much appreciation to SPF for convening this discussion!

Next Steps

- Sharing information gathered today with Skagit County Planning and Development Services, meeting participants, and SPF Board.
- SPF to set up and host a follow-up webinar in mid-August to share ideas about potential Ag tourism overlays for the Ag Zone.
- SPF to form an SPF Tourism Advisory Council to the SPF Board. Let Allen Rozema know if you are interested in participating.