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South Coast Strong: Agritourism a growing niche

GENEVA MILLER For The World Jul 22, 2017



Jenine Manning, co-owner of Dragonfly Farm, one of the stops on the 2017 Wild Rivers Coast Farm Trail.

Geneva Miller

2017 Wild Rivers
Coast Farm Trail



South Coast
Strong 2017

Who says a grocery run is boring? Shoppers on the Wild Rivers Coast Farm Trail get a destination experience while they stock up on fresh, local grub.

The 2017 Farm Trail is open for business, with nine stops from Bandon to Port Orford. Farm stands such as Valley Flora, u-pick, specialty food sellers and a plant nursery

include long-time businesses, such as the Jensen's century blueberry farm, as well as recent start-ups. Farmers markets in Bandon and Port Orford bookend the trail, with a wide variety of seasonal produce, meat and fish, plus baked and preserved goods. The trail fills a niche for locals and visitors hungry for homegrown products and unique experiences on the Southern Oregon Coast.

First-hand experiences on local farms are memorable, said Cathy Boden, Eat Fresh and Local action team leader. Farm trail explorers can visit one destination at a time or tour several in one day. Either way, the trail gets shoppers up close and personal with farmers and food producers.

"Farmers share who they are, what they're doing and what they're proud of," said Boden.

The official farm trail season is June through September, but many businesses are open year round. Find the farm trail list at bandon.com/farm-trail.

Farm to Table

"The farm trail gives people one more reason to stop in. It doesn't just reach the tourists but people from the area, too," said Jenine Manning, co-owner of Dragonfly Farm and Nursery.

Visitors to Dragonfly find an eye-catching retail nursery nestled in a wooded setting just off U.S. Highway 101 north of Langlois. Manning and the Dragonfly staff cultivate many of the nursery's ornamental and edible plants on site. And, she rounds out her retail selection with additional products grown in the region.

Manning got a jump on the 2017 gardening and tourism season in May. She staged her retail space, sold herb and vegetable starts at a mini farmers market hosted by Southern Coos Hospital. And, she organized an Earth Day weekend celebration with other local farmers and craftspeople. Manning said the Earth Day event drew close to 500 people, on Saturday alone, who shopped Dragonfly products as well as her guest vendors' wares.

Manning was just establishing the Dragonfly business when she attended a Rural Tourism Studio series for communities in South Coos and North Curry counties. She found inspiration in discussion of successful Oregon agritourism hubs and trails, such as the Hood River Fruit Loop. She knew it would take a few years for the farm trail to develop into a regional attraction, but she's pleased with the progress. And, she appreciates the marketing boost from farm trail promotions.

"It's great exposure for us," said Manning.

Agritourism niche

Agritourism is a growing niche that bridges culinary, heritage and outdoor experiences. Interest in Southern Oregon Coast agritourism is consistent with visitor trends reported by the state's destination marketing agency Travel Oregon.

The Rural Tourism Studio is a professional development program presented by Travel Oregon to strengthen tourism in rural regions throughout Oregon. Local steering committees work with Travel Oregon staff to organize workshops and networking sessions. Participants identify tourism opportunities and recruit action teams for ongoing product development. The Wild

Rivers Coast Farm Trail had its genesis in the 2013-14 studio series. Boden, who is the Foodshed Program Coordinator with the Curry Watersheds Partnership, signed on as an action team leader. The Eat Fresh and Local team started work on the farm trail concept and launched the first trail season in 2015.

A baseline assessment commissioned for the 2017 Southern Oregon Coast Rural Tourism Studio presented a cross-section of tourism and travel information. Forty-two percent of survey takers said they are more likely to return to destinations where they can buy local food products, according to a 2010 market study by Travel Oregon for its Oregon Bounty program. The 2017 studio steering committee noted that the region is home to hundreds of farms and has a reputation as a “delicious place to visit.”

“Tourism is about economic development, not just being a great host,” said Boden.

A visitor-friendly infrastructure includes multiple elements, from ODOT-approved destination road signs, to staff recruitment. Boden envisions each stop on the farm trail as an opening to other businesses on the trail. Visitors who tour the trail should collect a series of memorable experiences that entice them to return to the region and stay longer.

Guests who stay in commercial lodging make a significant impact on the local economy, according to the 2015 Travel Impacts report by Dean Runyan Associates for Travel Oregon. The report showed Coos County visitors staying one day less than the average tourist stay state-wide. Not surprisingly, outdoor, beach and waterfront attractions are the most popular visitor activities on the coast.

Travel data indicates potential for agriculture businesses to capture more visitor commerce, however. Visitor interest in culinary, cultural and heritage activities on the Oregon Coast increased from 2011 to 2015, according to Longwoods International reports.