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Challenges Facing Agritourism: How Are Producers Coping?

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Agricultural direct-marketing and agritourism contribute millions of dollars annually to the local food economy (Veeck, 2016). Family farms participate in agritourism in order to diversify their operations and preserve their cultural heritage, and agritourism can positively influence local economic development, farmer income, and the rural landscape and environment (Schilling, Attavanich, and Jin, 2014; Ammirato et al., 2020; Paras, Michaud, and Hoffman, 2022; Quella et al., 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns arose about the resiliency of the global food supply chain. As a result of the disruption of the supply of grocery items and travel restrictions, consumers turned toward local food and recreation. During the pandemic, visiting local agritourism businesses was considered relatively safe and appealed to families for the peaceful and idyllic atmosphere and the perceived healthiness of the local food and recreation opportunities (Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al., 2020). In general, local agritourism and direct marketing businesses and, specifically, the impact of COVID-19 on these businesses, are an underresearched area of the agriculture industry that has primarily been studied internationally (Wojcieszak-Zbierska et al., 2020; Magno and Cassia, 2021; Roman and Grudzień, 2021; Cesaro et al., 2022; Östh et al., 2023; Zawadka et al., 2022). To expand our knowledge about U.S.-based enterprises, we assessed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on agritourism and direct-marketing farms in the Northeast.

In one of the only U.S. studies focused on the agritourism-COVID-19 relationship, researchers in North Carolina found that while farmers diversified into virtual activities and anticipated positive long-term benefits from instituting online practices, their adaptations were made under uncertainty about repeatedly changing safety guidelines (Brune, Knollenberg, and Vilá, 2023). We build on this research by surveying agritourism operations in key agricultural counties in New York and Connecticut; together these states include 7,676 farms that offer direct sales or agritourism (Schmidt et al.,

2023a, 2023b). Our core research objective was to gain a better understanding of the needs and composition of agritourism businesses post-COVID-19. Agritourism can be an especially important outlet in areas facing pressure from increasing land prices, such as in the Northeast, due to its ability to allow farmers to profit and earn additional revenue from the amenity-rich rural landscapes that attract tourists (Paras, Michaud, and Hoffman, 2022). The percentage of agricultural income coming from agritourism is increasing in the Northeast (Schmidt et al., 2022); a recent study in New Hampshire found agritourism creates 11,000 jobs and contributes \$66 million in tax revenue (SMARInsights, 2021).

Our study focused on the types of operations conducting agritourism, the composition of their customers, and how COVID-19 and labor shortages affected their businesses. We found that to adjust to labor shortages, agritourism farmers made adaptations to their operations and worked more hours. While there appear to have been more positive than negative effects from COVID-19 for some operations, this was not true for all, and there was significant heterogeneity among respondents. Our results describe the experiences and struggles faced by agritourism operators in the Northeast during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, and we provide recommendations for future study.

Survey Population

The survey was implemented between October 2022 and March 2023 in 10 counties in New York and Connecticut.¹ These counties were selected because of the number of farming operations and outdoor recreational opportunities available in the area. While there is no set definition for local (Schmidt et al., 2022), for the purposes of our study we used the National Agricultural Law Center description of “any commercial enterprise that links agricultural production and/or processing with tourism in order to attract visitors onto a farm, ranch, or other business.” Given the overlap between agritourism and direct marketing, we clarified

¹ New York: Columbia, Saratoga, Washington and Greene Counties; Connecticut: Fairfield, Hartford, Litchfield, New London, Tolland, and Windham Counties.

that this included “when producers sell agricultural products directly to the end-user consumers” (National Agricultural Law Center, 2023). Direct-marketing and agritourism farms were identified through the Northeast Organic Farming Association websites for New York (<https://www.nofany.org/directory/>) and Connecticut (<https://guide.ctnofa.org/>), the Hudson Valley Bounty farm directory (<https://hudsonvalleybounty.com/businesses>), and the New York Department of Agriculture’s Farmers’ Market List (<https://agriculture.ny.gov/farmers-markets-county>). Based on available contact information, each farm either received an email with the survey link or a phone call. We sent six emails to each farm. All nonrespondents then received a follow-up phone call. Farms without an email address received two direct messages on Facebook or Instagram. Farms that only had a phone number received three phone calls, and a voicemail was left with the third call.

Results

Of the 533 agritourism operations identified in 10 study counties, we received 120 responses, for a response rate of 22.5%. The average respondent had been in business 37 years (SD ± 55; range = 1–301), with an average gross revenue of \$352,291 (SD ± 1,197,404 ; range = \$1,500 to \$10,000,000). Respondents were diverse in their operations (Table 1), though a majority reported selling agriculture products directly to consumers, primarily through farm stands. Agritourism or

direct marketing was core to the business operations for 68.6% of respondents.

Labor Shortages

Respondents suggested that agritourism operations are facing labor shortages and also demonstrating resilience resulting from necessary adjustments made during the COVID-19 pandemic. Operators reported variation in the number of hours per week spent managing or working at their operations. Approximately 30% of respondents worked less than 20 hours, and another 30% reported working 60 hours or more. More than half of respondents (54%) were not fully staffed; 28% had to reduce or change their operations because of staffing shortages in 2022. Instead, owners reported working longer hours. Of those with reduced staffing or operations, 35% did not have a plan to hire more employees. It should be noted that 38% of our respondents had no employees. Of those with employees, half of respondents had both full and part-time employees, while the remainder had either one or the other.

For the 55 respondents who sought additional labor, most sought part-time employees (76%). Other staffing strategies included offering internships (43%) or seeking full-time employees (38%), volunteers (33%), or foreign seasonal workers (17%). Respondents reported that staffing difficulties varied based on the needed skillset (Table 2), with particular difficulty finding general farm labor (67%), general or physical labor (45%), customer service and sales staff (40%), and harvesting or picking

Table 1. What Agritourism or Direct-Marketing Activities Does Your Operation Currently Engage In?

Type of Operation	<i>n</i> 120	% 100
Sell unprocessed agricultural products direct to consumer	72	60.0
Farm stand	69	57.5
Sell processed agricultural products direct to consumer	69	57.5
Sell meat direct to consumer	44	36.7
Farm walks or tours	30	25.0
Educational events	25	20.8
U-Pick	21	17.5
Beekeeping	12	10.0
Firewood	9	7.5
Animal encounters	8	6.7
Short term rentals	7	5.8
Christmas tree farm	7	5.8
Bird or wildlife observations	7	5.8
Overnight farm stays	6	5.0
Roadside stand	5	4.2
Brewery	3	2.5
Winery	3	2.5
Ice cream stand	1	0.8
Horseback riding	0	0.0
Other	21	17.5

Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply.

Table 2: What Types of Positions Are You Having the Most Trouble Hiring for Right Now?

	<i>n</i>	%
General farm labor	37	67.3
General or physical labor	25	45.5
Customer service and/or sales	22	40.0
Harvesting or picking	15	27.3
Chefs, cooks, kitchen, and/or food preparation	12	21.8
Animal or livestock handling	10	18.2
Management	8	14.6
Specific time or shift related	5	9.1
Accounting or clerical	3	5.5
Mechanics, welders, maintenance, technicians or other skilled positions	2	3.6
Line workers, production line, slaughters or meat cutters	2	3.6
Fermentation	2	3.6
Specialists	1	1.8
CDL or Equipment operator	1	1.8
Applicator	0	0.0
Veterinarians and veterinary technicians	0	0.0

Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply. Total *n* = 55 (respondents who stated an intention to hire new employees). A position was categorized as “production” if it was general physical, general farm, harvester, livestock handling or applicator. A position was categorized as “nonproduction” if it was manager, sales, accounting, chef, CDL operator, mechanic, line worker, fermentation, veterinarian, or shift related.

crews (27%). This aligns with anecdotal evidence that it is increasingly difficult to find part-time labor as younger workers are prioritizing activities such as education and other extracurricular activities over part-time work (Rosenblatt, 2021; DeSilver, 2022; Gruber, 2023). It also matches research showing that potential workers under 25 are less likely to seek summer employment (Bauer et al., 2019). The most common recruiting practices were employee referrals and networks (76%), social media (54%), and advertising on the business website (38%), which together demonstrate the importance of informal networks in agriculture. It also aligns with research suggesting that components of agritourism operations are increasingly online as a result of COVID-19 (Brune, Knollenberg, and Vilá, 2023). Only 18% of respondents intended to recruit at colleges or universities and 8% from trade schools.

There was difficulty in hiring both production and nonproduction positions regardless of the recruitment method used, and relying on multiple methods did not improve success. We found that 86% of those who used multiple methods experienced trouble hiring production positions, as did 90% of those who used only networks and referrals. Similarly, we found that 63% of operations using multiple methods had difficulty hiring nonproduction positions, compared to 50% of businesses using only networks and referrals to recruit; this difference was not statistically significant at the 5% level. During our period of interest, existing personal networks seemed to provide the most reliable method for recruiting.

COVID-19

We found that operations experienced effects of the COVID-19 pandemic differently (Table 3). The most

Table 3: Overall, How Did the COVID-19 Pandemic Affect Your Agritourism and/or Direct-Marketing Operations?

	Overall %	Exclusively Sell DTC		Do Not Exclusively Sell DTC	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Impact	100	49	100	52	100
Received more customers	57.4	28	57.1	30	57.7
Supply chain issues	44.6	22	44.9	23	44.2
Stopped some operations temporarily, but able to continue others	28.7	11	22.4	18	34.6
Allowed for new operations	26.7	11	22.4	16	30.8
Received fewer customers	21.8	9	18.4	13	25.0
Change in sociodemographics of customers	19.8	9	18.4	11	21.2
Change in where your customer base is located	11.9	5	10.2	7	13.5
Stopped some operations permanently	7.9	4	8.2	4	7.7
Stopped all operations temporarily	5.9	2	4.1	4	7.7

Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply. Total *n* = 100. A farm was categorized as exclusively selling direct to consumer if they only selected “sells unprocessed agricultural direct to consumer,” “sells processed agricultural products direct to consumer,” “sells meat direct to consumer,” “farm stand,” “roadside stand,” or “firewood.”

frequently selected COVID-19 impact was that they received more customers (57%), whereas only 22% of operators reported receiving fewer customers. However, one respondent suggested that, while there was an uptick in customers during the pandemic, demand has decreased since then. Approximately the same percentage of respondents stated that they temporarily closed an aspect of their operation (29%) and began a new operation (27%); 45% of respondents reported experiencing supply chain issues. When farms were characterized by whether they exclusively sold through direct-to-consumer channels, and/or offered typical agritourism activities, farms that exclusively sold direct to consumers were less likely to have to both stop some of their operations temporarily and begin new operations. They were also less likely to report receiving fewer customers or noticing a change in customer sociodemographics or location.

In Table 4, we compare the impact of COVID-19 across different types of operations. While most farms in our sample were diversified, with several types of operations, some general trends existed. Operations

identifying as a brewery or ice cream stand reported closures (Table 4), presumably as they would not have been allowed to operate under initial pandemic restrictions. While operations selling firewood or incorporating animals and wildlife were more likely to report a closure, the greatest percentage of closures occurred for those selling agricultural products directly to consumers and offering farm walks. Among categorized operation types, those selling food were most likely to report at least one temporary closure as well as a permanent closure. Less than half of farms that included entertainment or experiential activities reported a temporary closure, and 9% closed some operations permanently. However, because many farms incorporated both direct to consumer and entertainment options, we further created a mutually exclusive category representing farms that only sold products direct to consumer. We found that this type of operation reported the lowest level of COVID-19 interruption (24% compared to 39% for farms that offered solely entertainment or a combination of entertainment and direct to consumer).

Table 4: Operations Closing during COVID-19

Type of Operation	n	Temporary Closure	Permanent Closure
		%	%
Sell unprocessed agricultural products direct to consumer	62	35.48	6.45
Farm stand	59	37.29	6.78
Sell processed agricultural products direct to consumer	58	27.59	10.34
Sell meat direct to consumer	36	25	8.33
Farm walks	23	47.83	8.7
Educational events	22	36.36	4.55
U-Pick	19	31.58	15.79
Animal encounters	7	57.14	14.29
Bees	6	50	-
Christmas tree farm	6	33.33	16.67
Bird or wildlife observations	5	60	40
Firewood	5	60	60
Short term rentals	5	40	20
Farm stay	5	40	20
Roadside stand	5	20	20
Brewery	3	100	-
Winery	3	66.67	33.33
Ice cream stand	1	100	-
Horseback riding	-	-	-
Other	17	29.41	5.88
<i>Categories of Operations</i>			
Entertainment or experiential activities	48	39.58%	8.33%
Winery, brewery or ice cream stand	6	83.33%	16.67%
Farm stays or short term rentals	7	42.86%	14.29%
Sells direct to consumer	94	31.91%	8.51%
Only sells direct to consumer	49	22.45%	8.16%
Does not sell direct to consumer	7	28.57%	-

Note: n = 101 respondents provided information on both their operation type and COVID-19 impacts. We did not define temporary or permanent in the survey, instead allowing respondents to select “stopped some operations temporarily” or “stopped some operations permanently” in response to the question “Overall, how did the COVID pandemic affect your agritourism and/or direct-marketing operations?” A farm was categorized as offering “Entertainment or experiential activities” if it included U-Pick, animal encounters, farm walks, birdwatching, education, or Christmas trees. A farm was categorized as “sells direct to consumer” if it selected sells unprocessed agricultural direct to consumer, sells processed agricultural products direct to consumer, sells meat direct to consumer, farm stand, roadside stand or firewood. A farm was categorized as only selling direct to consumer if it did not also offer entertainment, food, or farm stays.

Table 5: Which of These Adaptations Will You Maintain Going Forward?		
How Did You Adapt to COVID	<i>n</i> 103	% 100
Moved to an online format	32	31.1
Began offering delivery	17	16.5
Began offering takeout	14	13.6
Added outdoor seating	12	11.7
Other	33	32.0
No changes	33	32.0

Note: Respondents were able to select all that apply.

We found that 68% of operations had at least one positive impact (more customers or new operations), while only 44% noted a negative impact (fewer customers or halting operations in some way). Operations with gross revenues greater than \$100,000 were more likely to report a positive COVID-19 impact (83%) compared to those with revenue of \$100,000 or less (60%). In terms of operation type, U-Pick farmers (e.g., which allow customers to self-harvest from orchards or fields) were more likely to report a positive impact, while apiaries, breweries, and wineries had negative experiences. However, there were no additional differences related to agribusiness type or age of the operation. In sum, our respondents indicated that COVID-19 had a more positive than negative impact on agritourism operations, and there were few definitive business characteristics that explained differences in COVID-19 experiences.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents reported making at least one change to their business in response to COVID-19. The most-mentioned adaptation was to move to an online format (31%; Table 5); 69% of those businesses stated they would continue with this change. COVID-19-induced technological change seems to be viewed positively by a majority of adopters. The next most common adaptations were to begin offering delivery (17%) or takeout (14%). From our data, the number of adaptations did not appear to vary based on operation age or size. However, there did appear to be differences based on type of operation. Those who sold some type of processed agricultural product were more likely to make an adaptation (74%) relative to those who did not (53%). Thus, our data suggested that in-house processing of goods forced additional adaptations that might require additional labor or the use of a separate facility (e.g., commercial kitchens).

Agritourism and Local

Most agritourism operators were local residents, with 89% of farmers stating that they lived full-time in the town where their business is located. This seemed true for their customer base, with 77% of respondents believing that the majority of their customers were local residents (15% indicated that the majority of their

customers were tourists). Half of respondents stated their customers changed seasonally, primarily observed as more total customers in the summer and more locals in the winter.²

Operation types differed in whether customers were believed to be primarily locals or tourists (Table 6). Relatively speaking, a greater proportion of operations with non-local customers included animal encounters, short-term rentals or farm stays, firewood, wildlife observations, or a roadside stand. Breweries and wineries also were more likely to note that their customers were primarily tourists.

Overall, 12% of all respondents believed their customer base changed as a result of COVID-19 (Table 7); however, that response differed between those who perceived tourists as their primary customer base (24%) versus locals (7%). Of those who observed a change in their customer base from primarily tourists to locals, all but one respondent noted an increase in the number of customers, suggesting that businesses might be attracting a new type of customer.

Businesses whose customer bases were mainly tourists noted a change in their customers and having to “stop some operations permanently but continue others” (41.2%) or “stop some operations permanently” (23.5%). This was more prevalent than in businesses with a local customer base (23.7% and 5.3%, respectively). Tourist-oriented businesses that were apiaries, Christmas tree farms, and wineries were among those that noted a reduction in the number of customers. However, a greater percentage of businesses with primarily tourist customers also began new operations (35%), compared to businesses with local customers (22%). These results suggested that COVID-19 may have created more of a disruption to operations that primarily catered toward tourists than locals. Additionally, 24% of businesses with a primarily tourist customer base noted a change in the sociodemographics of their customers, yet this was the case for only 16% of businesses whose customer base was primarily locals, potentially mirroring a shift in who had direct access to those businesses.

² Based on open-ended responses to the question “How does the origin of your customers change seasonally?”

Table 6: Operations With a Primarily Local or Tourist Customer Base

Type of Operation	n	Local Customers	Tourists
		%	%
Sell unprocessed agricultural products direct to consumer	63	85.7	14.3
Farm stand	58	84.5	15.5
Sell processed agricultural products direct to consumer	57	82.5	17.5
Sell meat direct to consumer	38	79.0	21.1
Farm walks or tours	25	88.0	12.0
Educational events	21	85.7	14.3
U-Pick	19	84.2	15.8
Bird or wildlife observations	7	71.4	28.6
Bees	7	85.7	14.3
Animal encounters	6	50.0	50.0
Firewood	6	66.7	33.3
Short term rentals	5	60.0	40.0
Christmas tree farm	5	80.0	20.0
Overnight farm stays	5	60.0	40.0
Roadside stand	4	75.0	25.0
Brewery	3	33.3	66.7
Winery	3	33.3	66.7
Ice cream stand	0	-	-
Horseback riding	0	-	-
Other	20	80.0	20.0

Note: n = 103 respondents provided information on both their operation type and whether their customers were primarily tourists or locals. Of those, 86 had a local customer base and 17 had a tourist customer base. We did not provide a definition for “local” or “tourist”; respondents self-interpreted these terms for their response.

Conclusion

We used survey responses from 120 farms in New York and Connecticut to assess the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on agritourism operations. While respondents overall tended to experience more positive than negative impacts from COVID-19, results differed by operation. Beyond the scope of our data, there likely are elements that influenced success, as agritourism requires owners to employ a wide array of competencies including business acumen, socio-emotional skills, and hospitality (Schmidt et al., 2022). Additionally, the small sample size likely affected our ability to identify strong patterns across operations. Most farms made at least one

adaptation due to COVID-19, and while farm size (in terms of gross revenue) did not seem to influence whether a farm implemented adaptations, it did influence whether they noted positive or negative outcomes from COVID-19. However, operations that exclusively participated in direct-to-consumer sales appeared to have fewer disruptions as they were less likely to both close or open new operations.

Operations also differed in whether they primarily catered toward tourists or local residents. Both types of farms saw similar changes in customer numbers and demographics, but businesses that catered toward tourists more often reported closing at least one part of

Table 7. Variation in COVID-19 Impacts

	Overall	Percentage (%)	
		Primarily Local Customers	Primarily Tourists
Received more customers	57.4	61.8	52.9
Supply chain issues	44.6	42.1	52.9
Stopped some operations temporarily, but able to continue others	28.7	23.7	41.2
Allowed for new operation	26.7	25.	35.3
Received fewer customers	21.8	19.7	29.4
Change in sociodemographics of customers	19.8	18.4	29.4
Change in where your customer base is located	11.9	7.9	23.5
Stopped some operations permanently	7.9	5.3	23.5
Stopped all operations temporarily	5.9	6.6	5.9

Note: n = 101 respondents provided information about COVID-19 impacts, 76 of whom primarily catered toward locals and 17 of whom had a tourist customer base. The remaining eight respondents were unsure whether the majority of their customers were local or tourists.

their operation. Operations also reported staffing shortages, leading to owners either working more hours, reducing operations, or both. Most farms relied on informal local-based networks when recruiting new employees; using additional practices did not appear to influence their likelihood of finding labor.

There has been concern that consumer interest in local food during the pandemic was situational rather than permanent; although our results suggest a shift toward local did occur, its permanence is an open research question. Given the role agritourism can play in rural economic development, work could be done to study and improve the support services available for these operations. Growing interest in developing agritourism Extension programming is illustrated by several Northeastern states having established active Agritourism Extension programs, providing a roadmap for improving outreach in this area (Schmidt et al., 2022).

Most states have local food consumption branding such as CTGrown or New York State Grown and Certified, and organizations such as chambers of commerce and Departments of Agriculture could collaborate to develop similar campaigns for agritourism. Additionally, while a lack of available farm labor was highlighted as a constraint, a minority of respondents were actively recruiting at colleges or trade schools. This suggests a potential missed opportunity, especially given stated interest in offering internships, and is an area that could warrant further study. An important finding of our study is that the technology-forcing nature of the pandemic may have permanent impacts on agritourism business operations, which warrants further study, especially given the new customer exposure noted by respondents.

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