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California counties adapt permitting and regulations for agritourism

by Penny Leff

California's 58 counties bear the primary responsibility for permitting and regulating agritourism operations on agricultural land within their boundaries. The counties often struggle with creating allowances and ease of permitting for agritourism businesses while ensuring that agritourism is a supplemental (rather than primary) activity on a commercial farm or ranch. Regulations also must ensure that agricultural production and local residents are not adversely affected by tourism. Some counties have recently changed their general plans, zoning ordinances and staffing assignments to encourage agritourism and have created guides to agritourism permitting.

The Lake County general plan includes Goal AR-3, "To provide opportunities for agritourism that are beneficial to the county and its agricultural industry and are compatible with the long-term viability of agriculture." The countywide general plan in Calaveras

County (Foothill and Mountain region) specifically allows, by right, on-site sales and tasting, and directs that the definition of agricultural operations allowed should be broadly construed. Solano County (Central Valley region) has designated new zoning that encourages agritourism in Suisun Valley, one of 10 county regions defined in its general plan.

Mariposa, Placer and El Dorado counties (Foothill and Mountain region) have involved farmers and ranchers on advisory committees that created ordinances to streamline permitting for agritourism operations while limiting the extent of allowed activities in proportion to the size of the primary agricultural operation.

Potential agritourism operators often complain about the lack of coordinated information from different county regulatory departments. To address this problem, Marin County (North Coast region) contracts with UC Cooperative



Regulators must strike a balance between promoting agritourism and ensuring that local residents are not adversely affected by traffic and other impacts. Above, a toddler visits Dave's Pumpkin Patch in West Sacramento.

Extension (UCCE) for an "agricultural ombudsman" to assist applicants with agriculture-related permitting. Marin County UCCE and Placer County staff created plain-language guides for farm-stay operations. Yolo County has created an Agricultural Permit Manual that describes all the permits that may be needed for various types of agritourism operations. More coordination among county departments and between counties would ease the regulatory burden on agritourism operators.

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