

Agritourism Could Be Boon To Rural Indiana Communities

U-pick farms, scenic byway tours and wineries could be the next big cash crop for small towns in Indiana.

To combat rural population decreases, local leaders should consider the potential economic impact and job creation of agritourism, according to an Indiana State University professor and recent ISU honors graduate.

"Well-developed agritourism systems in rural areas have the potential to reverse negative economic trends by bringing in visitors and creating new jobs and local business ventures for rural residents," Nathan Schaumleffel, assistant professor of recreation and sport management, and ISU graduate Melissa Ramsey wrote in an article in the fall 2006 issue of *Indiana Business Review*.

Schaumleffel and Ramsey co-authored the article, "Agritourism and Rural Economic Development," to help local leaders develop agritourism opportunities in Indiana, and introduce them to the Indiana Rural Recreation Development Project, recently established by Schaumleffel.

According to the 2000 census, 29.2 percent of Indiana's population lived in rural areas, which is a 5.9 percent decrease since 1990, Schaumleffel says. Indiana's metropolitan areas have increased in population, while Indiana's rural areas have not kept pace.

Agritourism has been described as a hybrid concept, that merges elements of two complex industries * agriculture and travel/tourism * to open up new profitable markets for farm prod-

ucts and services, and provide regional travel experiences.

Examples of this concept are agriculture festivals, roadside markets, camping and hiking destinations, and the Indiana Uplands Wine Trail.

The trail, which stretches about 110 miles from Monroe County all the way south to the Ohio River, is a good example of regionalization, the article says. Launched in mid-2004, it consists of seven Indiana wineries, which tourists can travel between, staying in bed and breakfasts, eating at local restaurants, and shopping along the way.

"Facilitating agritourism development throughout Indiana could potentially create jobs," Schaumleffel and Ramsey say. "It is plausible that if more jobs are

created in rural communities then more families will remain in rural Indiana."

According to the article, Lt. Governor Becky Skillman stated that, "with 75 percent of Indiana counties designated as 'rural,' we must cater to the needs of these communities and offer any assistance possible to successful and sustainable rural Indiana communities."

Only 51 Convention and Visitors Bureaus exist within Indiana's 92 counties, potentially leaving 41 rural counties with no central agritourism development agency.

In these cases, Schaumleffel says, local leaders should look to municipal and county park boards to develop local tourism by initiating partnerships with other local, regional and state agencies.