

Expanding the Blue Ribbon Passport Program
Presentation of Karl King, Regional Tourism Program Manager for
The Alleghenies
before the
Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
April 13, 2007

Background:

In 2005, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture established the Blue Ribbon Passport program under its Agritourism Initiative. The program, marketed through the Department of Community and Economic Development's Office of Tourism and VisitPA.com, promotes four components of agritourism

- County fairs
- Farmers markets
- Farm stays
- Wineries

While the program is promoted in the Department of Agriculture's supporting brochure as a "gateway to our state's rich bounty and rich agricultural heritage," the Blue Ribbon Passport program is currently limited to just three regions of the state.

The first region, along the I-79 South corridor, comprises Lawrence, Butler, Beaver, Allegheny, Washington and Greene Counties. Region 2, along the I-79 North corridor includes Erie, Crawford and Mercer Counties. The third region follows the Interstate 78 corridor through Northampton, Lehigh, Berks, Schuylkill and Lebanon Counties.



- 1 INTERSTATE 79 (SOUTH)
- 2 INTERSTATE 79 (NORTH)
- 3 INTERSTATE 78

Limitations:

While the Blue Ribbon Passport Program is a commendable start, it is obvious that a large section of the agricultural heart of Pennsylvania – including *The Alleghenies* – isn't incorporated in the program's marketing. In order to maximize the impact of the state's efforts, we would endorse the recommendation of the Center for Rural Pennsylvania's 2004 study of Agritourism in Pennsylvania, <http://www.ruralpa.org/agritourism2006.pdf>, which called for "a more comprehensive effort...to market the state's agritourism and rural tourism opportunities."

Study Findings:

The study defined agritourism as *"an enterprise at a working farm, ranch or agricultural plant conducted for the enjoyment of visitors that generates income for the owner. Agricultural tourism refers to the act of visiting a working farm or any horticultural or agricultural operation for the purpose of enjoyment, education, or active involvement in the activities of the farm or operation that also adds to the economic viability of the site."*

It determined that agritourism may provide a means for operators to expand existing operations, diversify or supplement income or acquire new skills. It also suggested that agritourism may be a vehicle to support land preservation, local revitalization and job creation. The study found that agritourism operators need practical assistance with customer relations, staff hiring and training, business planning, risk management and marketing.

An example of the need for marketing assistance was reflected in survey results that indicated agritourism operators relied mostly on word-of-mouth, repeat business and newspaper advertising in their marketing efforts while agritourists relied on the Internet, visitors centers and brochures for information about agritourism facilities.

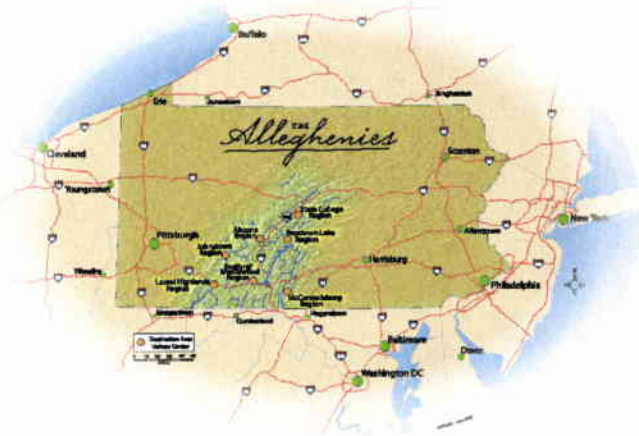
That discrepancy underscores the need to bring state resources to bear in developing a comprehensive agritourism marketing effort.

The Alleghenies Role

The Alleghenies concurs with the recommendation for a comprehensive agritourism marketing effort and believes the region is suitable for inclusion in

an expanded Blue Ribbon Passport program. The infrastructure to support that inclusion already exists along the I-99/US 220 corridor, passing through the heart of the seven-county region.

The Alleghenies includes Bedford, Blair, Cambria, Centre, Fulton, Huntingdon and Somerset Counties. Blair and Centre Counties each have more than 25 Agriculture Department recognized agritourism providers.



The Department identifies 16 fairs and farm shows taking place within *The Alleghenies*, compared with 10 in the Passport program's Region One, 12 in Region Two and 11 in Region Three. Similarly, *The Alleghenies* encompasses 4 farm stay operators. There are three in Region One of the Passport program, none in Region Two and just one in Region 3. There are three wineries in *The Alleghenies*, comparable to the 2 vintners in the Passport program's Region One, 4 in Region Two and 3 in Region Three. Additionally, *The Alleghenies* boasts 15 farm markets identified by the Agriculture Department, more than all three of the existing Blue Ribbon Passport regions combined.

Agritourism's Impact

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania's study determined the direct agritourism expenditure averaged \$120 per visitor day. Based on its determination that agritourism operators host approximately 7,445 visitors annually, that amounts to nearly \$900,000 in direct sales within the agriculture sector. Visitation patterns also show agritourism's peak season occurs in August, September and October, providing the opportunity to extend the state's traditional tourism season. Based on its analysis of the agritourism market, the Center's study concludes that there is "vast potential for market expansion" in Pennsylvania.

Blue Ribbon Passport Program Expansion

The most immediate opportunity to take advantage of that potential is to expand the Blue Ribbon Passport program; *The Alleghenies* would appear to be

an ideal candidate for that expansion. However, the Department of Agriculture currently has no plans to increase the program beyond its existing three regions. Individual agritourism operators are free to work together to develop a program similar to the Blue Ribbon Passport, but lacking the resources of the Departments of Agriculture and Community and Economic Development, the full potential of such a program is not likely to be realized.

We ask that the Committee recognize the benefits of broadening the Blue Ribbon Passport program to *The Alleghenies* and other important agricultural regions of the Commonwealth as part of the comprehensive agritourism effort recommended by the Center for Rural Pennsylvania.