

AGRI-TAINMENT: COMBINING AGRICULTURE AND ENTERTAINMENT ALONG THE GRAND STRAND

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview of the benefits sought by consumers from Agri-tainment venues and the challenges of establishing such venues. The paper begins by defining Agri-tainment, and providing examples of established Agri-tainment venues across the United States and within the Grand Strand area of South Carolina. It then provides a series of Supporting Statements regarding likely benefits and Cautionary Statements associated with Agri-tainment, and concludes with potential resources for expanding the offering of Agri-tainment venues along the Grand Strand.

INTRODUCTION

A reader to Yahoo Travel finds the following description of Myrtle Beach:

“Myrtle Beach’s history is a story of persisting, starting over and reinventing. Due to the ecological make-up and relative remoteness from early settlements in Charleston and inland, it took a while for its founders to realize that the ocean, frequent blue skies, beautiful flowers and shrubs and unusual birds would attract visitors (Yahoo Travel).”

The growing residential and commercial development in the area, as well as the arrival of new residents from all over the United States and beyond, have the potential to mask the important history and “reinvention” of the region as referenced above. This is particularly true of the agricultural roots of the region. Early settlers took advantage of the region’s many rivers and marshes to cultivate rice, indigo, and other crops on area plantations in the early 1700s. The early 1800s brought the arrival of sawmills and the production of pine timber, tar, and turpentine products. It wasn’t until the early 1900s that region transitioned to a vacation destination (see Yahoo Travel, City of Myrtle Beach, and myrtlebeachinfo.com for historical information about the Grand Strand). The dawning of the twenty-first century sees a burgeoning resident population, growing second-home ownership, and new attractions proposed and/or currently under construction (such as the Hard Rock Café Amusement Park in the Fantasy Harbor area).

The South Carolina Competitive Institute, funded by South Carolina Business leaders, commissioned Harvard’s Michael Porter and his Monitor Group to assess the state’s competitiveness (Flowers and Easterling 2006). The Monitor Group recommended South Carolina focus its industrial development around four key clusters: Automotive, Chemical Products, Textiles, and Tourism (Porter 2003). The Coastal region (from Little River in the

north to Hilton Head Island in the south) has historically represented a clustering of a tourism economy in South Carolina. The Monitor Group encourages a broader development of the tourism potential of the entire Palmetto state.

It is interesting to note that approximately 30 farmers and agriculture-related organizations located along the South Carolina Heritage Corridor (a 14 county region stretching from the Lowcountry to the Upstate) have banded together to encourage participation in agriculture-related events, including seasonal harvest festivals. Officials describe this effort as “the first successful niche trail along the Historical Corridor that not only has a positive economic impact but also provides fun and educational family experiences” (see www.sc-heritagecorridor.org).

Increasingly, more and more farmers are embracing “Agricultural Tourism” or “Agri-tainment” as a means to supplement conventional farming income. Traditional attractions such hayrides, pumpkin patches, and pick-your-own fruits and vegetables have been augmented with batting cages, bakeries, restaurants, miniature golf, home-made ice cream, and other offerings (Hamilton 2005). Given the agricultural heritage of the region, the following guiding questions are advanced:

- **Could the agricultural roots of the Grand Strand be used to develop Agri-tainment tourism attractions?**
- **Would such Agri-tainment tourism attractions compliment the existing portfolio of tourist attractions along the Grand Strand?**

The purpose of this manuscript is to evaluate the growing use (and popularity of) Agri-tainment as a means for Grand Strand farmers to diversify risk, reach new groups of consumers, educate fellow citizens, even preserve a way-of-life. This evaluation is offered to (hopefully) stimulate a dialogue regarding the possibility of: (a) the development of new Agri-tainment venues along the Grand Strand, and (b) the development of an integrated marketing effort for existing Agri-tainment venues in the area. A series of *Supporting Statements* is advanced to frame this discussion. Further, a series of *Cautionary Statements* is offered to illustrate matters deserving further exploration.

AN OVERVIEW OF AGRITAINMENT

A variety of terms have been used to describe the desire of farmers to expand their farm operations beyond their core function: growing or cultivating tangible goods to be sold in the marketplace. The term “agricultural tourism” (or, agri-tourism) is often used to describe early efforts by farmers to develop such items as pick-your-own fruits and vegetables, petting zoos, and hay rides. Agri-tainment (i.e., Agricultural Entertainment) represents an extension of these efforts to include new offerings such as children’s play areas, children’s discovery farms, and destination mazes (see Barbieri 2004; Hamilton 2005). In some instances, these new offerings represent the majority of farm income, possibly 100% of total. Wineries are no longer simply wine producing facilities, but destinations themselves (Blevins 2003). Alcalá (2000) notes farmers are increasingly seeking a “less tangible harvest of smiles and memories.”

Globally competitive agricultural markets, as well as growing farm efficiency, encroaching development, and seasonal droughts, have motivated farmers to seek new methods to raise revenue to sustain their operations. In fact, farm extensions may allow farmers simply to stay on their land and to preserve a way of life (Blevins 2003). New Agri-tainment offerings added by entrepreneurial farmers seeking to make up for lost farming revenue include (but are not limited to):

- Mazes
- Cooking Classes
- Greenhouses
- Picnicking Tents
- Controlled Burn Assistance
- Cattle Roping
- Carnival Rides
- Farm-Themed Children’s Play Areas
- Stocked-Pond Fishing
- Horse Riding
- Haunted Forests

Other offerings will likely be developed by entrepreneurial farmers in the future. A list of example Agri-tainment venues is provided in **Table One**. The reader should note all venues have a web page to assist in their marketing effort. At present, there are some Agri-tainment options along (or near) the Grand Strand. These venues are profiled in **Table Two**. Could more be done? The publication of this manuscript may stimulate further discussions regarding this matter.

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| Supporting Statement #1 | A clustering of Agri-tainment venues could be successfully developed along the Grand Strand to compliment the existing portfolio of tourist attractions. |
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| Supporting Statement #2 | Existing Agri-tainment venues along the Grand Strand could benefit from a coordinated marketing effort. |
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Table One
Examples of Agri-tainment Venues Across the United States

| Name | Location | Description | Miscellaneous |
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| Johnson's Corner Farm johnsonsfarm.com | Medford, NJ | Farm store, bakery, country kitchen, ice cream, greenhouses, petting zoo, picnic tents, and hayrides. | Farm is located in the suburbs of a major metropolitan area (Philadelphia, PA). |
| Weaver's Orchards weaversorchard.com | Robeson Township, PA | Pick-your-own orchards, corn maze, crafts, entertainment, farm animals, hay tunnel, and others. | Geographic area offers a cluster of Agri-tainment Options. |
| Paul Bunyun Land: The Old Farm thisoldfarm.net | Brainerd, MN | "stand alone" town of farm equipment and collectables, general store, sweet shop, old-west saloon, 35 buildings in all. | 35-acre facility open for more than 25 years. |
| Huber's Orchard and Winery huberwinery.com | Starlight, IN | Petting zoo, farm equipment, fishing ponds, winery, brandy distillery, ice cream shop, cheese shop, and others. | Assisted in the development of the Indiana Uplands Wine Trail to collectively promote regional wineries |
| Brown's Berry Patch brownsberrypatch.com | Waterport, NY | Pick-your-own berries, ice cream, BarnYard Adventures (children's play area), and others. | 50% of income from Agri-tainment; popular for birthday parties; hosts a classic car cruise in weekly during summer |
| Davis Farmland davisfarmland.com | Sterling, MA | Farm animals, play area, corn maze, water spray park, sleepovers, and others. | Largest private sanctuary of endangered livestock in North America |

Source: Original.

Table Two
Existing Agri-tainment Venues in and Around the Grand Strand

| Name | Location | Description | Miscellaneous |
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| Bee City Beecity.net | Cottageville, SC | Operating bee farm producing honey and related products. Also provide a petting zoo. | Observation hives (behind glass) allow an up-close look at bees producing honey. |
| Boone Hall Plantation Boonehallplantation.com | Mount Pleasant, SC | Farmers market and u-pick fruits and vegetables. | One of the oldest working plantations (320+years) along the coast. |
| Freewoods Farm Video.sc.edu:16080/freewoods/index.html | Burgess, SC (between Socastee and Murrells Inlet) | Living museum replicating rural life for black farmers in the last 1800s. | Homestyle molasses sold at the farm market. Customers often volunteer on the farm. |
| Country Farm Museum www.countryfarmmuseum.com | Green Sea, SC | Glimpse of early farm life in SC and tractor collection | Tractor collection |
| Hickory Hills Farm hickoryhillsfarm.com | Conway, SC | Working agricultural and aqua-cultural farm. | Offers u-pick blueberries and u-catch catfish. |
| Indigo Farms www.ncagr.com/markets/gginc/store/ShowSite.asp?ID=1909 | Calabash, NC | Farm tours, barnyard, horse rides, hayrides, special events. | Popular field trip for schools and scouting groups. |
| La Belle Amie Vineyard Labelleamie.com | North Myrtle Beach, SC | Operating vineyard with a variety of events to draw visitors to the winery. | Hosts Saturday events every two weeks (in season) combining food, wine, and entertainment. |
| Rice Museum Ricemuseum.org | Georgetown, SC | Museum celebrating the importance of the rice crop to development of the region. | During the mid 1800s, the Georgetown area produced ½ of u.s. rice crop. |
| Silver Coast Winery Silvercoastwinery.com | Ocean Isle Beach, NC | Operating vineyard with monthly events to draw visitors to the winery. | The winery also owns a winery in New York. |

Source: Original.

Just how large is the Agricultural Tourism segment? Over 62 million people visited U.S. farms in 2001 (the last year such a figure was available) and that figure has increased steadily over time (Hamilton 2005). Revenues for nature and agricultural tourism increased 30% per year from 1997-2004 (Davis 2004). Annual revenues from Agri-tourism range from \$20 million in Vermont (up 86% between 2000-2002 (Perlman 2005)) to \$200 million in New York (a state with a large number of wineries clustered around its Finger Lakes region). Agri-tourism revenues in Hawaii rose 30% for the period 2000-2003 (Hamilton 2005). Following the terrorism attacks of September 11, 2001, rural destinations in driving distance for families have increased in popularity. Agri-tainment venues have benefited from this shift in travel patterns (Davis 2004). One half of North Carolina farmers surveyed reported an increase in farm visitations the past year (Perlman 2005).

DIVERSITY OF TARGET MARKETS SERVED

Agri-tainment venues have long been fieldtrip options for schools, churches and scouting groups (Burns 2002). Children receive exposure to a venue and share that experience at home. Parents may then leverage that child’s exposure to a venue into a family outing knowing the experience will be pleasing to the child (as they recommended it themselves at home). Still other target markets are (or, can be) served by Agri-tainment venues.

The creation of regional “wine trails” allows the targeting of adults (who often travel with their children) (Davis 2004). Corn mazes can be an effective venue for corporate training and team building exercises (Oleck and McNatt 1998). (The reader should note the presence of a wooden maze (Maze Mania in Garden City, SC, www.mazemaniasc.com) for such use.) Hawaiian Agri-tainment options (such as Macadamia nut growers, coffee processors, pineapple plantations) are particularly appealing to conference attendees who can explore the islands during their free time (Wentzel 2002). Outdoorsman may simply request permission to hunt, fish, or trap on a farmer’s land.

UNDERLYING CONSUMER INTEREST IN AGRITAINMENT

Urban Escape

City-dwellers have long been interested in escaping the city in favor of more remote destinations. This would suggest the rural destination to be of value in and of itself. Though often thought of as rural tourism options, Agri-tainment attractions do just as well in urban areas, thus lessening the commute for urban dwellers to get “down on the farm” (Barbieri 2004). And, urban consumers are often more willing to pay higher prices for Agri-tainment attractions (Burns 2002).

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| Supporting Statement #3 | Families (resident and guest alike) may welcome the addition of other family-friendly entertainment options along the Grand Strand. |
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Connecting to the Past

The efficiency of modern farming lessens the need for farm employees to produce the nation's food supply. This has led to a detachment from the farming lifestyle (Saunders 1998). The desire to explore the nation's agricultural roots contributes greatly to the growing popularity of Agri-tainment. Many parents use Agri-tainment to teach children about farming's link to the food supply, debunking the view that food or milk simply come from a carton (Perlman 2005). Noted one u-pick farmer, "...you're not selling fresh produce, you're selling a farm experience, you're selling nostalgia" (Alcala 2000).

It is suggested here the detachment of a significant number of the population from farming is akin to the parallel separation from the manufacturing process that has contributed to the growth in "Consumer Experience Tourism" or "Industrial Tourism" (i.e., company plant tours, company visitor centers, company museums) (see Mitchell and Orwig 2002). The shift to a service economy takes individuals out of the factories. This removes people spatially and culturally from the manufacturing sector ... providing less contact and little first-hand knowledge of industrial work. The plant tour creates a novel and nostalgic view of industrial work, which in turn feeds tourist interest in manufacturing processes (see Harris 1989; Prentice 1993). The parallel: people left the farms and seek to satisfy their curiosity of the farm life experience.

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| Supporting Statement #4 | Many visitors to the Grand Strand come from more urban areas. They may be interested in connecting with an agricultural past, a lifestyle unfamiliar to them. |
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Richards (1996) notes the industrial revolution created an era where the transition from modern to obsolete occurs more rapidly. As such, products of older technology (with planting and harvesting often taken for granted as "old technology") are considered cultural and historical artifacts creating feelings of nostalgia among society. Many Baby Boomers have not lived on the farm. Again, the farm can satisfy the desire for nostalgia.

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| Supporting Statement #5 | Many visitors to the Grand Strand come from more urban areas. They may be receptive to the 'escape' and 'nostalgia' possibilities of Agri-tainment. |
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| Supporting Statement #6 | Many visitors to the Grand Strand come from more urban areas. They may be receptive to the entertainment options which explore the agricultural roots of the region. |
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Older citizens may relish the experience of "returning to their roots." Rudd and Davis (1998) identify the industrial revolution as a defining event in American history as the economy shifted its relative emphasis from agriculture and small-scale production to large-scale production. As a result, fewer people were engaged in farming. Many Baby Boomers, for example, never lived in

a rural setting (unlike their parents). Agri-tainment often provides a vicarious experience of the rural life (Alcala 2000).

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| Supporting Statement #7 | Older visitors (Baby Boomers and older) may wish to re-connect with their agricultural roots. |
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| Supporting Statement #8 | Older visitors (Baby Boomers and older) may wish to share their agricultural roots with children and grandchildren (who often visit the region). |
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Involvement with the Product Category

Brand managers seek to address consumer needs at three levels: functional (providing solutions to consumer problems); symbolic (providing satisfaction of psychological desires); and experiential (providing sensory pleasure, variety, and cognitive stimulation) (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986). Agri-tainment can strengthen the bond between consumers and selected farm products (i.e., wines, cheeses, etc) by providing a visual presentation of the brand, its operation, production process, history, and historical significance. Such a bond may be viewed as an increased level of personal involvement with the brand and (assumedly) translates into greater brand loyalty.

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| Supporting Statement #9 | Visitors to Agri-tainment venues (such as wineries, country stores, or plant tours) may become more brand loyal and/or more frequent users of both the brand and category. |
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Extension of the Consumer's Self Concept

Participation in Agri-tainment activities may be a way for consumers to extend their own concept of themselves. Belk (1988) noted that preference for a handcrafted work over something that is mass produced may be related to our own desire to both extend our self by possessing the item (e.g., be able to show others that we have authentic lambswool sweater made on a farm, or make jam from strawberries picked at a u-pick-it facility), and to take on and retain part of the extended self of valued others. In other words, those who are drawn to Agri-tainment activities may be not only trying to better understand and embrace the lifestyle, history, and processes of the respective Agri-tainment venue, but also trying to be able to represent that awareness as an enhancement to their own self concept. The pride with which such consumers discuss the original artifacts and products that they obtain from such interaction speaks to that interest and value (Pratt and Rafaeli, 2001).

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| Supporting Statement #10 | Visitors to Agri-tainment venues may seek to expand their own self concept through understanding the experience of those who live in these communities and to appreciate the unique value of products and services of such venues |
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OPERATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR AGRI-TAINMENT PROVIDERS

Many farmers never imagined they would be part of the entertainment industry with their family farm much like a theater venue. Crops such as corn and pumpkins are often simply theater props used to provide entertainment for guests as a haunted corn maze or you-pick-it pumpkin patch (Blevins 2003). Tourism introduces some new challenges to farmers. Now, new issues such as public facilities (i.e., rest rooms), insurance, marketing, and others must now be addressed (Davis 2004).

Weather

Historically, farmers have had to monitor the weather for its influence on crops. For sure, a single hailstorm can effectively destroy a pumpkin patch (Blevins 2003). But, if that pumpkin patch is a key attraction, the farmers loses the ability to host subsequent guests that season. The weather’s impact on visitor traffic must also be considered. A rainy weekend may keep visitors away from a corn maze or pumpkin patch. Most attractions do not offer significant inside attractions and thus cannot replace the lost demand from inclement weather. And, walking and parking areas can become muddied and discourage visitors as well.

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| Cautionary Statement #1 | The summer heat may limit attendance at outdoor venues when compared to the cooling potential of a day at the beach. This may limit year-round appeal of such attractions along the Grand Strand. |
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| Cautionary Statement #2 | Rainy periods may limit attendance at outdoor venues. This may limit year-round appeal of such attractions along the Grand Strand. |
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| Cautionary Statement #3 | Cool winter weather may limit attendance at outdoor venues. This may limit year-round appeal of such attractions along the Grand Strand. |
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Guest Comfort

Much like many manufacturing facilities were not built to accommodate large numbers of visitors, the typical family farm was not originally designed with weekday or weekend visitors in mind. For instance, shaded areas must be provided for guests. Restrooms must be available. Parking must be accessible and close. Such considerations do not arise when simply cultivating crops for sale.

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| Cautionary Statement #4 | The need to create guest comfort facilities may limit operator interest in expanding into Agri-tainment along the Grand Strand. |
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Insurance and Regulations

Increasingly, farmers must deal with the questions of both availability and cost of liability insurance as they seek to welcome large numbers of visitors to their farms. Liability insurance remains a chief obstacle to many farmers expanding into Agri-tainment. Policy prices can run from \$600 for a few visitors to approximately \$10,000. Fewer agencies are willing to write such policies for fear of accidents (Jarboe 2004; Viewpoint 2005).

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| Cautionary Statement #5 | High liability insurance costs may limit operator interest in expanding into Agri-tainment along the Grand Strand. |
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Safety and Sanitation

Farmers must be cognizant of visitor safety, including protecting children from possible abduction or even inappropriate contact by farm employees. A transient workforce must be properly evaluated prior to employment. Play areas must meet current regulations, such as the presence of a cushioned fall areas. The most common insurance claims by Agri-tainment providers have been from animal bites or falls from machinery, ride and attractions. One consultant suggests operators pay special attention to three areas: animals (risk of e coli and bites), ladders (pick-your-own farms), and transport vehicles (such as tractors for hayrides) (see Viewpoint 2005). Operators must find ways to provide access to the farm environment in a safe manner, such as keeping visitors a comfortable distance away from livestock or farm equipment (Ernst 2003). Also, issues related to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) must be addressed (Barbieri 2004).

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| Cautionary Statement #6 | The additional of new areas of concern (and unknown) may limit operator interest in expanding into Agri-tainment along the Grand Strand. |
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Employees

“People want to visit a ranch or a farm that is immaculate,” noted a rancher specializing Clydesdale horses. “And that means lots of help, lots of work, to keep the place looking good.” (see Saunders 1998) This expectation means more employees are needed to maintain the grounds, thus increasing labor costs. Also, an increasing number of visitors may require more customer contact personnel (Blevins 2003). Farm workers long viewed as production employees must be sensitive to their new roles as customer-contact specialists. And, possible language barriers may exist between some farm workers and visitors.

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| Cautionary Statement #7 | The need to train employees in customer contact skills may limit operator interest in expanding into Agri-tainment along the Grand Strand. |
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Taxes and Zoning Issues

The transition from a sleepy family farm to a successful Agri-tainment destination may draw attention from local government. For example, some counties are electing to reclassify farm property as retail businesses and increase the tax rates on the farmer. Conversely, other farmers have found their land to be zoned for agricultural purposes and not retail, thus precluding the development of a store or bakery (Perlman 2005). Finally, increasing land values along the Grand Strand may encourage some farmers to sell their land to developers, thus removing the land from farming.

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| Cautionary Statement #8 | Zoning or taxation issues may limit operator interest in expanding into Agri-tainment along the Grand Strand. |
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| Cautionary Statement #9 | The increasing value of land along the Grand Strand may encourage farmers to sell their land to developers, thus taking away the opportunity to develop Agri-tainment venues. |
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| Cautionary Statement #10 | Many times banks are reluctant to loan the small sums that may be needed to create a Agri-tainment venue from an existing or historic agricultural site. |
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THE FUTURE OF AGRITAINMENT ALONG THE GRAND STRAND

As noted earlier, consultants charting the future of South Carolina's economic development have recommended a focus on, among other things, tourism as a means for the state to develop a sustainable competitive advantage. While tourism opportunities are spread throughout the Palmetto state, a critical clustering of tourism spending occurs along the Grand Strand and stretching down to the Atlantic coast to Charleston and Hilton Head Island.

Currently approximately 14 million visitors spend their time and money along the Grand Strand. With "reinvention" as a hallmark of the region's growth to date, questions have been advanced to consider the use of an agricultural past as a key contributor to the region's (assumed) tourism future. To be sure, Agri-tainment currently exists along the Grand Strand (as illustrated in **Table Two**), and the existing venues could benefit from a more coordinated marketing effort; however, several opportunities exist for Agri-tainment venues to partner with existing statewide tourism programming efforts. South Carolina the State Trails Program, operated by the South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism provides awards and technical assistance for "emerging trail system targeting...walkers, hikers, cyclist,

equestrians, off road enthusiast, paddlers, and nature lovers... visitors of all ages” to observe both the rural and the urban beauty of the state. Information about how to apply for funding is provided at www.sctrails.net/trails/TRAILSPROGRAM/GRANTS/grants.html to show local agencies or qualified private organizations how to apply for funding to purchase land to be used for recreational purposes or to build or improve trails. South Carolina currently has both a Cotton Trail and a Tobacco Trail, which have points of interest in the Pee Dee and the Horry County area.

The Rails to Trails Conservancy is a non-profit agency dedicated to converting former rail lines for converting former rail corridors to create ...”healthier places for healthier people.” One such trail is the North Carolina Tobacco Trail, which is part of the Rails to Trails Conservancy’s ‘American Trail.’ Development and funding opportunities for these projects is subject to the Transportation Efficiency Act of the 21st Century (TEA 21), which was preceded by the Intermodal Surface Transportation and Efficiency Act (ISTEA) and described in a publication entitled, ‘Secrets of Successful Trails: An Acquisition and Organizing Manual for Converting Rails into Trails. The document can be accessed from www.railtrails.org .

Microlending may also provide resources for building Agri-tainment opportunities. Microlending provides small loans to individuals to support their microenterprise and are often required when banks refuse to handle such small scale loans. According to the Association for Enterprise Opportunity (2005: 1), microenterprises are “any type of small business with fewer than 5 employees that is small enough to benefit from loans of under \$35,000.” According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), microenterprises consist of organizations with fewer than 4 employees, while the Small and Medium Enterprise Department of the World Bank makes the cutoff for micro enterprises at 10 employees (Ayyagari, Beck, and Demirgüç-Kunt, 2003). Such definitions may very well include many of the Agri-tainment venues in the Grand Strand region. Microlending has been used in such countries as Senegal and Bangladesh to support small tourism related microenterprises, and microlending has been adopted at the state level in Nebraska, with the passage of the Nebraska Microenterprise Act, which is focused on providing small loans of no larger than \$10,000. Such efforts may offer possibilities for supporting the advancement of Agri-tainment microbusinesses in the Grand Strand area.

As mentioned within the pages, there are a number of existing examples of Agri-tainment products/experiences available in the Grand Strand/Pee Dee area. There are certainly others yet to be discovered. As also suggested, there may be opportunities for local public and private organizations to find assistance for their efforts at the state and federal level. The evaluation of Agri-tainment offered here may stimulate (we hope) a dialogue regarding shared marketing efforts of existing Agri-tainment venues along the Grand Strand as well as the development of additional venues across the region. For sure, agriculture has played a significant role in the history and development of the Grand Strand. Agri-tainment (combining agriculture and entertainment for tourism purposes) may extend these agricultural influences well into the future.

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