

# Agritourism Business Concerns

## ASSESSING & MITIGATING RISK

Donna says liability coverage starts on the farm itself. She is very careful to walk the trails and fencelines to ensure there are no tripping hazards or concerns to cause injury. All farm visits are closely supervised with no wandering among the hills or herd allowed. Her homeowner's policy has a rider for farm visits. She's had great advice on this aspect of her business from Farm Bureau and ASAP's Business of Farming conference.

Visitors can take advantage of mountain trails and natural springs on the farm property. A new remote camping spot is in the works. Ever the builder, Donna is loading her four wheeler with pallets to create a camping platform at the natural spring above the farm. Visitors are expected to 'leave no trace' and receive clear directions for best practices and safety precautions in the remote location.



Donna takes real delight in watching her guests interact with the baby goats.

One of the most important decisions agritourism operators have to make is the comfort level of having folks in your back yard at all hours. The smile on Donna's face as she greets visitors and shares in the story of High Mountain Meadows Farm is a testament to her joy on this farm and sharing the abundance she has created. Agritourism has also been a sound business decision, increasing farm profits and creating a Farm School brand Donna is proud to grow.

# Agritourism Spotlight

A publication of NC Cooperative Extension Local Food Program Team

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SPOTLIGHT

## High Mountain Meadows Farm & Creamery

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Empowering Mountain Food Systems



Even the youngest guests have a good time visiting the animals at High Mountain Meadows.

### ENTERPRISE OVERVIEW

Donna Gaines has been farming since 1990. As her farm has developed over the years she has grown from a cheese production operation to now include farm stays, cheese making classes and is preparing a new barn apartment for additional farm stay revenue.

Donna is a big believer in continual learning and market diversification. She first learned about farm stays while attending the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project's Business of Farming conference. There, she heard about a farmer adding significant income to his operation by adding a farm apartment and hot tub for farm stay experiences. That got her thinking. Since Donna has moved on from keeping horses, her hay loft was unused. This 70 year old independent farmer is also a skilled builder as she began transferring her hayloft to a beautiful barn apartment with two bedrooms, a living room and bathroom. Visitors will enjoy the sweet and sometimes rowdy sounds of Donna's French Alpine goats in the barn below.

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The Local Food Program Team is a multi-disciplinary team of Extension professionals that identifies and assesses priorities, builds capacity, and mobilizes resources to support Cooperative Extension in leading and fostering stakeholders and community efforts that enhance the state's local food system(s).

The Economic Impacts Work Group facilitates regional economic development by developing agent trainings and other resource materials that support local food system development. Its 2016-2021 projects include agent trainings in organic certification and business planning, grantwriting, and multifarm collaborations, research and agent trainings on the impacts of local food programming on downtown revitalization efforts, piloting county-based local food campaigns, development of county ag infographics, agent and landowner trainings in legal regulations and compliance, and agent trainings in agritourism, of which this article is an important part.

## Impact on Farming

### HOSTING FARM STAYS

While the barn apartment is under construction, Donna is actively hosting guests lodging on her farm in their own RV's. Donna launched her Harvest Host experience in 2021. Harvest Host is a membership program for RV's to park at farms and vineyards all over the world. Visitors book stays and are expected to purchase products from the farm and take farm tours if applicable. Guests stay the first night at no cost and pay a fee for additional nights. <https://harvesthosts.com/>

Donna likes the harvest host model because it introduces her farm to campers from around the country. It's a way to reach and educate individuals about small livestock, milking, and cheesemaking. There are nature walks available, and it's an opportunity to introduce them to a quiet and peaceful forest experience, since Donna's farm is nestled among beautiful mountain forests.



Billy Goat Gruff struts his stuff at High Mountain Meadows Farm & Creamery.

## Developing the business concept

### FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY



Donna explains her cheesemaking process to Dr. Rich Bonanno, Director of NC State Extension.

Sustainability measures abound on High Mountain Meadows Farm. A large solar panel array sits below her home and farthest pasture. Donna shares her reasoning for using renewable energy and the federal programs that support renewable energy for farms. Guests also learn about the science behind rotational grazing as a natural parasite preventative, using 'waste' whey as a natural fertilizer, and how natural springs are protected by using nontoxic products throughout her farm operation. In addition to goats, the farm features chickens for fresh eggs, a guard donkey, rabbit breeding for meat and manure and an occasional pig for the family's freezer. All animal manure is composted and used for pasture management. Visitors learn how all of these farm elements lead to a quality product and an environment that is safe for farm animals, pollinators, the three generations of family living at the farm and visitors alike.

## Leveraging Resources

### LEARNING FROM OTHERS

The educational program at High Mountain Meadows Farm School includes courses from regional farm neighbors as well. Donna has invited farmers to teach seed saving techniques and she has a fermentation series in the works for the coming year. Class size is limited to 12 assuring everyone has lots of elbow room and personal attention. Courses are designed to be affordable. Most participants purchase extra products to take home or share with friends and family.

Donna has received significant counseling from the Tri County Community College Small Business Center on her agritourism operation over the years. She has also benefitted from NC Cooperative Extension, the NC Farms App, Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, the American Dairy Goat Association, and Harvest Host to help her develop her farm and agritourism operation.

# High Mountain Meadows Farm & Creamery

Hayesville, NC

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## PRICING, PROFITABILITY, MARKETING AND PROMOTION

### ACTIVITY

In addition to hosting farm stays, Donna hosts cheese-making workshops. During the COVID pandemic Donna was able to host outdoor classes with participants spaced out for safety. Donna makes many varieties of goat cheese including fresh chevre and hard cheeses. Cheesemaking classes last two days for a fee of \$200, which includes overnight lodging. She also offers one-day classes for \$100. Students participate with hands-on experience in the cheesemaking process, and go home with cheeses they've made, including chevre and feta. Participants learn about all aspects of cheese making including the details about her goat menagerie, breeds, kidding, care and the day to day management of a small rural farmstead.

### PRICING

### PROFITABILITY

The Agritourism operation fits in well to the flow of farm life for Donna. She organizes visits around her schedule to complement and not compete with her other farm and family duties. On-farm sales and commercial sales are increasing, saving considerable time that used to be devoted to weekly farmer's market visits. All farmers balance the benefit of packing up, traveling, setting up, tearing down and the unpacking required for a trip to market. Staying put on the farm, allowing the market to come to you reduces travel costs and increases farm productivity. The balance is weighing towards more time for farm visits and classes.



## MARKETING AND PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

Promotion efforts have included an old-fashioned favorite, in these days of social media focus, Donna prides herself in her outreach via articles in the local newspaper and word of mouth among program participants. An eight year-old recently had a wonderful birthday party with baby goats. Her Mom learned about High Mountain Meadows Farm School through Facebook. The county cooperative extension office, regional local food guides and outreach at her farmer's market booth lead to many farm visits and cheese school participation. Facebook is part of her social media marketing strategy, but she realizes she could spend more time on it. Donna would rather be networking in person and tending goats to being on screen so she relies on her farmer helpers and some family members to keep her Facebook updated. Annual open houses welcome visitors for a free tour and snuggle time with all the goats. These promotions sell cheese and create a pool of returned visitors and community promotion.



Donna, up close and personal, with one of her kids.

"I do this because so many farmers taught me, the knowledge I have gained should be passed on; this way of life is unknown to so many."

- Donna Gaines