

Message from President Sylvia Burgos Toftness

If I had to choose just a few words to summarize WATA's work in 2023, they would be "strategic" and "collaborations." Within the growing world of agricultural tourism, WATA focuses on those services that will help members most: Marketing, Education, and Advocacy.

When you combine these strategic pillars with the commitment to collaborate with other organizations that have aligned mission, you can begin to realize impact that helps our member farms, as well as the entire state.

We are a nonprofit that plans and implements with the values and skills of any for-profit business. Our Executive Director, Sheila Everhart, partners directly with the board of directors to plan, implement and evaluate programs and their value to our membership. It is why we continually update our visitor-friendly website. It is why in 2023 we launched a marketing campaign to drive individuals and families to our website, and by extension to you.

This two-year campaign, called "Wisconsin, America's Agricultural Tourism Destination," is prominently displayed at 30 rest stops along Wisconsin's major highways. The promotion features a bright red, metal, 30"x20" sign that displays our logo and a QR code a visitor can scan to get to our website. We have also produced a series of short videos — ranging from 30 seconds to 90 seconds — that prompt people to use the QR code. These videos are shared on WATA's Facebook page, our website, and at conferences across the state.

This campaign is a first-of-its kind effort made possible by collaborations with the Department of Transportation, the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, the Disability Service Provider Network, and other agencies. Our March 9th press conference was well attended and garnered media coverage.

We celebrated our 30th anniversary in 2023 and continue to thank those pioneers who set the association in motion. Throughout the year, WATA was well represented at key conferences, both as an exhibitor and presenter. Travel organizations from across the country are reaching out to WATA to ask about our programs. Although our association is modest in size, it boasts a strong board of directors and our amazing Executive Director, Sheila Everhart — we are strong, and our overhead remains low.

2023 saw many accomplishments, including WATA's award of a USDA specialty crop grant called Growing Wisconsin; food, specialty crops, and agricultural tourism development; galvanizing Wisconsin. WATA's new peer-to-peer mentorship program is funded by this grant. This will allow us to create and evaluate a model for helping farmers enter and/or expand their agricultural tourism enterprises.

WATA works for the benefit of our members because we believe family farms are critical to the quality of life in Wisconsin. We are also committed to efforts that can provide family farms opportunities to develop needed revenue streams through agricultural tourism. This financial vitality will not only help the individual farm, but the local rural community, and the state at On Dec. 1st, we were able to announce the award of a specialty crop grant called Growing Wisconsin; food, specialty crops, and agricultural tourism development; galvanizing Wisconsin. WATA's new peer-to-peer mentorship program is funded by this grant.

Thank you for being a member of the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association. Together we can continue working to make Wisconsin America's Agricultural Tourism Association.



Sylvia Burgos Toftness
President
Bull Brook Keep
Clear Lake, WI

Meet your 2024 Board of Directors



Sylvia Burgos Toftness
President
Bull Brook Keep
Clear Lake, WI



Clara Hedrich
Vice President
LaClare Family Creamery
Malone, WI



Brian Schuett
Treasurer
Schuett Farm
Mukwonago, WI



Abigail Winkel (Martin)
Director
Farm Wisconsin Discovery Center
Manitowoc, WI



Dave Carlson
Director
Trempealeau County
Galesville, WI



Dorothy Harms
Director
Valley Springs Farm Bed & Breakfast
Reedsburg, WI



Malorie Paine
Director
Executive Director, Plover Area
Convention and Visitors Bureau



Sarah Schuster
Director
Schuster's Farm
Deerfield, WI



Jean Bahn
Director
Farmview Event Barn
Berlin, WI

Enhancing and Growing your Agricultural Tourism Business -Educational Webinar Series-

This online Educational Series is a free membership benefit.

~Available 24/7

~Members Only Page

~Member Generated

~New Webinars in 2024

Owning your own Agricultural Tourism Destination can be challenging and rewarding at the same time. Join WATA and spend the off season exploring, planning, rejuvenating, networking and boosting your creative entrepreneurial spirit. Production is happening now.

Educational Webinar Series



WIAGTOURISM.COM



Know your Permitted Uses on Your Land.

Farmers have the “right to farm”;
Agricultural Tourism is farming.
Do you know what is going on at your Township Level?
Or your County Level?



Take the time to learn what is going on with your Town and County Board Regarding
Agricultural Tourism Zoning – Agritourism A-T Ordinances
Every ten years townships must review their comprehensive plans.

Are you, agricultural tourism destination operator, involved with ordinance updates
that will change or restrict your operating model?

Because we can't anticipate every future land use issue, it's important to develop an ongoing trust and communication with local residents.

- These local residents have moved into the township and live on 1, 3 or 5 acre parcels.
- They have move from the city to the country.
- They know little about farming and your right to farm. They are not a part of the 4th, 5th or 6th generation family farm.

Your new neighbors are afraid of consumer demand and your success. They are concerned about traffic, parking, noise, development, frequency, trespassing, and the Unknown “not in my backyard syndrome”, yet your family has been offering agricultural tourism activities for 40, 30 10, 5 years.

Do you know your zoning, local ordinances, conditional uses, permitted land use, noise ordinance and sign ordinances. It is time to dust off and review these documents.

Daily the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association receives calls regarding changes in local ordinances and members learn after the Town Board has approved the changes.

- Traffic
- Parking
- Noise
- Development
- Frequency
- Trespassing
- “The Unknown”

Ask to serve be appointed to your local planning and zoning commission. Being active keeps you on the offense, and you will not be blindsided. Advocacy is critical to the growth and success of the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Industry. If something does not feel right reach out to WATA Executive Director, Sheila Everhart or Advocacy Chair Jean Bahn at Director@wiagtourism.com.

Sue Nelson 2024 Friend of WATA

During National Ag Week, a kick-off ceremony held at the Food + Farm Exploration Center, Sue Nelson was recognized as the 2024 Friend of the Wisconsin Agriculture Tourism Association (WATA). The award celebrates her leadership as a Green County Supervisor, particularly her tireless efforts in shaping Green County, WI zoning ordinances related to agricultural tourism and her outstanding contributions to the agricultural community.

It was only fitting that Nelson's award was marked on this special day and at the new exploration center, a hub for education, innovation, and community engagement. WATA's goal is to help more families and individuals discover Wisconsin's diverse agriculturally-based adventures, learning opportunities, recreation and food experiences; while preserving family farms.

Nelson has worked diligently to strike a balance between economic development and preserving the rural charm that draws visitors to our counties, region, and State. Her dedication to sustainable practices and her unwavering commitment to supporting local farmers has left an indelible mark on the agricultural landscape of Green County, WI.

Sheila Everhart, Executive Director of WATA, praised Nelson's work: "Sue's passion for agriculture and her advocacy for sensible zoning ordinances have made a significant impact. Her efforts have created an environment where farmers can thrive while welcoming tourists to experience the beauty of our farms." Nelson reaffirmed her commitment to advancing Wisconsin's agricultural heritage. Her legacy will undoubtedly inspire future generations of farmers, policymakers, and advocates.

Her work exemplifies the spirit of collaboration and dedication that defines the Friend of WATA award.

The Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association promotes and preserves the rural lifestyle, fosters partnership opportunities within the ag-tourism community, and provides tools which encourage sustainable economic growth while creating awareness of Wisconsin agriculture.

For information about Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association, visit wiagtourism.com. For more information about the Food + Farm Exploration Center, visit explorefoodandfarm.org.



Sue Nelson, Green County Supervisor, accepts the 2024 Friend of Agricultural Tourism Award from Sheila Everhart, right Executive Director Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association (WATA) during National Ag Day ceremonies held at the Food + Farm Exploration Center, Plover, WI.



Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Ag-vocates nominated and recognized for the Governor's Tourism Awards

Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism took center stage on Tuesday, March 12 at the Wisconsin Governor's Conference on Tourism in Lake Geneva.



During the Wisconsin Governor's Conference on Tourism opening ceremonies; Dan and Ashley Wegmueller of Wegmueller Farm, a small 4th-generation farm offering farmstays, interactive tours, equine experiences, and ag outreach were recognized by WI State Secretary of Tourism Anne Sayers.

Five agricultural tourism experts nominated for five of six award nomination categories.

Pam Jahnke, Midwest Farm Report, aka **The Fabulous Farm Babe** has been nominated for the **Governor's Legacy Award**.

For 33 years, Monday-to-Friday, Pam's Midwest Farm Report has been aired from 5-6 a.m. in 66 of Wisconsin's 72 counties by 36 radio stations. Her broadcasts, web posts, and social media engagements, as well as personal relationships across the state have helped build the state's reputation as a premier national destination for agriculture, fairs, festivals, and tourism. "Pam is Wisconsin's first social media farm influencer."

Her excellent work and service have been recognized by numbers of professional and civic organizations over the years. She received the "Honorary Recognition" award from UW-Madison's College of Agriculture, an honorary "American FFA Degree", and citations from the Wisconsin State Senate. She was named "Friend of Agriculture" by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture for her assistance in raising awareness of the "Harvest of Hope" program. The Badger chapter of the National Agri-marketing Association selected her as "Agri-Marketing Person Of The Year in 2013. In 2022 she was named Friend of the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association.

In 2010, she served as president of the National Association of Farm Broadcasting, and in 2013 was named Farm Broadcaster of the Year. More recently, Pam was inducted into the National Association of Farm Broadcasting Hall of Fame.

Commemorative video - <https://youtu.be/0nBntiMYOCY?si=GeF9nIOtwdSXcci9>





Malorie Paine, Plover Area CVB Executive Director has been nominated for the Governor's Rising Star Award.

Malorie Paine since moving to Wisconsin two years ago, she has won numerous awards for her dedicated work including the Agricultural Communicator Network's 2022 Andy Markwart Horizon Award. Paine, newly appointed Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association Board of Director collaborated with the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association to develop Savor and Sow: An Ag-Venture Weekend Getaways. The first of three weekends will take place March 22-24, 2024. These weekend retreats will be hosted three in the Plover Area will create a framework for other destinations to launch similar programs. Savor and Sow is a two-night women's retreat that will highlight agritourism opportunities.

For more information click on the [Events page](#) of the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association website.

Schuster's Farm, Deerfield has been nominated for the Governor's Arts, Heritage and Culture Award as they have preserved the last century (100 + year old) round barn in Dane County.

In 2022, the same year that Dane County saw more than \$1.3 billion in direct visitor spending and more than \$2.3 billion in total economic impact from tourism (including agricultural tourism), Schuster's Playtime Farm hosted more than 70,000 guests and employed 200 seasonal farmhands.

The Schusters' agricultural tourism business and their centennial round barn thrive in an interdependent relationship: one could not exist without the other. If not for the centennial round barn, the branding and mission of Schuster's Playtime Farm would not have taken such a memorable hold in farm visitors' experiences. And if not for agritourism - the inviting of guests to experience agriculture - this centennial round barn would not be standing.



Mitchell, Sarah & Theresa Schuster

Preserving the barn has required hundreds of thousands of dollars. All funding for the barn has been paid through the farm's agritourism business, without any government funding or assistance. Agritourism was the reason for the preservation and has been the payer of the bills for the barn's restoration.

The barn's preservation and return to beauty has attracted visitors from around the world who stop to take photos and share their stories about farming and barns. Photos of the centennial round barn have been featured in articles and books about barns and round barns not only across the country but around the world. It is truly a Wisconsin landmark.

Serving as the focal point of Schuster's Farm brand, the round barn is also the farm's agritourism mecca. The hands-on learning space, located in the area of the barn that formerly housed farm animals, hosts thousands of school children each year. In the haymow, guests learn the history of the barn and farm through stories shared from past generations. The unique and beautiful space also hosts a variety of life celebrations that will be fondly remembered not only for the occasion but for the historic location where those memories were made.

[PBS WI My Wisconsin Life Schuster's Farm Video](#)

Basse's Taste of Country, Colgate, WI has been nominated for the Governor's Tourism Innovation Award.

Basse's Farm is one of the first Agricultural Tourism Destinations to go totally cashless. Basse's also share their experiences with other farmers to help make consumer experience frictionless - reducing wait time and long lines.

The farm: Basse's Taste of Country is located in rural Washington County and is a key contributor to the area's economic vitality. This farm helps boost the overall impact of Washington County's tourism growth of 12.9% between 2021 and 2022 — totaling \$284 Million. This family business also contributes to the 2,233 full- and part-time tourism jobs in the country, as well as to the generation of local tax revenue.



Sarah & Blake Basse

“Our Great Community - Washington County puts people first, and Basse's is the consummate example of Our Great Community as they emphasize "making memories" for families that visit their farm environment with creative activities that promote learning about farming while having fun. As a neighbor of Basse's Taste of Country and as a Washington County Board Supervisor District 16, we are fortunate to have Basse's Taste of Country in Washington County.” Jodi Schulteis, District 16 County Supervisor.

Working together with businesses and organizations throughout the county and the Visit Washington County's marketing efforts; Basse's Taste of Country was featured in the Discover Wisconsin - Fall Fun in Washington County episode promoting the fun on the farm experiences for visitors. Basse's Taste of Country has become a destination for people from all over the state, nation and world.

The project: The Basse family decided to transition to this model in 2018. The family contends that “Going Cashless” has proven to be safer, faster and more efficient.

Safer. Keeping guests and team members safe is number one priority for the Basses. Basse's is now a cashless operation during all seasons and events. With no need to keep cash on hand for making change, the opportunity for theft is dramatically reduced.

They accept all major credit, debit, and mobile payments. If guests come with only cash, Basse's have a cash-to-gift-card option for them. Any value that remains on the gift card can be used at the farm on future dates, from strawberry season in June to any fall activities. Any increments over \$5 can be put on a card.

Once a proven concept on the farm, Blake has been a selfless resource for other State and National Tourism providers including the Wisconsin Summer Fest and members of the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association. The Basse Families willingness to collaborate and teach elevates all within the tourism industry.

Faster. The Basse's have found that eliminating the need to make change allows for quicker transaction times and faster lines at any register. This adds up making the guest experience even better.

Efficiency. The cashless model allows the farm to operate more efficiently and effectively, giving the team members the opportunity to focus more on their guests. For example, this eliminates the need to tally and check every register after closing hours. It also makes it easier and faster to gain insight on sales and demographics. [Preserving Family Farm Fun Video Basse's Taste of Country](#).

Bon Sens Media, Milwaukee has been nominated for the Governor's Service Award for their assistance in WATA in their two-year marketing campaign promoting agricultural tourism - Wisconsin, America's Agricultural Tourism Destination.

Bon Sens Media, owner Shawn Lehman is a champion of travel and tourism efforts that support family farms and in keeping marketing and production costs reasonable. This Service Excellence Award winner provided consulting, copy creation, and digital content to help launch a two-year statewide Agricultural Tourism Marketing campaign that helps to drive tourists to their next Ag-Venture. These efforts support and add to the economic viability of family farms by allowing farmers to utilize agricultural tourism as a value-added economic revenue stream.

2022 was a record-breaking year for Wisconsin's Tourism Industry. Tourism generated \$23.7 billion in total economic impact in 2022, surpassing the state's previous record. With 1/3 of all Americans living within 500 miles of our borders, tourists desire to drive to Wisconsin to enjoy our rural communities and agricultural tourism destinations in all 72 counties. There were 111.1 million visits in Wisconsin including 45.4 million overnight visits. The economic impact of the travel and tourism industry is felt by rural communities in every corner of the state. Tourism supported 174,600 part-time and full-time jobs; and generated \$1.5 billion in state and local tax revenue. Tourism and agricultural tourism experiences are FUN and generate much-needed revenue in our rural economies.

After months of planning and understanding the data, the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association (WATA) began a statewide push to get even more visitors to members' farms, event barns, vineyards, petting zoos, and tree farms with the launch of their two-year marketing campaign, Wisconsin: America's Agricultural Tourism Destination - Find your next ag-venture.

Large, easy-to-read signs boasting LUV-R-AG and smartphone-friendly QR codes were placed at highway rest stops and visitor centers from Hurley to Kenosha, Ashland to Beloit, Superior to Platteville, and Menominee to La Crosse. Over 30 signs, each measuring 30" x 20" are now hanging in high-traffic areas in rest stops and visitor centers across Wisconsin as identified as red dots on the map above. Travelers will be able to see the signs, use the QR code, and find their next ag-venture.

After crossing the border, the first stop is often a Visitor Center or Rest Area where first impressions of Wisconsin are created. Wisconsin is a great state. And it is because of the collaborative efforts of key agencies. Wisconsin: America's Agricultural Tourism Destination - Find your next ag-venture 2-year marketing campaign was launched.

What was determined early on was that visitors loved the signs, but many were unsure what they were about. Bon Sens Media LLC collaborated with Chris Bradley Productions to create content videos to be used on social media and digital platforms to educate Wisconsin Visitors to "scan the QR code to find your next Ag-Venture".

Sample Videos: [LUV R AG scan the QR code](#)
[Family Fun on the Farm. Plan your Ag-Venture Today](#)
[Napa Valley of the Midwest](#)
[Wisconsin Farm Weddings](#)



Shawn Lehman

WATA Members had a great time at the Food + Farm Exploration Center during 2024 Lunch & Learn



The Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association is a non-profit organization open to agricultural tourism related businesses in Wisconsin. We welcome growers, farmers, bakers, cheesemakers, farmers markets, wineries, breweries, distilleries, corn mazes, wedding venues, historic agriculture, petting farms, farm stay vacations and orchards.

Our members also include fairs and festivals that celebrate Wisconsin as well as convention and visitors bureaus, chambers of commerce, grower associations and ag service businesses.



WATA members exploring the Food + Farm Exploration Center during 2024 Lunch & Learn

The Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association promotes and preserves the rural lifestyle, fosters partnership opportunities within the ag-tourism community, and provides tools which encourage sustainable economic growth while creating awareness of Wisconsin agriculture.

Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism is an economic revenue stream that allows farmers to stay viable, keep farmland in production, and allow the next generation to return to the family farm and to sustain a living.

[Join WATA - Online Membership Form](#)

News to Know... Upcoming WATA Events

- Save the Date — August 6, 2024 —WATA State Fair Stage Show 5-6 p.m.

Would you like your Agricultural Tourism Destination recognized at the Wisconsin State Fair?

Send trivia prizes before August 1st, 2024 to:

WATA

4618 West County Road A
Janesville, WI. 53548

**Ideas: hats, t-shirts, admission tickets, lotions, balms, jams, keychains, etc.



- Mark your Calendars - Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Week September 21 - October 1, 2024

WATA Continues Kicks Marketing Campaign to Drive Visitors to Your Farm



Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association continues a statewide push to get more visitors to members' farms, event barns, vineyards, petting zoos, and tree farms.

Large, easy-to-read signs boasting LUV-R-AG and smart-phone friendly QR codes were placed at highway rest stops and visitor centers from Hurley to Kenosha, Ashland to Beloit, Superior to Platteville, and Menominee to La Crosse. Travelers will be able to see the signs, use the QR code, and find their next ag-venture.

News to Know...

- Rural Mutual Agents are offering Signs for their clients. Contact your agent. [Page 45 WFBF Rural Route](#)
- Pica Grove Image Allies of Sparta is offering a \$50 discount to WATA members for all your signage posting needs to be in compliance with WI Act 269. See these and more products at their website: www.picagrove.com.
- Wisconsin Meetings Magazine Spring 2024 Editor Katie Scrivano "Next, as Wisconsin becomes a major agricultural-tourism destination, we explored open-air farming venues perfect for memorable, hands-on, team-building adventures. Check out inspired workshops, immersive experiences and more in our story [Giving Meetings a Farm-Fresh Perspective](#) by Kristine Hansen.
- Lavender Offers Opportunities for Value-Added Ag. [Read More in Farm Progress](#)



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