

Save the Date!!

March 5th 10 a.m. WATA Member Benefits / Annual Meeting

Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association Annual Meeting- Moving Forward in 2025.
Meeting links will be emailed to members on March 4, 2025.

Are you interested in serving as a WATA Board Member?

WATA will have elections for Board Positions March 2025.
Please contact/text Sheila at (608) 774-1354 or director@wiagtourism.com
if you are interested in being a candidate.

WATA Lunch & Learn March 20, 2025



Join the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association for From Field to Field Lunch & Learn. Learn strategies to promote your attraction before, during and after the 2025 Draft in Green Bay April 24-25

March 20, 2025

Discover Green Bay Visitors Center, Lambeau Field & the Hall of Fame

Cost: **\$60** Members **\$185** Non-Members
Mail Check to WATA 4618 West County Road A, Janesville, WI 53548

Registration Deadline: March 9, 2025 No refunds after March 12, 2025*

Lunch & Learn Schedule:

10 a.m. Check-in Discover Green Bay Visitor's Center Education Conference Room
[1945 Argonne St.](#)

10:15- 11:45 Workshop Nick Meisner, Vice President of Digital Marketing and Communications of Discover Green Bay will customize a Digital Marketing & Communications presentation on how Agricultural Tourism Destinations can capitalize on the Drive Market going to and from the 3-day 2025 Draft April 24-26, 2025. As well as marketing tips before and long after the Draft.

WATA's Marketing Campaign continues to Drive Visitors to Your Farm

The Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association continues with our 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. Take a minute to view the videos created:

[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](#)

Enhancing and Growing your Agricultural Tourism Business

-Educational Series-

This online Educational Series is a free membership benefit.

~Available 24/7

~Members Only Page

~Member Generated

~ 20 new Podcasts

[GoWIAgTourism SCBG23-10 Podcasts](#)

Educational Webinar Series



WIAGTOURISM.COM

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; check wiagtourism.com for updates.



Marbleseed's 36th Organic Farming Conference

This year's theme was Local Farm Revolution



Governor's Tourism Awards Categories

- **Arts, Culture & Heritage Award:** This award will be presented to an organization or destination that showcases the arts, culture or heritage to enhance the tourism experience and economic well-being of a community.
- **Bright IDEA Award:** This award recognizes a project or initiative that is driving meaningful impact for visitors by advancing or supporting inclusive, diverse, equitable or accessible (IDEA) tourism in Wisconsin. Eligible nominees champion meaningful change — whether through a project, promotional campaign, partnership and/or ongoing initiative — that fosters a welcoming environment and authentic experience for all visitors.
- **Innovation Award:** This award recognizes an organization or destination that has implemented a new strategy that has made a positive impact through an innovative approach in technology, sustainability, adaptivity and/or the implementation of best practices.
- **Legacy Award:** This award will be presented to an individual who has made a long-lasting and permanent contribution to the industry over the years. A nominee should have 25 years or more of distinguished service to the tourism industry, including 15 years or more in Wisconsin.
- **Rising Star Award:** This award will be presented to an individual who is new to the tourism industry — within the last five years — and has shown leadership, commitment and passion for Wisconsin's tourism industry.
- **Service Excellence Award:** This award will be presented to an organization or individual that has achieved significant success and tourism growth by providing exceptional service to customers and a strong charitable involvement in the community.

Skelly's Farm Market -Nominated for the Governor's Tourism Innovation Award

Scott Skelly's use of internet technology whereby Wisconsin farmers can design unique corn mazes, and boost visitor traffic to family farms. Skelly also pioneered an innovative mobile app that integrates the corn mazes on his Century Farm with the smartphone skills of 21st century visitors. Skelly's corn mazes are some of the oldest in the country operating continuously since 1998 when Scott Skelly designed Skelly's first maze at age 9. Additionally, from 2004-2019, Scott used his technology skills to operate Corn Mazes America (CMA), a business that designed corn mazes for other farms across Wisconsin and the country. Scott helped support other farms enter the tourism industry through corn mazes as his services went



well beyond designing and cutting a corn maze. Scott and his wife's Laura's wrote *The Corn Maze Owner's Guidebook: Lose Your Customers, Not Yourself* and *Agritourism: A Beginner's Guide* to help others enter the field of agricultural tourism. In 2022, he pushed the tech envelope further by creating a mobile app to incorporate smart phone gaming into their corn maze attractions. In 2024, the Skelly's advanced the application further on their two mazes; the 6-acre family-friendly maze, and the more challenging 9-acre maze. The app is available as visitors make their way through the network of paths and dead-ends, bringing elaborate video-like games and adventures. It allows players to navigate the mazes and advance from one level of play to the next. Their labyrinths also include the only known escape room within a corn maze.

Corn mazes attract tens of thousands of visitors to Wisconsin working farms every fall. Skelly's Farm Market launched its first corn maze in 1998, and today attracts thousands of maze visitors every year. This not only supports the farm's financial sustainability, but also contributes to the economic vitality of its rural community. For example, Skelly's Market Farm employs numerous students and adults to support its pick-your-own strawberry patch, sunflower maze, pumpkin patches, 8 off-farm stand locations, and two corn mazes. This innovation is also distinctive because its multiplier effect. It demonstrates how other Wisconsin farmers might consider cutting-edge technologies to attract visitors to their agricultural tourism activities, including corn mazes. In addition to focusing on their home farm, Scott and Laura continue to be leaders for what a Wisconsin agricultural tourism destination can be. They host and produce Digging Deeper in Agritourism, a NAFDMA members-only podcast for the International Agritourism Association to help other farmers expand their thinking and, thereby, their opportunities to build revenue through agricultural tourism. Laura also serves on the NAFDMA Board of Directors, involvement that elevates the state's profile providing Laura access to out-of-state insights that can help our farmers.

These strategies illustrate how a Century Farm adjusts for sustainability by using its time-honored strengths while pioneering technology innovations and staying attuned to consumer demand. The State of Wisconsin loses hundreds of farms every year. At the same time, more and more farmers are searching for ways to diversify and increase revenue. The Skelly family has farmed in the Janesville area since the mid-1880s. Designated a Century Farm in 2018, there has not been a cow on the 350-acre farm since 2000, and huge field tractors have left the field. In response to market changes, Skelly's now cultivates over 100 acres of fresh, hand-picked produce — an approach for solvency. Over the years, Skelly's have invested in changes to keep their farm financial healthy and an asset to their community. The first corn maze was cut in 1998, an annual event makes Skelly's one of the oldest corn mazes in the country. They renovated the cow barn and other buildings to expand opportunities for learning, fun and great food. They added kitchen areas, a bakery, and retail space to provide convenience while preserving the farm atmosphere. Their aim is to farm successfully today, and for future generations. They do that by preserving their history, protecting their assets, growing real food, and by offering unique and authentic family-friendly adventures — something visitors cannot find anywhere else. Scott Skelly and family, deserving of the Governor's Award, gives back to other agricultural tourism destinations and stays active on agricultural tourism trends in Wisconsin and Nationally.

Skelly's Farm Market is considered one of Janesville's top family-friendly tourist destinations. This farm drives tens-of-thousands of guests to the area from Northern Illinois and Southern Wisconsin, recording year-after-year economic impact gains for the local economy. As active members past and present of The Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association (WATA), Wisconsin Berry Growers, Wisconsin Vegetable Growers, and North America Farmers Direct Marketing association, Laura and Scott, Joe, and Tom and Cheryl have served as board members, conference speakers, webinar and round table hosts, and even hosted agritourism podcasts. They have also hosted field days for Wisconsin growers numerous times in the past three decades to help them push their own agritourism locations to be as best as possible.



To continue to serve Wisconsin, WATA provides farmers with marketing, education, networking and public policy service. Agricultural tourism is a growing economic engine for farmers and rural communities while providing on-farm educational and recreational experiences for visitors. <https://wiagtourism.com>

Food + Farm Exploration Center Nominated for the Governor's Tourism Bright IDEA Award

Food + Farm Exploration Center (F+FEC) in Plover, Wisconsin, opened in December 2023 as a state-of-the-art destination for hands-on learning about modern agricultural practices. Food + Farm Exploration Center is nominated for the Bright IDEA Award because it exemplifies inclusivity, diversity, equity, and accessibility in its design and programming. Visitors of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities can engage with over 60 immersive exhibits and multi-sensory activities, gaining a comprehensive understanding of how food is produced and reaches their tables.

Food + Farm Exploration Center integrates IDEA principles into every aspect of its operations, providing a welcoming and enriching experience for all visitors. Key features include:

- Wellness Room: This dedicated space offers families a quiet, low-stimulation environment to reset and de-escalate without needing to leave F+FEC, ensuring an inclusive experience for individuals with sensory sensitivities.
- Noise Cancellation Headsets: Are available for youth and adults.
- Ag Simulator Exhibit: A highlight of F+FEC, this exhibit features a real tractor cab converted into a 360-degree simulation of vegetable production—from planting to harvest. The cab's design includes a wheelchair-accessible sliding seat and a floor-level platform, ensuring visitors of all abilities can fully participate.
- Onsite UTV – UTV available to assist individuals with limited mobility to enter agricultural demonstration fields for events.
- Accessibility Enhancements: F+FEC includes additional features to ensure inclusivity and accessibility:
 - * Cane strikes in critical areas, including the soil cube, under the steps in the farm tech shed, and under the steps in the emergency exit
 - *Braille on room name signs for visually impaired visitors
 - *Doors, hallways, public spaces and handicap parking spaces exceed minimum ADA requirements
 - *Special cabinets in the Kitchen Lab and Maker Space designed for wheelchair accessibility, including access to a sink
 - *Adjustable-height tables in the Kitchen Lab and wheelchair-accessible tables in the Maker Space
 - *Two automatic doors for building entry and exit
 - *Exhibits designed with accessible layouts, including maintaining minimum space between exhibits.

Visitor feedback highlights the intentional design and thoughtful implementation of inclusive measures:

- Parents of children with autism have praised the Wellness Room as a critical resource, allowing their families to continue enjoying Food + Farm Exploration Center without disruption.
- The Ag Simulator has received accolades for its innovative design, which provides a realistic farming experience for individuals who might never have such an opportunity.
- Overall, visitors recognize and appreciate that inclusivity was a foundational priority, not an afterthought, in F+FEC's development.



Food + Farm Exploration Center sets a new standard for IDEA tourism in Wisconsin, serving as a model for other attractions statewide. Its thoughtful planning and execution demonstrate a commitment to exceeding ADA requirements and delivering a superior visitor experience. By attracting diverse audiences and fostering greater understanding of agricultural practices, Food + Farm Exploration Center bolsters Wisconsin's reputation as an inclusive and innovative tourism destination. Recognizing this initiative with the Bright IDEA Award would spotlight its achievements and encourage similar efforts across the state.



Food + Farm Exploration Center represents years of dedicated planning to ensure an inclusive, equitable, and accessible experience for all. Its success underscores the importance of integrating IDEA principles into the foundation of any project, setting a benchmark for excellence in tourism and education. Within the first year F+FEC has welcomed: *50,000 visitors *5,250 students for field trips*2,750 students reached through outreach classroom and youth group visits*350 lesson downloads for classroom use *586 participated in Kitchen Lab events with Mid-State Technical College*88 families attended Tot Time *4 U-Pick Harvest events that offered free produce to the community and donated over 5500 lbs. of produce to Central Rivers Farmshed*8,577 guests have attended meeting & celebrations Food + Farm Exploration Center partners with other organizations to provide additional benefits to the community. Museums for All Partnership: As a Museums for All science center, F+FEC offers discounted admission to visitors receiving SNAP benefits, enabling families with limited financial means to experience F+FEC. ADRC and ODC (Opportunity Development Center) Collaborations: Created adaptive cooking activities for senior citizens and individuals with disabilities. Field Trip Grant Program: This initiative provides financial support for students from urban and rural communities to visit F+FEC, covering transportation costs.



By removing financial barriers, the program ensures educational opportunities are accessible to all. Rural Community Connections Taskforce – hosted Winter Fest, an event with over 300 attendees, to help address social isolation and loneliness in Portage County.

Busy Barn Farm Adventures, Nominated for the Governor's Tourism Rising Star Award with 2.5 years in the tourism industry.

These Rising Stars, Afton and Mitch, first generation farmers, provide guests with acres of fun, unique experiences and memorable farm adventures while increasing the awareness, understanding and appreciation of agriculture; teaching children where their food comes from. Mitch, a firefighter and Afton, a teacher, made a career move to Wisconsin to pursue farming in 2022 when they purchased the Busy Barn Farm Adventures.

Busy Barn Farm Adventures has grown into one of Jefferson County's #1 Agricultural Tourism Destinations. Their 30,000 guests generate tens-of-thousands of Room Tax Revenue, jobs and economic impact to Jefferson County. In 2023, Jefferson County tourism supported 1.575 K part - and full-time jobs across various sectors of the tourism industry. Tourism in Jefferson County also generated \$11.2 million in local and state tax revenue. Transitioning careers from fire-fighting and education to farming they moved back to Wisconsin to lay the foundation for re-branding the farm. Still so early in their agricultural tourism career, they have taken significant steps to make the Fort Atkinson/Jefferson County area an attractive place to visit. In the past two ½ years, Afton and Mitch have developed and implemented strategic marketing and communication plans positioning Busy Barn Farm Adventures as a must-visit destination. Since moving to Jefferson County, they have earned several recognitions from community groups. They are also active members in the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association sharing best practices and presenting workshops for other tourism destinations.

As creative partners, Afton and Mitch have launched and highlighted their rural Jefferson County authentic farm experience in several ways. They have been the driving force behind collaborative partnerships and content creation to launch the rebranding of Busy Barn Farm Adventures to grow and sustain local tourism development. They have marketed and expanded their field trip programming and had over 4,500 students visit the farm in 2024 to learn about agriculture and experience the farm hands-on with educational facts, activities and animal care. Afton & Mitch have established family friendly hours, on-line ticketing, streamlined food on the farm, and created collaborative community events all to enhance the guests and user experiences at Busy Barn Farm Adventures. Partnerships have been established to support the community including food pantry fundraisers, hosting local proms, and giving private tours to high school agriculture students that are going into agriculture as well. Afton and Mitch also collaborated with the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association to present "Winter on the Farm" sharing a framework for other destinations to launch similar programs offerings. In 2024 this two weekend/ 4- day event included a pancake breakfast in which hundreds of guests traveled from urban Milwaukee region and northern Illinois to rural Jefferson County to experience the Winter on the Farm.

As collaborators this young first generation farm couple are elevating local, regional, and state tourism in BOUNDLESS ways. They are helping sustain and grow the industry by using digital media to brand the Jefferson County, Southern Wisconsin area as a unique destination with vibrant, welcoming communities. The Gathering Barn, a private event venue, at Busy Barn Farm Adventures hosted 98 gatherings since August of 2022.

Generating substantial room tax and economic impact for the local communities, which can be directly attributed to their authentic on-the-farm weddings, corporate events, proms, and family reunions. In 2023, Wisconsin welcomed 113 million visits, including 45.9 million overnight visits. Overnight visitors, on average, spend almost three times as much as a day-trip visitor. Busy Barn Farm Adventures has contributed to this record breaking tourism growth.



Busy Barn Farm Adventures employs 31 season helpers annually. Additionally, last year, Jefferson County tourism supported 1.575 K part- and full-time jobs across various sectors of the industry, part of the more than 178,000 jobs sustained by tourism across the state. Tourism in Jefferson County also generated \$11.2 million in local and state tax revenue. Statewide, tourism generated \$1.6 billion in local and state tax revenue in 2023. Without this revenue, each Wisconsin household would pay an additional \$660 to maintain the current level of government services.

Wisconsin loses one farm a day to bankruptcy, foreclosure or urban development. This first generation farm couple is preserving Wisconsin farmland and sustaining our agricultural heritage for generations to come. Their passionate and “all in” dedication sets them apart from other young couples and agricultural tourism experience providers. They are dedicated to continuing to grow the awareness and make the connection to the next generations about where your food comes from and how we all need to take a part in continuing to see Wisconsin's farmland thrive and grow, not shrink. They see the opportunity to share their farm with the community as an honor and an opportunity to spread awareness, excitement and the joy of Wisconsin farms.

Busy Barn Adventure Farm is a unique Southern Wisconsin destination that supports vibrant, welcoming rural communities in Jefferson, County. This on-the-farm destination offers a variety of activities for overnight and day-trip visitors. Working collaboratively with the Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Association, to increase visitors trips across our state borders to “Wisconsin, America’s Agricultural Tourism Destination”. Elevating tourism revenue for all. Afton & Mitch have established family friendly hours, on-line ticketing, streamlined food on the farm, and created collaborative community events all to enhance the guest and user experiences at Busy Barn Adventure Farm. Partnerships have been established to support the community including food pantry fundraisers, hosting local proms, and giving private tours to high school agriculture students that are going into agriculture as well. This young farm couple are truly Rising Stars and deserve the Governor's Tourism Award.



Green Bay Packers 2025 NFL Draft Team Nominated for the Governor’s Tourism Service Excellence Award

Green Bay Packers 2025 NFL Draft Team; ten years of collaborative work among The Packers, Discover Green Bay and community organizations expects to attract 250,000 attendees to the draft; projecting a \$94-million impact on the state, including \$20 million locally in Green Bay. Brad Toll, CEO of Discover Green Bay envisioned this opportunity when the NFL uprooted the draft from its previous home at Radio City Music Hall, NY in 2014. Toll reached out to Packers Director of Public Affairs Aaron Popkey and told him Green Bay has the accommodations, championship history, unique team ownership, and municipal infrastructure to showcase this NFL event.

**We're officially welcoming 88
Wisconsin businesses to the 2025 NFL
Draft Source Program!**

... Titletown, on the west side of Lambeau Field, and the construction of the spacious Resch Expo on the east side were obvious catalysts in the city's bid; however, every proposal the Packers put together centered on a couple of unique qualities – Green Bay's deep roots in professional football and unparalleled fan experiences. Nothing compares to the history and tradition of the Packers fan experiences that connects the team, city and state. The Green Bay Packers and the 2025 Draft Team joined to drive the draft bid process; their commitment boosted by the tremendous staff at Lambeau Field and the support of local organizations. This is the largest event ever come to Green Bay. Communities and local organizations will provide visitors the welcome, history, fan enthusiasm, downtown features, and 2025 NFL Draft fanfare only possible in the state of Wisconsin and city of Green Bay.

The Green Bay Packers, a community-owned team, has embraced the vision of the 2025 Draft Team; Green Bay Local Organizing Team Members; Packers President/CEO Mark Murphy, Vice President of Marketing and Fan Engagement Gabrielle Dow, Director of Public Af-

fairs Aaron Popkey, Planning Specialist, Marketing & Sales Megan Roberson, NFL Draft Intern Anna Jacobsen, late Treasurer Mark McMullen, and President and CEO of Discover Green Bay Brad Toll and his 14-person staff (2025 Draft Team; Green Bay Local Organizing Team- PMI Entertainment Group). They have planned and will execute an all-inclusive transformational marketing campaign to showcase Wisconsin's football history, culinary treasures, and agricultural heritage, while keeping at the forefront the visitor's experience. Many firsts for Wisconsin, includes the "Taste of the Draft" Wednesday, April 23, from 4 to 7 p.m. at Schreiber Foods headquarters in downtown Green Bay. This new philanthropic event will showcase an extraordinary blend of Wisconsin ingredients and culinary traditions while raising funds to benefit national nonprofit GENYOUth's efforts to tackle student hunger in Wisconsin. The menu will showcase Wisconsin's unique supper-club experience. Guests will taste everything from soup to nuts – or rather, relish trays to after-dinner drinks – with menus featuring curated spirits and salad bar favorites, as well as the state's internationally recognized cheese and dairy products.

The Green Bay Packers Organization has developed a sports/business/recreation center of state-of-the-art facilities and events that will attract visitors for generations. This team also demonstrates the power of collaboration, spanning more than a decade, with huge economic impact, and a boost to Wisconsin's reputation that will reverberate for years to come. The "Lambeau Field Campus," includes the sports field, Titletown, Resch Expo and Resch Center. It will house the main media stage, NFL Experience, green room, red carpet, media center, and fan areas.

Whether guests visit because of the draft, or are fulfilling a life dream, all are encouraged to travel throughout the state. The 2025 Draft Team; Green Bay Local Organizing Team has collaborated with regional convention and visitors bureaus, 88 Wisconsin businesses participating in the NFL Draft Source program, as well as with supper clubs and farmers to help promote and show case the state.



Approximately a quarter of a million visitors are expected to the draft events; a projected \$94 million on the state and \$20 million for Green Bay. This is a huge economic win for Wisconsin!

April 24-26th, 2025 NFL Draft Total Attendance 240 K Total Impact 20 M Green Bay Total Impact 94 M Wisconsin Family Friendly Activities *Photo Opportunities *Player /Media Meet & Greets * Food + Entertainment NFL Engagement Activities *40 yard dash. *Vertical Leap *Throwing Competitions *Lombardi Trophy *Super Bowl Championship Rings and much, much more ... Loyal Fans can also apply to work at the Draft through the NFL initiative - Teammates.

This is a historic event for Green Bay, for the Green Bay Packers and for Wisconsin. This organization deserves to be aware the Governor's Service Award.



Wisconsin schools are invited to apply for a Taste of the Draft School Nutrition Grant!

The grants will provide nutritious school meal distribution equipment for up to 90 schools across the state, in recognition of the 90th NFL Draft.

The deadline to apply is rapidly approaching! Click for more information.



Upcoming WATA Events ...

- ~March 5, 2025 Annual WATA Meeting 10:00 am via Zoom
- ~March 9-12, 2025 Wisconsin Governor's Conference on Tourism - LaCrosse
- ~June 12-14 2025 Classic Green Reunion - West Bend
- ~June 13-15, 2025 International Peony Festival - Beaver Dam
- ~August 5, 2025 Wisconsin State Fair - Milwaukee
- ~August 15, 2025 WI Christmas Tree Producers Summer Conference- Merrill
- ~September 18 – October 31, Wisconsin Agricultural Tourism Fall Season

News to Know...

~2025 Membership Renewal Campaign – [2025 online WATA Membership Renewal Form](#)