RURAL TOURISM INITIATIVE

Executive Summary

Tennessee and its rural areas are rich in natural amenities, agriculture and small farms, geological and ecological diversity, cultural diversity, history, music, and much more. Tennessee also has distinctive seasons and a mild climate. Given the wealth of these amenities, Tennessee has the potential to be the #1 tourist destination of all inland states for U.S. and international visitors. The mission of the Rural Tourism Initiative is to develop within the Institute of Agriculture at the University of Tennessee the expertise and services needed to propel Tennessee to be the top tourist destination state for inquiring visitors from around the world through rural tourism.

We propose to hire six (6) experienced Ph.D. level faculty with expertise in agritourism (2), ecotourism (2), and heritage tourism (2). Three will be statewide Ph.D. level Extension Specialists in each of the three areas of expertise. The other three faculty will have appointments in two of the three areas of research, teaching, and Extension and will be engaged in creating degree concentrations in CASNR in ecotourism/heritage tourism (FWF) and agritourism (Agricultural Economics and Natural Resources) to prepare students to work in rural tourism enterprises. These 6 faculty will also bring added expertise to the development of Lone Oaks Farm and expand the services offered by the Center for Profitable Agriculture while increasing rural economic development across the state.

Initiative Leaders:

J. Mark Fly, Professor, Department of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries
Director, Human Dimensions Research Lab
Coordinator, Wildland Recreation Concentration, B.S. in Forestry

Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture

David Hughes, Professor and Greever Chair in Agribusiness Development
Department of Agricultural Economics and Natural Resources

Ben West, Interim Director, Lone Oaks Farm

Departments/Regions Creating this Report:

Department of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries
Center for Profitable Agriculture
Lone Oaks Farm
Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics
PawPaw Partners, Conservation and Cultural Resource Planning Consultants

Submit to Dr. Neal Schrick (fschrick@utk.edu) by February 15, 2016
Setting Bold Priorities/Facilitation Guide

Definitions:

Rural Tourism – Rural tourism is simply the experience of actively engaging in a rural lifestyle during leisure time. It is the joyful experience of connecting ourselves and our children with our agrarian roots and ancestors who were farmers. Rural tourism provides an opportunity for people to immerse themselves in a time when life was simpler, when activities engaged in correlated directly with one’s existence - a time when farm, food and nature were deeply interwoven. Rural tourism is experiencing the social milieu that emerged to support farming communities – the feed and seed stores, the gathering of farmers for breakfast at the local diner, the community social events and festivals celebrating rural life, the places of worship, gatherings by the creek to swim/picnic, and rival villages competing on the ballfield.

*Rural Tourism is an umbrella term that encompasses agritourism, ecotourism, and heritage tourism.*

Agritourism – Agritourism is the experience of actively engaging in farm activities or farm life during leisure time for a fun and educational experience. It includes an array of activities with farm related themes that are presented in a farm and agricultural setting. Guests can pet farm animals, feed a goat, harvest crops, go on a hayride, visit for a day or stay overnight, and much more. Agritourism includes educating children and adults about how food is grown and the processes used to get food from the farm to the table. It puts visitors in touch with the men, women, and children who grow our food and crops that keep our nation going strong.

Ecotourism – Ecotourism is the experience of having fun and sometimes challenging outdoor recreation activities that connect people with nature and local cultures in a sustainable manner. The mission of “eco”- tourism is to: (1) Keep tourism dollars local by supporting the local “eco”- nomy; (2) Minimize the “eco”-logical footprint of tourists on the local environment; and (3) Provide fun, educational and sometimes challenging experiences while engaging the local cultural, historic, and natural environment.

Heritage Tourism – Heritage tourism is focused on engaging visitors in the places, people, and artifacts that represent rural life and events from the past and may include cultural, historical, agricultural, or natural resources. Much of what is heritage tourism is described in the definition of rural tourism above.

Priorities:

Mission:  *Increase rural economic development in Tennessee through the expansion and growth of rural tourism.*

Goals: (1) *Make Tennessee the premiere destination for international tourists visiting the U.S. inland states.*
(2) Make Tennessee the prime destination for out-of-state tourists visiting inland states.

(3) Make Tennessee the destination of choice for Tennesseans.  
(Promote “staycations” to keep tourist dollars in Tennessee)

(4) Make Tennessee the educational model for rural tourism in the U.S.

Objectives:  Greatly expand Rural Tourism in Tennessee through the growth of (1) Agritourism, (2) Ecotourism and (3) Heritage tourism.

This Rural Tourism Initiative focuses on opportunities for which Tennessee’s agriculture, nature-based and rural communities are uniquely positioned for development and expansion. The initiative enhances UTIA’s ability to provide specific leadership, educational programs and development of opportunities which directly address the Governor’s Rural Challenge. This proposal contains Extension, Teaching and Research components across four collaborating units: Department of Forestry, Wildlife and Fisheries, Lone Oaks Farm, Center for Profitable Agriculture, and the Department of Agriculture and Resources Economics.

This initiative hits numerous specific recommendations found in the 10-year strategic plan of the Governor’s Rural Challenge. It advances agriculture, natural resources and rural opportunities; it provides educational information and opportunities which are science-based, practical and applicable; it includes collaborators from across departmental subject matter and with industry partners; it includes real market opportunities and public-private sector collaboration; and it provides impact opportunities for youth, enterprise income and formal and informal educational outreach.

A thriving rural tourism economy will not only boost local communities though sales tax generation, it also does not require vast infrastructure expenditures. In addition, as rural economies grow through tourism, supporting businesses, such as lodging, food service, and shops will boost the local economy even more.

Tennessee’s small farms are finding it increasingly difficult to compete with much larger operations in the Midwest and West. Most small farms and hobby farms can no longer sustain themselves growing row crops or running fifty head of livestock. Encouraging small farms to focus on specialty crops (heirloom vegetables, herbs, baby vegetables, or flowers) or heritage breed animals allows farms to be more profitable on the same acreage. However, there must be ready access to markets. Encouraging cooperative ventures, for instance, a pooled refrigerator truck that picks up produce from a number of farms for deliveries to farmers’ markets would alleviate the need for daily runs to the city that take away time from production. Farmers that grow different crops could join together to fill Community Supported Agriculture
(CSA) orders; after all, consumers want a diverse selection of choice produce. More facilities to create value-added products, for instance community canneries or dairies, or mobile abattoirs, could boost farm income significantly. From a tourism perspective, specialty farms would create much more interest. A visitor would find a field of sunflowers in bloom much more remarkable than a field of milo or a pasture. Seeing heritage breed animals like Highland Warrior cattle or Tamworth hogs would make visitors stop in their tracks. “Farm-to-Table” dinners, wine trails, “farm stays,” pick-your-own opportunities and special farm events are all potential sources for boosting tourism and farm economies.

Most Tennessee tourists come to enjoy a wide variety of enticements; rural tourism that includes agritourism, ecotourism and heritage tourism can complement their experiences and have a positive impact on our agrarian economy.

**Relation to the Governor’s Rural Challenge 10-Year Strategic Plan**

This rural initiative is related to 12 of the 27 specific recommendations in the 10-year strategic plan while specifically impacting recommendations 1.6, 3.2 and 4.7:

- **1.1** – Conduct a comprehensive inventory of rural assets and their economic value.

  (Note: One of the main tasks of this tourism Initiative is to work with each rural county to conduct a comprehensive inventory of “all things rural,” that is, all the ways tourists can experience rural life in each county. This effort could be coordinated through the UT County Extension offices. **Having the ability to gather and analyze spatial data is paramount to the success of this initiative.**)

- **1.3** – Increase agriculture/rural involvement with local Chamber of Commerce programs.

  (Note: Local visitor centers, Chambers of Commerce, and economic development organizations will be critical to the success of this initiative.)

- **1.4** – Encourage farmers and agricultural professionals to be active in local and state business organizations.

  (Note: All rural tourism operators need to be engaged in their local Chamber of Commerce to facilitate integrated efforts in developing tourism. A key to success of the initiative is the clustering of activities and experiences that will extend length of stay of tourists though farm stays, B&Bs, historic inns and hotels. This will increase the likelihood that tourists will visit a greater number of rural enterprises in the area.)

- **1.6** – Encourage more profitable forestry management on private woodlands.
(Note: Forest management encompasses timber production, non-timber forest products (e.g., mushrooms), wildlife habitat, aesthetics, and outdoor recreation. Farms engaged in rural tourism need to manage their forests with a comprehensive plan for timber sales while maximizing opportunities for guests to engage in outdoor recreation and education activities on the farm. These opportunities may include a buggy ride through the woods, hiking, MT. biking, wildlife viewing and education about conservation practices related to riparian zones, wetlands, native warm season grasses (prairies), and protecting quail, bats, pollinators, and amphibians. Ecotourists want to support local conservation efforts with their tourist dollars.)

- 3.2 – Enhance market development activities to directly improve net farm income… “Maximize opportunities for agritourism and ecotourism development” – p. 8

(Note: This is the main purpose of the “Rural Tourism Initiative.”)

- 3.3 – Stimulate rural enterprise innovation across the state.

(Note: This is the main purpose of the “Rural Tourism Initiative.”)

- 3.4 - Promote expansion of commodity value-added processing and differentiation through established member-owned cooperatives. . .

(Note: Promoting rural tourism will provide additional opportunities for communities to form cooperatives to market farm produce and create value-added products.)

- 4.2 – Opportunities for on-farm applied research and demonstrations.

(Note: Develop private partnerships to conduct research on rural tourism and provide demonstration sites for those enterprises that cannot be replicated at a UT Ag Research and Education Center.)

- 4.3 and 4.5 – Expand 4-H/FFA participation in education programs and increase agricultural awareness for youth.

(Note: Develop Lone Oaks Farm to be a model in the effort to increase agricultural awareness in youth and adults. Specifically educate youth about opportunities to develop and manage a full range of rural tourism enterprises, expanding opportunities for job creation, and allowing the next generation to stay on the family farm.)

- 4.6 – Relations to agriculture and natural resources curriculum in higher education.

(Note: Grow rural tourism capacity by developing and expanding degree concentrations in rural tourism across the state. Develop a two-year degree and certification program in rural tourism at the junior college level with online options. Develop a partnership program between 2 and 4 year colleges for Bachelor Degrees.)
Setting Bold Priorities/Facilitation Guide

- **4.7** – Educational programs that encourage efficient resource utilization and best management practices in production systems to increase profitability.

(Note: See 1.6 and 4.6 above)

More specifically, this rural initiative would: (1) expand agritourism capacity at the Center for Profitable Agriculture and add new capacity in ecotourism, heritage tourism, and rural tourism; (2) increase nature-based recreation and tourism infrastructure in rural areas to provide opportunities for growth in ecotourism based economies; (3) develop an ecotourism certification program that meets international ecotourism standards for nature-based recreation and become a national model for certification programs (international tourists prefer to patronize ecotourism certified businesses); (4) provide education and training for ecotourism operations to meet certification standards; (5) develop marketing strategies to promote rural tourism experiences to inquiring tourists around the world, and (6) provide expertise to the planning, development, and operation of the Lone Oaks Farm with the intention of making Lone Oaks a national model for rural tourism and all the elements described herein.

**UT Faculty/Staff Collaborators**

Dr. Rachel Chen, Director, UT Center for Sustainable Business and Development  
Dr. Mark Fly, Director, Human Dimensions Research Lab, Department of FWF  
Dr. Susan Hamilton, Director, UT Gardens, Department of Plant Sciences  
Dr. Donald Hodges, Department of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries (FWF)  
Rob Holland, Director, Center for Profitable Agriculture  
Dr. David Hughes, Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics  
Dr. Neelam Pouydal, Department of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries  
Andy Pulte, Public Horticulture, Department of Plant Sciences  
Susan Schexnayder, Associate Director, Human Dimensions Research Lab  
Dr. Ben West, Director, Lone Oaks Farm  
Dr. Adam Wilcox, Department of Forestry, Wildlife, and Fisheries

**External Collaborators:**

Jerry Jolley, Area Director, USDA Rural Development, Cookeville, Tennessee  
Richard Quinn & Sherry Beard, Owners, PawPaw Partners  
(Conservation and Cultural Resource Planning Consultants)

**Project Leadership:**

Dr. Mark Fly will provide leadership to the Rural Tourism Initiative and its advisory committee of faculty and stakeholders until the initiative is fully staffed.
Setting Bold Priorities/Facilitation Guide

**Stakeholders:**

**State Agencies:**
Tennessee Department of Agriculture
Tennessee Department of Tourism
Tennessee State Parks
Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency
Tennessee Division of Forestry
Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development
Tennessee Development District Association (9 Development Districts in Tennessee)
Middle Tennessee State University (Century Farm/Historic Preservation Programs)

**Federal Agencies:**
USDA Rural Development (Provide rural grants with 8 offices in Tennessee)

**Other Agencies and Organizations:**
Tennessee Farm Bureau
Chambers of Commerce
Visitor Centers and Convention Bureaus

Tennessee Agritourism Association
Tennessee Arts Commission (Rural Arts Initiative/help form rural crafts guilds)
Tennessee Association of Farmer’s Markets
Tennessee Association of Museums
Tennessee Craft Brewers Guild
Tennessee Environmental Education Association
Tennessee Farm Winegrowers Association
Tennessee Flower Growers Association
Tennessee Fruit and Vegetable Association
Tennessee Naturalist Program
Tennessee Organic Growers Association
Tennessee RC & D Councils (Resource Conservation and Development) (12)
Tennessee Recreation and Parks Association
Tennessee Wildlife Federation
Tennessee Wildlife Society

Bed and Breakfast Association of Tennessee
Kentucky/Tennessee Chapter of the Society of American Foresters
Land Trust for Tennessee (Farm conservation easements)
Tennessee Preservation Trust
Society of Tennessee Archivists
Tennessee FFA and 4-H Clubs
## Setting Bold Priorities/Facilitation Guide

### New Positions Needed to Support the Priorities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position Title</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Expected Outcomes/Goals</th>
<th>Potential Collaboration</th>
<th>Approximate Appointment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assist/Assoc/Full Professor</td>
<td>Agri-Tourism Specialist</td>
<td>See Outcome descriptions below</td>
<td>See UT Faculty list below</td>
<td>50% research, 50% teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist/Assoc/Full Professor</td>
<td>Ecotourism Specialist</td>
<td>See Outcome descriptions below</td>
<td>See UT Faculty list below</td>
<td>50% research, 50% teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assist/Assoc/Full Professor</td>
<td>Heritage/Rural Tourism Specialist</td>
<td>See Outcome descriptions below</td>
<td>See UT Faculty list below</td>
<td>50% research, 50% Extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statewide Extension Specialist</td>
<td>General Tourism Background and Support ability</td>
<td>Work regionally to form linkages from tourism faculty to public and business interests in state.</td>
<td>New tourism faculty and others on list below</td>
<td>100% Extension</td>
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<td>100% Extension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager/Lecturer</td>
<td>See description below</td>
<td>Help new hires and collaborators function as a team; teach or co-teach related courses</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>50% research, 50% teaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Setting Bold Priorities/Facilitation Guide

The three statewide Ph. D. level Extension Specialists will focus their work in the three regions of Tennessee, East, Middle, and West. These specialists will work with County Extension Offices in the three priority areas – Agritourism, Ecotourism, and Heritage Tourism. A Project Manager/Lecturer is needed to process budgets, and coordinate meetings, conferences, workshops, prepare proposals and write reports. As a Lecturer, they will teach and support degree concentrations in Agritourism and Ecotourism/Heritage Tourism.

Supporting Resources: Travel and operating funds, as well as funds for grant writing, and feasibility and marketing research, will be needed to launch the initiative.

Expected Outcomes:

Teaching – Develop concentrations in Agritourism, Ecotourism, and Heritage Tourism under the B.S. Degree in Forestry, and the B.S. Degree in Food and Agricultural Business or Natural Resource and Environmental Economics.

Research- Develop and test decision-support tools to assist in feasibility analysis for business start-ups and expansions. Identify successful operators and determine the educational, experience, and personality characteristics that predict likelihood of success. Engage local city, county agencies and organizations in rural areas in identifying their special places to determine opportunities for expanding rural tourism. Use GIS and spatial analysis to identify areas of unique opportunity for growth, similar to a gap analysis. Conduct market research.

Extension- Disseminate research findings through one-on-one assistance, bulletins and workshops. Work with county Extension offices to identify activity clusters and facilitate start-ups and expansions to complete the array of opportunities needed for guests to have extended stays in specific rural areas.

Rationale:

Of all inland states in the U.S., Tennessee is primed to be the leading destination site for inquiring international tourists from around the world. Inquiring tourists want to immerse themselves in “Place Based Tourism.” They want to identify special places, like Tennessee, and experience the unique social, cultural, and natural environments Tennessee has to offer. They want to engage in “Tourism by Immersion.” Questions they seek to answer through immersion are:

1. What unique experiences can I have that are different from home?
2. What is life like for people who live here?
3. What rich memories can I build by being immersed in this place?
4. What can I learn that I will be excited to share with friends and family back home?
5. What iconic experiences in Tennessee can I have that stand out on the world stage? For example:
“I kayaked the most biologically diverse river in the world.”
“I visited the home of Jack Daniels.”
“I learned to live sustainably in a Mennonite community.”
“I walked on the “Trail of Tears.”
“I walked under the highest waterfall in eastern North America.”
“I saw the synchronous fireflies.”
“I visited Bell’s Cave, home of the Bell Witch.”
“I saw where the Mississippi River flowed backwards.”
“I took a boat ride on America’s largest underground lake.”
“I experienced ‘Elvis’s Highway,’ the rural road (HWY 100) he drove between Memphis and Nashville.”
“I visited the largest sinkhole in North America.”
“I visited the birthplace of the creator of the written language of the Cherokee people.”
“I snorkeled the river shoal that has more species of freshwater mussels than anywhere in the world.”

They do not want to stay in resorts or chain hotels, eat at chain restaurants, or visit only sites that everyone else visits. They tend to not engage in commercial recreation and tourism. They do not want incursions into urban environments that mimic other urban places. They avoid déjà vu. They may want a trip into the city to experience cultural diversity or visit a museum or historical site, such as the National Civil Rights Museum.

They want their experiences to be personal, special and unique. They want to experience the beauty, solitude and wonders of Tennessee’s nature, learn about rural and farm life, and soak in the country music of Broad Street, the Blues on Beale Street and the local band at the community dance on Saturday night. They might pick up a guitar and sing along. They would like to do “Farm Stays” and eat at the local country store and restaurant, or hang out at the local bar or music venue. They want to swim in the local swimming hole, kayak the local river, visit the local museum or historic sites and talk to the “Ole Timers.” They want to make long-lasting friends.

Tennessee has it all. The totality of the diverse tourism experiences available in Tennessee, fully developed, would surpass all other opportunities in states and provinces in North America. We have amazing terrestrial and aquatic diversity, including the Great Smoky Mountains and the most biological diverse rivers in the world (the Duck, Clinch, and Conasauga Rivers). The mountains and forests of East Tennessee have representative ecosystems that range from Georgia to Maine that can be experienced in one day. Our rocks are ancient and the geological diversity spans the Unaka Mountains, the Cumberland Mountains and Plateau, the Eastern and Western Highland Rim, the Central Basin, the Tennessee River Valleys, the Coastal Plains, and the Mississippi Alluvial Valley. Our cultural history is quite rich.
ranging from the Cherokee Nation and the Scotch-Irish in East Tennessee to the river-boaters of the Mississippi River. We were a major player in critical events of our nation’s history: the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, and the Civil War. Tennessee’s Presidents (Jackson, Polk, and Johnson) played a pivotal role in our nation’s westward movement. And finally, we have a rich musical heritage that includes bluegrass, country, the blues, rock, pop and more.

No other state in the nation has the broad array of experiences and opportunities Tennessee has to offer inquiring tourists from around the world. This proposal seeks to bring together a cadre of experienced scientists, educators and specialists to the University of Tennessee Institute Of Agriculture to work with current faculty and programs, such as the Center for Profitable Agriculture, the 4-H Camp and Conference Centers, including Lone Oaks, the Human Dimensions Research Lab, Dr. David Hughes, Professor and Greever Chair in Agribusiness Development. Proposed state agency partners are the Tennessee Department of Agriculture, the Tennessee Department of Tourism, the Tennessee Department of Economic & Community Development and the 9 Development Districts, the Tennessee Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils (12), and local Chambers of Commerce.

**Indicators of Success:**

1. Growth in the number of international tourists visiting Tennessee.
2. Growth in the number of visitors from Canada and other states in the U.S.
3. Growth in the number of visitors from Tennessee’s urban areas to rural areas of Tennessee.
4. Growth in the number of agritourism, ecotourism, and rural tourism businesses in Tennessee.
5. Growth in the number of certified ecotourism operations in Tennessee.

The people of rural Tennessee are sitting on a gold mine of opportunity and The University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, through its land grant mission, is in a unique position to help lead rural people to a better future. Social, cultural, and natural amenities exist in rich abundance in Tennessee. These amenities have to be identified, organized, and marketed and the people well-trained in business development, operations and hospitality services to achieve the mission of our Rural Tourism Initiative. The University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, through its teaching, research, and extension programs, is the logical institution to lead this effort.