

Workshops help farmers develop agritourism

By Jay Kirshenmann

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HOWARD — City-worn urban dwellers probably would enjoy a few days on a farm if they knew where to go, ag-tourism promoter Russell Stubbles said.

Simple pleasures like sitting on the front porch at night and looking at the stars, walking through the corn or helping with farm activities shouldn't be under-rated as tourist attractions.

People are willing to pay money for a peaceful stay, Stubbles said.

Leading workshops to help farmers realize the tourism value of their land, crops and location, the South Dakota State University park-management professor says marketing is key to reaching visitors.

It's called agritourism.

"For someone who spent years in Chicago or other big cities, a relaxing visit, a slow bike ride, or just a walk without fear of getting mugged is a nice escape," Stubbles said.

Sponsored by the Southeast South Dakota Tourism division, the next two workshops are set for 9 a.m to 4 p.m., Jan. 8 at the Miner County Community Revitalization office in Howard, and Jan. 15 at the Super 8 meeting room in Beresford.

"In a time when family farms and ranches struggle to make ends meet, a new interest is

emerging from travelers wanting to go to the farm to spend a day, overnight or their entire vacation," said Jacquie Fuks, executive director of Southeast South Dakota Tourism.

"Seeking the simple life, more visitors are asking to get back to basics and bring the family to the farm for a day of chores and home cooking, or to an apple orchard or pumpkin farm, or to see how cattle operations are run," she said.

"Or they may simply sit on the front porch and watch a prairie sunset."

Stubbles said hunting lodges could add income by drawing nonweapon-carrying, off-season visitors. Farmers also could draw on others in their community who make and sell interesting products such as honey, chocolate and handmade items. Looking at a neighbor's interesting hobby could add to a visitor's stay, too.

If a neighbor is willing to show his massive model train setup, for example, a farmer could search the Internet for people with like interests and send them information, he said.

A huge marketing budget isn't necessary to promote a location, he said.

"The challenge is getting people to see what they have here in the prairie region," Stubbles said. "Texas and California have been doing this for years, and visitors sometimes get

hooked on it, coming back to the same place again and again."

Stubbles worked extensively in Eastern Europe helping individuals and communities develop farm and ranch tours, demonstrations and family farm visits.

There are three agritourism basics: Have something for visitors to see, something for them to do and something for them to buy, according to the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service. Big home-cooked meals are a plus, too.

"Things to see and do are often offered free, but there is still a lot of money to be made selling items to visitors," the NSAIF's Entertainment Farming and Agri-Tourism division says.

South Dakota's biggest attractions are wide-open spaces, low crime, crops and animals, natural and cultural resources, birding and even the "big sky" at night.

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WORKSHOPS

DATES/LOCATIONS: Jan. 8 at the Miner County Community Revitalization office in Howard; Jan. 15 at the Super 8 in Beresford.

TIME: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

TOPICS: How to develop a business plan, insurance and liability concerns, brochure and Web site development and promotions.

COST: \$15 per person includes lunch.

REGISTER / INFO: Call 888-353-7382.

Web sites

- Russel Stubbles, agritourism consultant:
www.agritourism-prairie.com
- Southeast South Dakota Tourism:
www.southeastsouthdakota.com
- National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, Entertainment, Farming and Agri-Tourism: www.attra.org/attra-pub/entertainment.html