

Posted on Sun, May. 07, 2006

## Farms look to grow tourism trade

Associated Press

**ATHENS, Ga.** - Washington Farms in Oconee County first began as a "pick your own" strawberry farm.

But it's since grown to include pick-your-own pumpkins, a petting zoo, hay rides and a corn maze. Thousands of children and adults visit annually to pick their own fruit, get lost in the maze or visit the farm's petting zoo.

With the potential to earn extra money from tourists and school tours, farmers and leaders of two rural counties near Athens, Ga., are calling on farms to catch the rising tide of agritourism.

"It could be a tremendous boon for our economy," said Madison County Extension Agent Carl Varnadoe, pointing to successful farms in other counties that cater to tourists, such as Washington Farms.

Scott Cagle, an agritourism consultant who helped develop Cherokee County's Cagle Dairies into a tourist attraction, said agritourism helps preserve open spaces.

Cagle, his father and three brothers began giving tours to schoolchildren in 1993. Tourism now provides about half of the dairy's revenue, he said.

Governments can help by buying development rights to farms, which remove farms' pressure to develop, and with agritourism-friendly sign ordinances, Cagle said.

Oglethorpe County Chamber of Commerce is holding countywide meetings to develop ways to boost farm tourism. Farms are beginning to look into whether to invest in agritourism.

The Shields-Ethridge Heritage Farm near Arcade, Ga., doesn't yet qualify as an agritourism attraction, but it might in the future, said Susan Chaisson, president of the nonprofit corporation that operates the living history farm. The farm is a sort of museum begun by Chaisson's family to preserve land and educate people about farming a century ago.

Just outside Crawford, Ga., is the Agrarian Connections Farm, an effort by University of Georgia professor Robert Rhoades. He moved several log cabins to the farm and restored them and often teaches his students how to use tools and techniques popular among Georgia pioneers in the 1800s.

The farm added an apple orchard of more than 100 heirloom varieties. Rhoades hopes the farm will also become a living history museum where people can learn how the pioneers farmed.