



Agritourism Innovation Cluster Challenge

March 2020 - 2021

FINAL REPORT

Acknowledgement

Thank you to Project sponsors, funders and participants for your involvement in the Community Futures Wild Rose Innovation Challenge.

Pitch Participants

Rosebud Country Inn
Poplar Bluff Organics
Whispering Cedars Ranch
Old MacMiller's Farm
Local Up
Bighorn Tours
Good Knights Medieval Encampment

Partners

Western Economic Diversification
Government of Alberta
Community Futures Wild Rose
Factor 5 Group
Food Tourism Strategies
Alberta Food Tours
Wheatland County
Kneehill County
Rocky View County

Thank you to our project funders:

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Background and Context

The region east of Calgary is an agricultural centre with unique access to a large metropolitan population and international travellers. Since 2016, Community Futures Wild Rose (CFWR) has been fostering diversity in the agricultural sector by championing regional agritourism development in conjunction with Alberta Open Farm Days. In 2018-19, a regional agritourism strategy was developed to leverage this momentum and strengthen the role of agritourism in diversifying business and farm revenue sources. The Agri-tourism Cluster Innovation Challenge was an action-oriented approach to bringing the strategy, and industry to life.

Problem/Opportunity

The strategy identified the need to catalyze early sector development through education, business services and regional collaboration. To activate this strategy, CFWR designed an Agri-tourism Innovation Cluster Challenge to identify, train and support local agritourism operators in expanding their businesses in collaboration with regional partners.

The success of these local businesses provided examples of innovative agritourism businesses and helped community stakeholders better understand the agritourism potential in the region. As a result, new and expanded agritourism businesses have emerged, new industry networks have taken root, business connections have been made and decision makers have begun to recognize the importance of agritourism to the local economy.



Project Activities and Actual Timelines

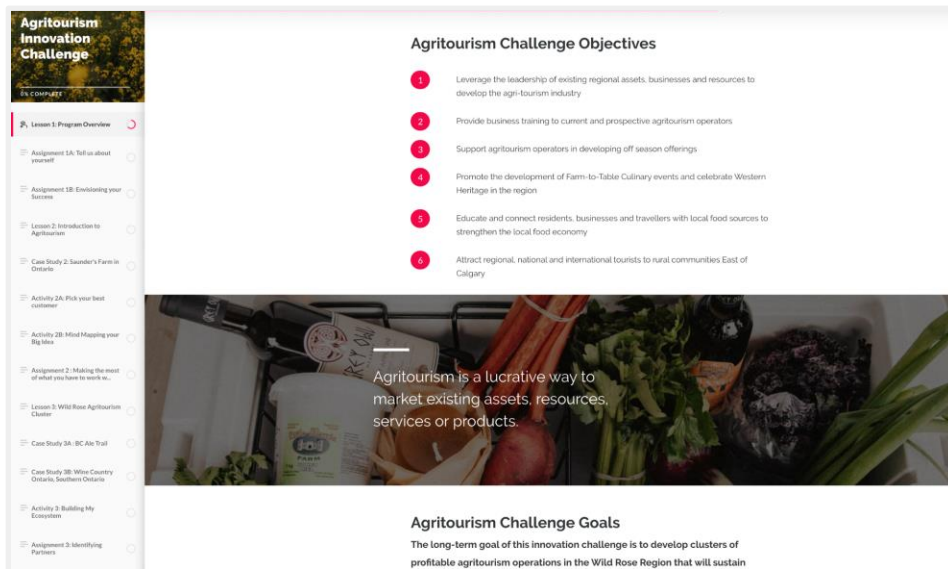
In 2020, Community Futures Wild Rose in Strathmore, Alberta launched an exciting initiative with the support of the Government of Canada and Government of Alberta to build a regional agritourism cluster through an *Agritourism Innovation Challenge*.

The Challenge was to build a micro-cluster by working with neighbours and industry partners from across the region with the help of training, business coaching, networking and marketing support that fostered regional collaboration and individual success.

20 program participants from across the entire region, including Bassano, Strathmore, Three Hills, Linden, Rosebud, and Carseland registered in the program.

Training and Workshops

To support entrepreneurs in the Challenge, we custom designed 6 online courses: Program Overview, Introduction to Agritourism, Cluster Development, Business Planning, Workforce Development and Marketing, each one with lessons, case studies, activities, assignments and special projects.



In the training, the program featured 9 Live Video Workshops that built a strong regional network, fostered peer addition to online



mentorship and catalyzed industry collaboration. The weekly workshops were invaluable to creating engagement and sustainable momentum that has resulted in participant organized meetings even after the training program has ended.

Participants were also encouraged to participate in the succession planning programs available to the region for the 2021/22 year. The sessions include topics for both family and non-family transitions. The 2021/22 schedule will be released in Fall of 2021 for participants to register through a separate CF supported initiative to ensure business transition and succession.

Pitch Competition

Once the training program was complete, 7 finalists participated in a virtual pitch competition, filmed onsite at the Rosebud Theatre by Smoke Signal Media, an excellent local production company. The pitches were scored based on regional impact, business viability, demonstrated commitment, and investment readiness. Honorable mentions:

Good Knights Entertainment, Three Hills, Medieval encampment accommodation
Old MacMiller Farm, Bassano, Agritourism operator
Local UP Collaborative Projects, Calgary, Culinary tours operating in the Wild Rose region
Big Horn Tours, Calgary, Scenic farm tours operating in the Wild Rose region

Third place went to **Rosemary Wotzke and Cam Beard of Poplar Bluff Organics** in Wheatland County, for her project to build a root vegetable distillery and steakhouse. Rosemary was awarded a pre-feasibility study and investment profile to help secure the resources needed to build this regional asset.

Second Place was **Jennifer Franssen of Whispering Cedars Ranch** in Wheatland County, for her project to build farm stay accommodations on the family sheep ranch. Jennifer was awarded a feasibility study and marketing plan to support her in taking the next steps of expanding the family business.

First Place was **BJ Jansen and the Rosebud Country Inn** in Wheatland County for their project to build a permanent market and dark sky reserve to diversify the tourism sector in Rosebud. BJ was awarded a professional feasibility study, business plan and promotional materials to kickstart the dark sky initiative.

Pitch Competition and Showcase

The pitches were the main feature of a 5 day virtual Agritourism Showcase highlighting the region and local businesses to visitors, investors and potential local partners, engaging 65 regional businesses, attracting 3,900 website visits and 600K social media impressions.



The development of social media channels, a vibrant regional website and entrepreneur training program are key assets for future regional agritourism development in the Wild Rose region East of Calgary.

A panel of judges were developed to review the pitches, evaluate and reward the participants on:

- Regional impact- based on regional collaboration and the involvement of partners
- Business viability - based on the business plan
- Demonstrated commitment - assessed based on the completion of training
- Investment readiness - based on the clarity of the pitch and the identified need

Project Timeline

Activity	Q1 (2020)	Q2 (2020)	Q3 (2020)	Q4 (2021)	Q1 (2021)	Q2 (2021)	Q3 (2021)
Preliminary Planning	■	■					
Community and Industry Engagement		■	■				
Detailed Program Design			■				
Curriculum Development			■	■			
Marketing Plan and Material			■	■			
Registration				■			
Training				■	■		
Pitch Competition and Expo					■		
Cluster Awards					■	■	■
Reporting							■

Project Results and Performance Indicators

As a result of the Agritourism Challenge, the region East of Calgary is poised to become the Agritourism capital of Canada through the development of culinary offerings,



authentic on-farm experiences, dark sky events and overnight stays to domestic and international markets.

Regional partners are committed to diversifying our tourism product to grow our rural economy, develop relationships with our urban neighbours and welcoming visitors to our home on the prairies. Building on the program's success, participants are excited to collaborate on a community-led approach to agritourism development by leveraging the website, social media and training assets.

We have also heard from prospective participants and partners outside the region who are eager to participate in future Agritourism Challenges. This indicates an opportunity to deliver the program across a wider geographical region in support of a growing industry that improves the economic, social and environmental sustainability of rural communities.

Other successes include:

- Active online Network of 22 members
- Industry association set to launch 2021
- A Regional Dark Sky initiative underway
- Regional Marketing infrastructure built
- Program infrastructure built (able to pivot to other industries, sectors and geographies)
- Agritourism curriculum developed
- Regional photobank developed for tourism marketing
- Multiple regional collaborative projects identified; some underway



Key Performance Indicators

As a result of the pandemic, the project management team had to pivot the program multiple times. Most notably, the pitch competition and showcase was turned into a virtual event that was heavily marketed through the website and social media channels. As a result, the website and social media channels are now regional assets that can be leveraged for future marketing campaigns or iterations of the Agritourism Challenge. (ST=Short Term, LT=Long Term)

Key Performance Indicators	Target	Achieved	Projected
Number of SMEs assisted	15	32	
Number of businesses created, maintained or expanded	15	24	
Number of businesses created, maintained or expanded ± Women	12	16	
Number of jobs maintained to date (as direct result of the project)	15	19	
# Participants trained	15	16	
# Partners engaged in community-based projects	10	11	
Number of businesses created, maintained or expanded ± Youth	3	2	
Number of non-HQP jobs created to date (as direct result of the project)	15	3	31
Number of non-HQP jobs created to date (as direct result of the project)- Women	12	3	15
Number of non-HQP jobs created to date (as direct result of the project)- Youth	3	1	5
Website visits	N/A	3,943	
Instagram	N/A	116,547	
Facebook	N/A	495,308	
Social media engagement	N/A	611,885	
# of Registrants	15	20	
# of workshop participants	30	45	
# of producers that report new sources of revenue	10	3	20
# of municipalities that contribute to regional agri-tourism initiatives	5	5	



Financial Information

Please see attached for complete project financial reporting and supporting documents.



Lessons Learned

Lesson #1 - Risk mitigation is important up-front and ease to 'Pivot'

Covid-19 had major impacts on the timeline of the project; with restaurant closures, visitor restrictions and overall business participation. The program had to be reconfigured several times throughout, and moving forward It is important to have a 'plan B' to in-person events and activities at the outset. Continuous pivoting was not only necessary for the project team, but also for businesses, oftentimes resulting in difficulty completing tasks and making in-person meetings.

Although COVID impacted the in-person events and activities, virtual training and meetings allowed participants to work at their own pace, and the pivot to online created space for all participants to remain connected during times of restrictions.

Although some of the project targets were not met, many powerful and important outcomes not identified were achieved. Lucrative partnerships within the local ecosystem were made such as hiring local photographers, videographers and tourism marketers. A strong network and mentorship was formed amongst the participants and surrounding operators. Operators are supporting each other to further diversify their business and are identifying and sourcing local talent and suppliers.

Lesson #2 - Leveraging Funds (change to COVID-19 Pandemic)

The project was very successful at leveraging funds from multiple partners to deepen the impact on local participants and the region as a whole. However, the number of funding partners and their individual eligibility/reporting requirements made it very challenging to pivot the project in response to major unforeseen circumstances (COVID-19). The amount of resources that went into repeatedly redesigning the project to accommodate funding criteria while responding to an uncertain and changing regulatory environment jeopardized the project. In the end, funding partners were understanding of the need to be flexible. Going forward, the value of leveraging funds needs to be weighed against the administrative burden, and some funding programs are more cumbersome and challenging than others.

Project Legacy and Recommendations Moving Forward

In spite of the impacts of COVID, the project was a massive success. Regionally, an agritourism micro-cluster has been built. A strong network has been formed, and businesses have been able to diversify their



offerings in collaboration with their neighbours. Regional marketing infrastructure such as a photobank, website and social media channels have been developed and will continue to grow their audience into the future.

An Executive Video Report was developed to share the results of the program with funders as well as future stakeholders who might be interested in the program. The video can also be utilized as a marketing tool to implement a similar project in the future.

The pilot received continuous revisions in order to respond to changing circumstances and become more streamlined and easy to administer. Significant project infrastructure has been built, including the training modules and videos that are currently housed on Rise online training platform, and can be easily transitioned to other industries, sectors, or geographical areas.

A program marketing plan has also been designed, and the project is significantly more cost effective. It should now be more aligned with a 'push and play' model with some program management and marketing support.

Recommendations for Future Consideration:

1. Establish/appoint a Destination Management/Marketing Organization, (DMO) to lead the Agritourism industry in the region including stewardship of marketing assets - 2022
2. Run a second iteration of the regional program over the winter of 2021/22 with an expanded region east to Brooks, Alberta - 2021/2022
3. Design a province-wide program for launch in Fall 2022, and across Canada in 2023
4. Adapt to the innovation challenge model to other priority sectors and/or sub sectors using the framework - 2022-24
5. Seek leadership/ownership to further manage and leverage the social media channels and website for future marketing of the cluster.

DocuSigned by:
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Chantale Sangster,
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9/29/2021

Date

