

Title: Land Use - Agritourism - Definition, HB558

Date: February 14, 2022

[Synopsis](#): Altering the definition of "agritourism" to include camping and incidental stays for the purpose of a certain provision of law authorizing a local jurisdiction to adopt the definition of "agritourism".

[Committees: Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs](#)

Position: **FAVORABLE**

Maryland Senators,

I am a fourth-generation farm owner in Carroll County, Maryland. To some, that may sound like stability and security, but to anyone with experience in rural communities, you will understand when I say that each generation had to make tremendous sacrifices to save our farm and way of life. I grew up hearing stories about how our family welcomed anyone who came down the farm lane, often offering a warm meal and a bed if they needed accommodations. But I also listened to stories about how my Grandfather had to personally buy back the farm (including every tool individually) at a public auction during the Great Depression. I then watched as my Grandfather worked several jobs, including farming, in order to pay all of the bills. Unfortunately, when I was a teenager, my Uncle who lived on the farm suddenly passed away at an early age from cancer, and the farm was sold outside of the family. One of the first changes the new farm-owner made was to put a gate with a lock at the end of the farm lane. It was this event that inspired my dream to one day buy back our family farm.

In April 2017, that dream became reality, and I am raising a family of my own, including our two adopted children, on the farm where my family started their journey almost 100 years ago. I give you this brief history to help you understand how important it is for farm-owners like myself to discover new revenue sources to protect the investment that many family members made before us. The tallest structure on our farm is the windmill, constructed in 1874, and it quickly became the logo for our farm because a windmill is something that harnesses power for a specific purpose. For many generations, the windmill harnessed the power of the wind to grind grain or pump water, but now in the 21st century, Willet Family Farm hopes to harness the power of agritourism to benefit every member of our community. Bringing people together is at the heart of everything we do.

In 2019, we were given a new opportunity to use the private property on our farm as a host location for camping guests through Hipcamp, an app-based marketplace similar to AirBnB, but specific to camping with a vision to get people outside. Immediately, we saw the positive impact that this had on our farm and our community.

1. In our first year, we welcomed over 200 guests from 9 different states and two different countries! This directly supported our vision of bridging the gap between urban and rural communities as we welcomed families from various cultural and religious backgrounds.
2. We witnessed the demand for camping as every single weekend was sold out on our farm.
3. This opened a brand new revenue stream for our farm that required very minimal expense or labor, but brought immediate profit. In the warm season, we spend approximately 1-2 hours per week managing communications with our farm-stay guests, but see \$250-\$500 per week in farm-stay reservations and sales.
4. We quickly heard from local businesses in Carroll County about how our farm-guests were visiting their local shops, breweries, restaurants, and markets, providing economic benefit to our neighbors.
5. As other farm-owners learned of this new opportunity, they also began offering farm-stays, and guests to our area actually *increased!*
6. Hipcamp's platform provides us the opportunity to sell products grown and raised on our farm directly to our farm-stay guests, increasing our revenue potential. In fact, often our product sales actually exceed our reservation fees!
7. The Carroll County Chamber of Commerce recognized our efforts of attracting local tourism and support of local businesses by awarding us the 2020 Carroll Biz Challenge Grand Prize Award and \$5,000.
8. Using the data from our farm-stay bookings, we were able to secure a \$50,000 grant from USDA to hire our first employee on the farm and promote our free-range egg operation.
9. When the Covid-19 pandemic hit in 2020, all of our other agritourism events had to be cancelled, but individual farm-stays provided us a safe solution for families to still get outside and experience nature and farm education in a socially-distanced environment. Farm-stay reservations in 2020 and 2021 were one of our main revenue streams, helping to ensure the financial stability of our farm.
10. In 2020, Forbes Magazine and Outside Magazine named Willet Family Farm as the "Favorite Hipcamp in the state of Maryland."

One of our recent guests captured our vision beautifully in their public review online when they said:

"The family who owns the farm are wonderful, welcoming, and easy to communicate with. Reading the info they provided about the farm's history and meeting them, it's clear they are dedicated to the farm and the land. Our four young kids (ages 1-8) loved exploring the farm and seeing the animals: bunnies, chickens, horses, and ducks kept them all fascinated. A popular

local orchard is just down the road for Pick-Your-Own-Fruit, too. We'll be back to check out the Willet Family Farm again." (Alethena, June 2020)

As you can see, farm-stays directly contribute to agricultural production, agricultural education, and agricultural sales, and that is why **we support the proposed revisions to the definition of "agritourism" to include camping and incidental stays** so that other farm-owners just like us can continue the tradition of protecting our land and way of life.

When we purchased the farm back into our family in 2017, the very first thing we did was remove the gate at the end of the farm lane, signaling to our neighbors, "you are welcome here." Revising the definition of "agritourism" to include camping and incidental stays will open the gate for more positive opportunities for farm-owners, local business owners, and the communities throughout Maryland that make our state the greatest state in the nation.

Sincerely,

Jeremy Willet
Owner
Willet Family Farm, LLC