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Michigan Farm Marketing and Agritourism Organization Formed

By Dick Lehnert

It's got a name and a birth date. Now we'll see what it grows up to be like.

The birth of the Michigan Farm Marketing & Agri-Tourism Association was announced in early December, during a marketing session at the Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Marketing EXPO in Grand Rapids, Mich.

A new steering committee has been named and will meet Jan. 16, according to Jeanne Lipe of the Michigan Department of Agriculture's (MDA) Marketing and Communications section. Its task will be to look at the information that has been generated in two years of work to form the new organization, clearly outline its goals and strategies, elect a governing board and then start a membership drive, she said.

Patrick O'Connor, who operates an East Lansing consulting agency and is the project manager, said it was fair to say that Michigan has joined the list of 41 other states that have organizations devoted to farm marketing and agritourism, but it was not the job of the advisory team that planted the seedling to say how the tree will look or what fruit it will bear.

There are about 1,000 farm marketing and agritourism operations conducting business in Michigan, O'Connor said, and given the diversity of the state's agriculture and its natural resources, it might have more farm markets and agritourism destinations than New York, Ohio or Pennsylvania – each of which has one or more organizations serving the industry.

It is up to the Michigan operators to figure out what they need their association to do for members, he said.

The new steering committee is made up of well-known Michigan operators of farm markets and agritourism operations. They include Brian Altonen, Williamsburg; Paul Geer, Belmont; Jay Jollay, Coloma; Douglas De Leo, Bangor; Karey Robinette, Grand Rapids; Gwen Anderson, Stanton; Howard Taylor, Grayling; Lynn Sage, Morrice/Eau Claire; Walt Harris, Honor; Abbey Jacobson, Romeo; Jeanette Yaklin, Lapeer; Bruce

Upston, Milan; Stephen Tennes, Charlotte; Bill Erwin, South Lyon; Lynette Henson, Blanchard; and Rick Coates, Acme.

Advisors who have participated in the formative stages include Michigan State University Extension personnel Bob Tritten, Ron Goldy, Phil Schwallier, Steven Fouch and Jim Bardenhagen, MSU campus persons Kirk Heinze and Michael Hamm; Ken Nye from Michigan Farm Bureau, Jeanne Lipe from MDA and the late Sandy Hill, who worked for MDA and whose husband and son operate a farm market near Montrose.

“Nationally, farm marketing and agritourism continue to grow as a method for small and medium-size producers to increase profits,” O’Connor said. “On-farm markets, roadside stands and pick-your-own operations are becoming increasingly popular with consumers who seek fresh and healthful agricultural products.

“Organizations can provide a number of positive benefits for members. Potential areas of focus could include public affairs, grant writing, networking, educational initiatives and collaborative promotional programs. A critical purpose for an organization could include identifying, facilitating and fostering the expansion opportunities for existing operations and the encouragement of new entries. There is potential for future collaborative research efforts in such areas as product innovation and marketing.”

He said the seedling has been planted, but the pruning and shaping work has just begun.