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## **Farm marketing, agri-tourism association announces first Board of Directors**

The steering committee of Michigan's newly formed Farm Marketing and Agri-Tourism Association (FMAT) announced this week its recommendations for the first board of directors for the association. The board of directors will be confirmed by FMAT's membership at its first annual meeting, to be held in conjunction with the Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market Expo in December 2006, in Grand Rapids.

"The candidates recommended by the FMAT steering committee have shown a strong interest in building a solid organization from the ground up to represent the farm marketing and agri-tourism industry," said Patrick O'Connor, Michigan State University (MSU) doctoral student and project leader. "It is exciting to see this important organization move forward under such capable leadership."

Board member recommendations were made based on the size and type of agri-tourism operation and the location/region of the operation, and include:

Representing Region 1 (Upper Peninsula) – one board position:

- Vacant – to be filled at the December board meeting; 1-year term.

Representing Region 2 (Northwest Lower Peninsula) – one board position:

- Walt Harris, Harris Farms, Honor; 3-year term.

Representing Region 3 (Northeast Lower Peninsula) - one board position:

- Howard Taylor, Wellington Farm Park, Grayling; 2-year term.

Representing Region 4 (Mid-West Counties) – two board positions:

- Karey Robinette, Robinette's Apple Haus/Robinette's Cellars Winery, Grand Rapids; 3-year term.
- Gwen Anderson, Anderson & Girls Orchards/Gift Loft, Stanton; 2-year term.

Representing Region 5 (Mid-East Counties) – two board positions:

- Jeanette Yaklin, Lapeer; 2-year term.
- Vacant - to be filled at the December board meeting; 1-year term

Representing Region 6 (Southwest Michigan) – two board positions:

- Douglas De Leo, Big Blue Plantation, Bangor; 1-year term
- Steve Tennes, The Country Mill Farm Market, Charlotte; 3-year term.

Representing Region 7 (Southeast Michigan) – two board positions:

- Bruce Upston, Wasem Fruit Farm, Milan; 1-year term.
- Abbey Jacobson, Westview Orchards, Romeo; 3-year term.

At-Large Representatives – two board positions

- Jay Jollay, Jollay Orchards, Coloma; 2-year term.
- Lynn Sage, Tree-Mendus Fruit, Eau Claire; 3-year term.

Terms of office for the initial board of directors were determined through a blind/random process to assure that no more than one board member from any given region or the at-large positions will be up for new terms of office or replacement election at the same time. Future board members will be elected for a three-year, staggered term. According to FMAT's bylaws, each board member can serve an additional three-year term, if elected.

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FMAT was created, based on input from Michigan's farm market and agri-tourism industry, to advance Michigan agriculture by promoting the interests of owners and operators of Michigan farm markets and agri-tourism endeavors; to encourage a profitable and sustainable farm marketing and agri-tourism industry in Michigan; to represent the interests of Michigan farm markets and Michigan agri-tourism businesses in matters of state or national concern; and to cooperate and coordinate efforts with other organizations in achieving these purposes.

An industry survey and focus groups were conducted last spring and summer to gauge the interest in a statewide organization that focuses on farm marketing and agri-tourism. Survey results showed a strong interest in a statewide organization, and FMAT was incorporated in November 2005. A steering committee of farm market and agri-tourism industry members was formed to create bylaws and direct the formation of FMAT.

Initial funding for research and the formation of FMAT was provided through Project GREEN (Generating Research and Extension to meet Economic and Environmental Needs), Michigan's plant agriculture initiative at MSU. Additional support, including legal counsel, was provided by Michigan Farm Bureau (MFB). Staff members from MSU Extension, MFB and the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) have served in an advisory capacity throughout the research and association formation process and will continue to provide in-kind support and advice to FMAT.

"Responding to industry-initiated and driven priorities was one of the primary reasons that Project GREEN was established," said Doug Buhler, associate director of the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station and director of Project GREEN. "Farm marketing and agri-tourism are steadily growing segments of the state's agricultural portfolio. This newly created grass-roots organization will position itself to aggressively respond to the specific needs of its members, help strengthen the network of Michigan farm marketing and agri-tourism industry members, and help create new linkages among them."

"The Michigan Farm Bureau is fully supportive of the association's mission, and we're pleased to see the association moving forward with the establishment of a board," said Ken Nye, MFB horticultural and forestry specialist. "Niche marketing and agri-tourism are popular sectors of Michigan's diverse agriculture industry. We believe this association will help these sectors maintain public interest, expand their customer base and fully realize their growth potential."

"It has been exciting to watch this organization develop over the past year to a point where it is now positioned to make a difference to the agri-tourism industry," said MDA Director Mitch Irwin. "MDA will continue to provide support in any way it can, and we look forward to partnering with FMAT in the future to promote and expand agri-tourism opportunities in our state."

Among the board's first priorities will be to create a public image for FMAT and to begin work on its first membership drive, which will be held in conjunction with the 2006 Great Lakes Fruit, Vegetable and Farm Market Expo in December.

"The members of this organization will be the drivers of its success," said O'Connor. "The direction this group takes and the priorities it addresses in the future will depend on a strong, active and diverse membership, and I encourage all farm market and agri-tourism businesses to be a part of this industry's future."

Information about membership opportunities, FMAT bylaws and goals, and the board of directors will be available over the next few months at [www.mi-fmat.org](http://www.mi-fmat.org).

For more information about agricultural tourism in Michigan, visit [www.michigan.gov/agtourism](http://www.michigan.gov/agtourism).

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