Sturgeon County Agribusiness and Agritourism Review – Current State Assessment

Submitted to:

Sturgeon County

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1. Introduction

Sturgeon County (the County) hosts a plethora of high-quality agricultural resources. With approximately 480,000 acres of farming area, the County is home to 730 farms including crop farms, livestock farms, fruit and vegetable farms, as well as greenhouses and nurseries. With such an abundance of primary production, the County is well-situated to support value-added agricultural operations and agritourism activities. To better support agribusiness and agritourism activities in the County, Nichols Applied Management (Nichols) along with ISL Engineering and Land Services (ISL) and Toma Consulting (Toma) were engaged to spearhead a review of agribusiness and agritourism and support an associated Task Force in the County. In this work the Study Team conducted a Current State Assessment to better understand existing agribusiness and agritourism activities in the County, as well as existing regulatory practices with respect to agricultural activities in the County.

The remaining sections of this Current State Assessment are as follows:

- **Section 2** provides a technical overview of agribusiness and agritourism in the County, including economic, industry, and market conditions.
- **Section 3** provides a document review of existing regulatory and policy practices with respect to agricultural activities in the County.
- **Section 4** includes a summary of feedback solicited from one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders regarding the state of agribusiness and agritourism in the County.

2. Agribusiness and Agritourism – Technical Overview

2.1 Introduction

Sturgeon County hosts an abundance of high-quality agricultural resources. As per the 2016 Census of Agriculture, farm receipts in the County totaled over $230 million in 2016 ($2016), the highest in the Edmonton Metropolitan Region (the Region) (Statistics Canada 2016a). The County hosted approximately 23% of the farm operations and 28% of farmland in the Region.

The County's strong base of primary production, along with its close proximity to a major urban centre, makes it well-positioned to host value-added agribusiness and agritourism operations. The remainder of this section outlines the current state of agribusiness and agritourism in the County, including a high-level definition of agribusiness and agritourism as well as a discussion of key market trends.

2.2 Defining Agribusiness and Agritourism

The terms "agribusiness" and "agritourism" are often used to describe a wide range of agricultural activities. While these terms are used frequently by a variety of stakeholders, they are not always applied consistently.

Agribusiness

The term agribusiness was originally coined to describe primary production activities that occur on the farm, and the corresponding sale of farm commodities (Edwards and Shultz 2005). As value chains have expanded and the list of agricultural activities has grown beyond primary production, it has been suggested that the term agribusiness is no longer "farm centric", but instead a descriptor of a wide range of agricultural activities that occur both inside and outside the farm gate. Today, agribusinesses exist all through the value chain and within a given County the size of an agribusiness can very substantially.

Today, the term agribusiness is used to describe a range of farm-related activities including, but not limited to:

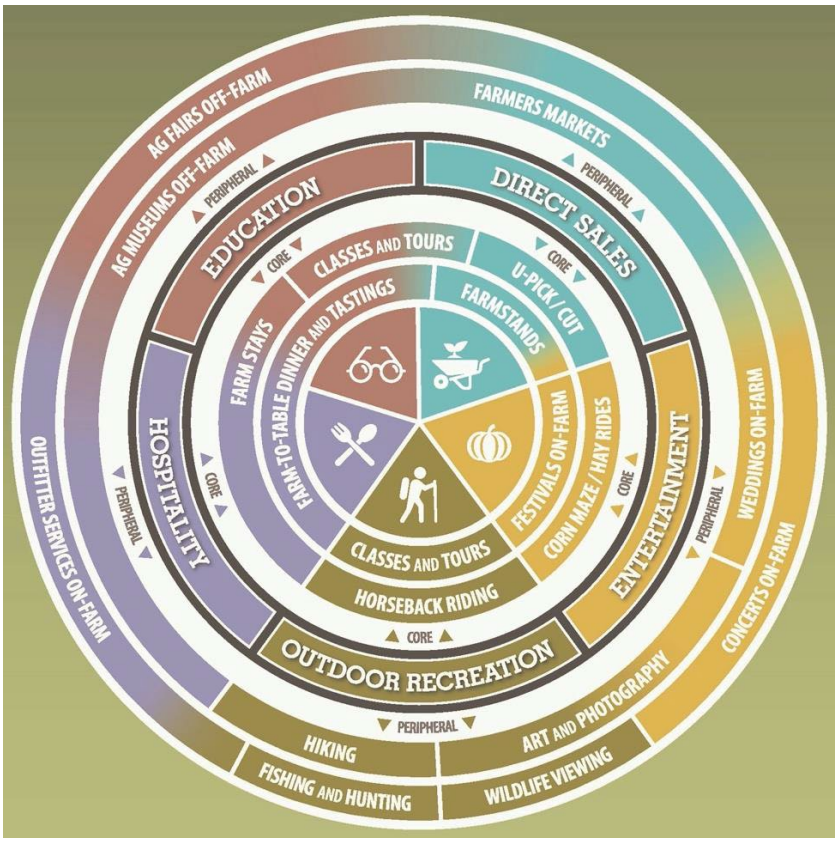
- primary production;
- value-added processing;
- farm input manufacturing (e.g., machinery and equipment, fertilizer, seed development, etc.);
- farm support services (e.g., grain elevators, egg grading stations, seed cleaning, spraying services, etc.);
- agricultural technology, research, and innovation (e.g., software, database development, digital services for e-commerce, etc.); and
- agricultural management and finance services (e.g., lending, insurance).

Agritourism

Like agribusiness, the term agritourism is used frequently to describe a wide variety of agricultural- and tourism-related activities. Some definitions of agritourism describe a direct interaction between a customer and a working farm. Other definitions of agritourism are much broader, sometimes referred to as "rural tourism" where activities can occur in rural areas but do not necessarily take place on a working farm. There has been some recent work focused on developing a clearer definition of agritourism. In a paper published in 2014, Flanigan et al. developed a general typology to describe agritourism which included both on-farm and off-farm rural tourism activities such as accommodations at an ex-farmhouse property, farming tours or demonstrations, participation in farm tasks, etc.

More recently, a study in the U.S. (Laime et al. 2021) presented a conceptual framework of agritourism that disaggregates agritourism activities into core (on-farm) activities including things like farm stays, classes and tours, u-picks, horseback riding, and dinners and tastings, and peripheral activities such as hiking, wildlife viewing, farmers markets, off-farm museums, and on-farm events like weddings and concerts (Figure 2-1). While the core activities presented in this framework have been relatively well-accepted, there has been some debate as to whether or not the peripheral activities should be included in the agritourism definition (Lamie et al. 2021).

Figure 2-1 Conceptual Framework for Understanding Agritourism



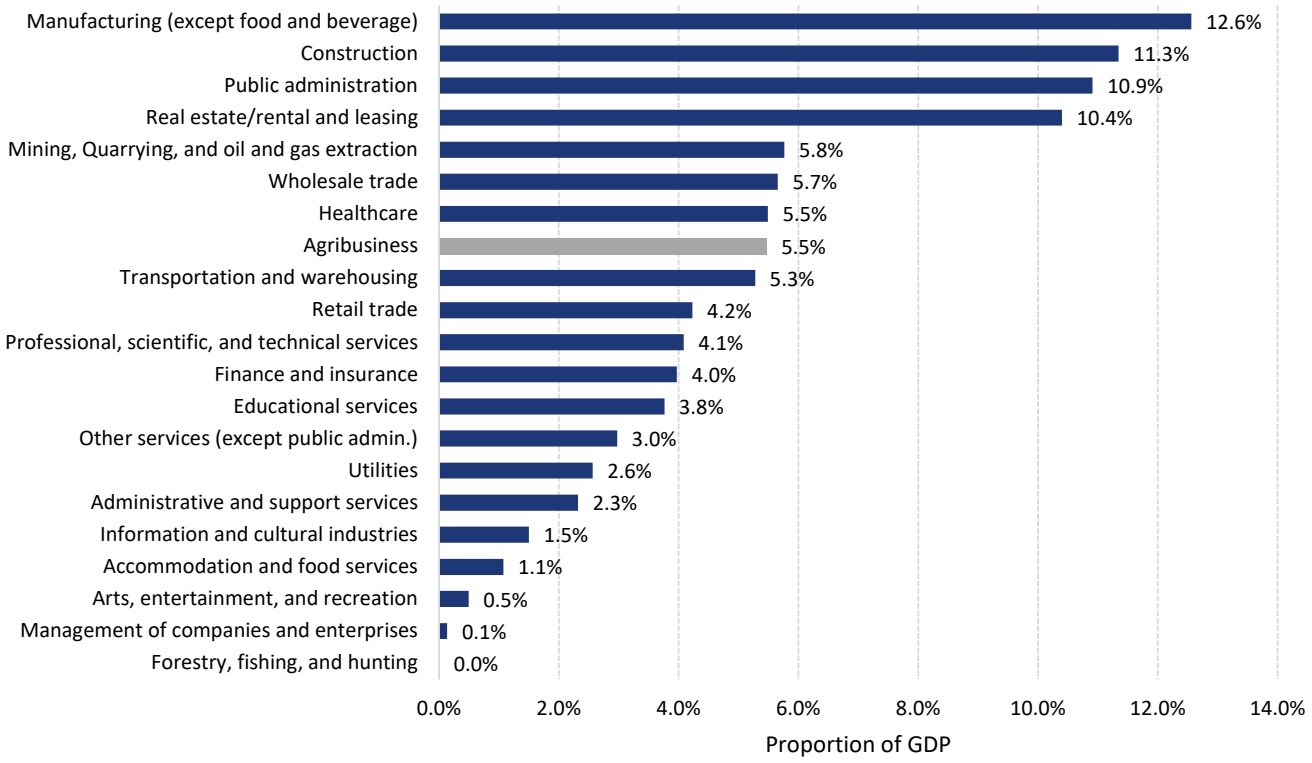
Source: Adapted from Laime et al. 2021.

Other jurisdictions that offer an abundance of agritourism have developed their own definitions of the term. For example, British Columbia has defined agritourism as "a tourist activity, service or facility accessory to land that is classified as a farm under the Assessment Act" (BC Ministry of Agriculture 2017). This definition therefore narrows down agritourism activities to those taking place on a designated farm and include activities such as recreation, events/festivals, educational services, direct marketing, and overnight visits. For the purposes of the current state assessment, a relatively broad definition of agribusiness and agritourism is adopted to provide general context of the County's existing agribusiness and agritourism activities. A more detailed review on agribusiness and agritourism definitions from a regulatory perspective are provided in Section 3 of this report, as well as the *Sturgeon County Agribusiness and Agritourism Review – Summary of Four Comparator Municipalities' Regulatory and Policy Requirements* report provided to the County under separate cover.

2.3 Describing Agribusiness and Agritourism in Sturgeon County

Primary production and associated value-added activities are important components of the County's economy. In 2019, the County's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was approximately $1.5 billion, representing approximately 0.4% of provincial GDP and about 1.5% of the Region's GDP (authors' calculations based on Statistics Canada 2021). Agribusiness in the County, including primary production, agricultural support services, and food and beverage manufacturing, made up roughly $82 million, or 5.5% of the County's total GDP (Figure 2-2), ranking it as the eight largest subsector in the County in terms of GDP contribution in 2019.

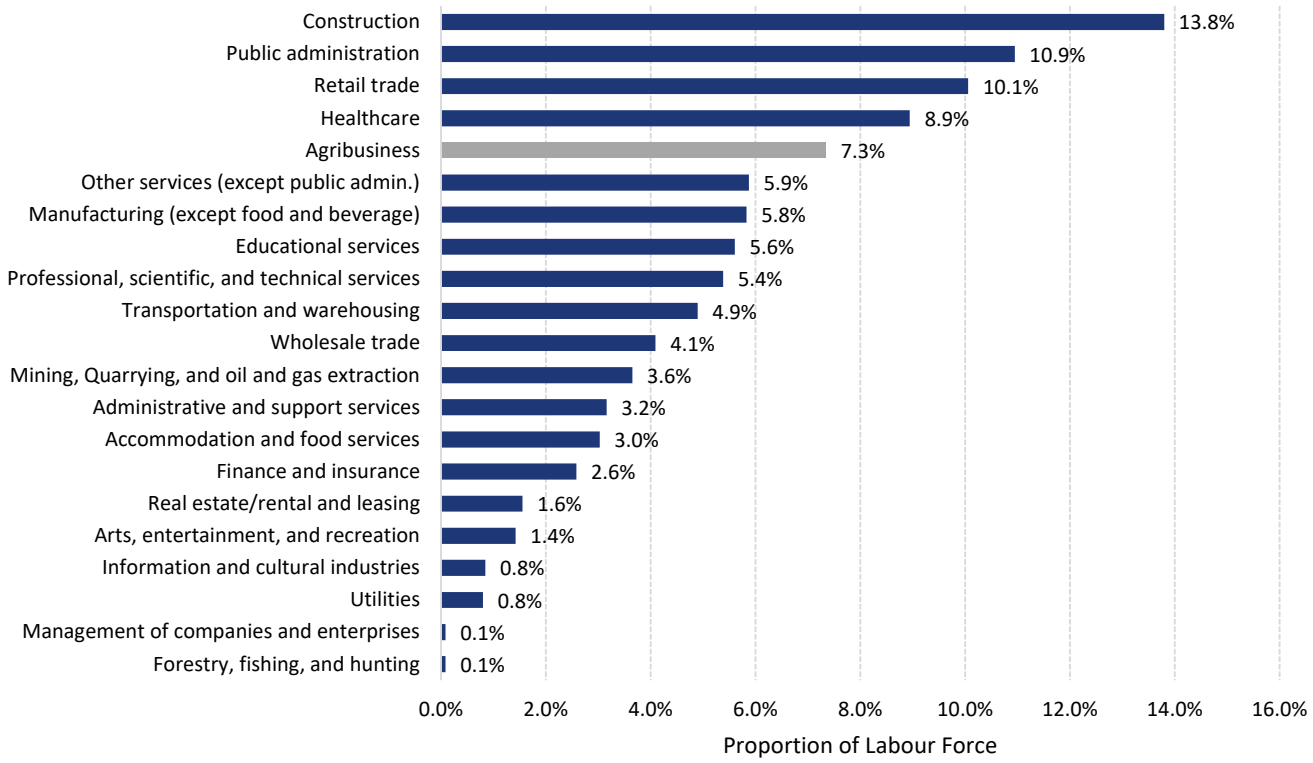
Figure 2-2 Sturgeon County GDP Breakdown, 2019



Source: Authors' calculations based on Statistics Canada 2021.

Agribusiness activities in the County are not only important in terms of GDP contribution, but they are also an important component of the County's labour force. In 2016, agribusiness activities made up over 7% of the County's labour force (Figure 2-3), ranking it as the fifth most important contributor to labour force in 2016.

Figure 2-3 Sturgeon County Labour Force Breakdown, 2016



Source: Statistics Canada 2016b.

As noted earlier, the terms “agribusiness” and “agritourism” are often used to describe a wide range of agricultural activities. Some of the agribusiness and agritourism activities taking place in the County are described in more detail below.

Primary Production

While the scope of this work does not focus on primary production, the importance of primary production to other agribusiness and agritourism activities in the County cannot be understated. Indeed, many agritourism operations in the County take place on working farms (e.g., Prairie Gardens and Adventure Farm). As per the 2016 Census of Agriculture (Statistics Canada 2016a) Sturgeon County was host to 730 farms including crop farms (58%), livestock and poultry/egg farms (36%), fruit/vegetable farms (3%), and greenhouses and nurseries (3%). In a recent agricultural engagement strategy prepared for the County in 2018 (Serecon 2018), the consultants found the County’s agricultural community expressed a deep sense of history and pride with respect to farming. The County’s agronomic conditions, including its soil quality, favourable climate, and precipitation, were frequently touted as some of the greatest advantages for farmers to grow a wide variety of field and horticultural crops. Indeed, Sturgeon County is host to many longstanding family farms that settled and stayed in the County due to its high-quality growing conditions and proximity to major urban centers like St. Albert and Edmonton.

While primary production has long been vital to the County, the sector is changing. Serecon noted that, like other areas of the province, the number of full-time farmers has been declining in the County as farms continue to consolidate into large-scale operations covering thousands of acres of crops or large-scale livestock production.

The County has also seen an emergence of specialty or diversified farming operations in response to increasing demand for local food, agricultural experiences, and other rural tourism activities (Serecon 2018). Finally, entirely novel activities have also entered the County's agriculture sector, such as cricket rearing and duck production.

The substantial changes occurring in the agriculture sector, not only in the County but elsewhere across the Prairies, have led to a number of challenges farmers now face, including concerns around succession, attracting labour, overall profitability of small- to medium-scale farms, and ongoing urban-rural land conflicts (Serecon 2018). Succession is a particularly concerning issue, as the average age of farmers is quite high in the County (57.5 years) and the provincial overall (55.7 years) (Statistics Canada 2016) and younger farmers find it difficult to buy existing farms due to high land and machinery costs.

Value-Added Activities

The County hosts many value-added agricultural processing operations. From small- to large-scale operations, the County has attracted a variety of value-added activities as a result of its proximity to high quality agricultural inputs and major urban markets like Edmonton and St. Albert.

Some of the larger-scale, more agri-industrial type processing operations in the County include crop processing, such as (Sturgeon County n.d.):

- Canadian Oats Milling, which processes 36,000 tonnes of oats each year into products such as whole oat groats, quick oats, and rolled oats, exporting these products to 40 countries around the world.
- Bunge Canada, which operates a large-scale oilseed crushing plant in the Sturgeon Industrial Park, processing about 850 metric tonnes of oilseeds per day.

The County also hosts two large grain terminals just west of Morinville owned and operated by Westmor and G3 Canada. These terminals handle up to 1 million metric tonnes of grain and pulses each year. Finally, the Nutrien Redwater Facility located in Sturgeon County's portion of the Alberta Industrial Heartland produces almost 2 million tonnes of nitrogen-based fertilizer each year (Sturgeon County n.d.).

Additional farm services operations include Sturgeon Valley Fertilizers, a diverse farm services provider that specializes in custom packaging, bagged fertilizer, application services like sampling, spraying, and spreading, as well as agronomy services.

The County also hosts many small- to medium-scale value-added agribusiness and agritourism operations (Table 2-1). As described in Table 2-1 below, the County hosts many small-scale berry and vegetable operations that offer farm-gate sales and u-pick services to their consumers. There is also a variety of diverse agricultural operations offering tourism services such as family events, educational workshops, and festivals. Note that Table 2-1 is not meant to represent a comprehensive inventory of agribusiness and agritourism operations in Sturgeon County, but rather a variety of the type and scale of operations that the County currently hosts.

Table 2-1 Agribusiness and Agritourism Operations in Sturgeon County

Business	Description
2BK Vegetable Farm	2BK produces sustainably grown vegetable products that can be purchased right on the farm at 2BK's country store during the growing season.

Business	Description
Berry Ridge Orchard	Berry Ridge Orchard focuses on saskatoon berry production and provides u-picking during the growing season, farm-gate sales, as well as direct sales of frozen berries to food processors.
Boissonneault Family Farms	Boissonneault Family Farms focuses on raspberries production and offers u-picking during the growing season.
Birchwood Meadows	Birchwood Meadows is a flower farm and u-pick garden offering a variety of outdoor workshops. The farm is also available for hosting events.
Coronado Saskatoon U-Pick Farm	Coronado Saskatoon U-Pick Farm offers u-picking, pre-picked and custom orders, an on-farm picnic area, processed products, and frozen products. The farm specializes in specializes in black currants and saskatoons.
Dark Sky Distillery	Sturgeon County's first grain-to-glass craft distillery specializing in gin and vodka.
Deb's Greenhouse	Deb's greenhouse offers bedding plants, hanging baskets, perennials, and annuals. The greenhouse also hosts a variety of horticultural workshops.
Double Eagle Farms	Double Eagle Farms produces seasonal fruits and vegetables and offers u-picking and farm gate sales. They also sell their produce at various farmers markets.
First Choice Tree Nursery	First Choice Nursery is a tree and shrub nursery that also hosts an on-farm garden center.
GNR	GNR is a fruit and vegetable farm offering u-picking and farmers market sales for strawberries and a variety of vegetables.
Grace Gardens	Grace Gardens offers on-farm u-picking for both raspberries and saskatoon berries.
Lakeside Farmstead	Lakeside Farmstead is a family-owned beef and dairy producer here selling beef at Darcy's Meat Market. Lakeside recently began producing craft cheese.
Lazy RT Beef	Lazy RT beef is a third-generation livestock producer with experience in all aspects of the beef industry from cow-calf and seed stock production to feedlot finishing and custom processing. The farm hosts an on-farm processing facility, Cardiff Meat and Sausage, where customers can purchase high quality beef products directly from the farm.
Manawan Farms	Manawan Farms is a small farm that raises free range pork fed with organic grains. Pork is sold by the quarter, half, or whole pig and can be purchased on the farm.
Peas on Earth	Peas on Earth is a local farm producing fresh, organic vegetables. Their produce is available at select markets. Peas on Earth also offers online pre-ordering and farm curbside pick up during the summer months.
Peeters Pride Alpacas	Peeters Pride Alpacas is an Alpaca farm that produces a variety of knitted products using Alpaca fibre. The farm is also open during the summer months offering a variety of activities and tours.

Business	Description
Prairie Gardens & Adventure Farm	Prairie Gardens & Adventure Farm is a 35-acre family farm focusing on the production of local, healthy food as well as agri-tourism activities. The farm hosts greenhouses, a garden centre, u-pick activities, a pumpkin patch, and a corn maze. Visitors can participate in group tours, u-pick gardens, on-farm festivals, and a variety of other events and programs.
Rosy Farms	Rosy Farms grows haskap fruit that can be purchased fresh or frozen. The farm also offers u-pick in the summer months.
Smokin' Elk Ranch	Smokin' Elk Ranch raises elk without the use of growth hormones or chemicals and offers a variety of products that can be purchased at the ranch including steaks, tenderloin, roasts, ground hamburger, sausage, pepperoni, smokies, and jerky.
Sprout Farms	Sprout farms is an apple orchard located in the County. The orchard produces apples, pears, and plums sold through a Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) program that allows participants to visit and help work the farm during the growing season.
Sundog Organic Farm	Sundog Organic Farm is an organic vegetable operation that sells their products at local farmers markets as well as through a farm share program.
Sunflower Gardens	Sunflower Gardens specializes in raspberries and saskatoon berries and offers u-pick and pre-picked orders. The farm hosts a small playground and picnic area as well as a variety of preserves and pies for sale.
T&D's Saskatoons	T&D's Saskatoons is a saskatoon berry operation providing seasonal u-picking to customers.
Tipi Creek Farm	Tipi Creek Farm covers 59-acres, over half of which includes untouched natural forest area. The farm focuses on low-impact, sustainable practices to grow healthy, local vegetables and herbs while conserving the soil, forest, and wildlife. The farm grows and markets vegetables under Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) and offer CSA participants the opportunity to participate in on-farm activities.

Source: Sturgeon County 2019a.

2.4 Agribusiness and Agritourism – Market Trends

Value-added agriculture in Alberta has been changing in response to changing consumer demands. Indeed, consumer preferences have been shifting, with an increasing interest in foods that not only taste good, but that are nutritious, sustainably produced, and that provide support for local farmers and communities (Canada Senate 2019). In recent years, small- to medium-sized agribusinesses that have been willing to innovate to meet the changing needs of consumers have been successful, while larger agri-food companies that have failed to adjust to these new trends have not (Canada Senate 2019). In a recent household survey conducted in Canada, Canadians indicated that the most purchased food products included those that:

- were locally sourced (43%),
- had recognizable ingredients (33%).

- were natural or organic (31%), and
- offered sugar-reduced versions (35%) (Deloitte 2021).

These trends have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and are expected to continue into the long-term as well.

Technological innovation has also allowed for new processing applications of primary products. For example, the Protein Industries Canada (PIC) Supercluster has funded an array of innovative projects working on novel applications of Canadian raw materials. The Supercluster works with consortiums made up of private sector companies, academic institutions, and industry stakeholders to explore the potential of plant-based proteins from crops like canola, grains, hemp, and more. Regulation changes have also had an influence on trends in agribusiness and agritourism activities. For example, in July 2020 animal slaughter regulation in Alberta changed to allow consumers to buy an animal directly from a farm and have it slaughtered on-site (CBC News 2020). The regulation change has supported farms adapting to increased interest in direct farm purchases due to meat supply chain disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another recent example includes new regulations around cannabis production and sales, which has effectively created a new industry in Canada.

Sturgeon County has a history of attracting and developing agribusiness and agritourism activities (see Table 2-1). The County is also home to the University of Alberta Research Farm where field crop research is undertaken that may be leveraged for value-added agribusiness activities (Serecon 2018).

Agritourism in particular has been a growing part of the general rural tourism market, with visitors nostalgic for a simpler time and looking for opportunities to connect with cultural heritage (Ainley and Smale 2010). Agritourism also allows consumers to get to know where their food comes from and develop a stronger connection to how their food is produced (Ainley and Smale 2010). Agritourism participants typically live relatively close, often undertaking day trips to participate in a singular experience like farm tours, u-picks, farm product purchases, etc. (Travel Oregon 2017). In a recent agritourism study conducted for the Foothills Tourism Association, four major tourism trends influencing agritourism in Alberta's Foothills were identified (Culinary Tourism Alliance 2021):

- **Escape from the city** – Urbanites are looking for ways to escape the city while staying close to home, a trend that has been increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. As uncertainty remains around international travel, local agritourism operations can take advantage of those looking to alternative, local tourism activities.
- **The search for meaning** – The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many people to look for meaningful connections with the places they visit. Agritourism allows tourists to engage directly with the people and landscapes they are visiting and empowers business owners to share their stories. Post-pandemic, agritourism can offer locals and residents from nearby municipalities an opportunity to connect to primary products and producers without having to travel very far.
- **Responsible consumption** – Consumers are more and more interested in knowing where their food comes from and how it is produced. A 2016 study of Albertan households indicated that between 2012 and 2016 there was a 9% increase in the number of Albertan households who had purchased goods from a farm retail channel (i.e., at the farm or through an online order from the farm) (R.A. Malatest & Associates 2016). This study also showed that 23% of Albertan households chose restaurants based on their use of locally sourced Albertan ingredients. Agritourism operations in Alberta therefore have an opportunity to showcase the environmental, economic, and social benefits of participating in agritourism and purchasing local primary products.

- **Agritourism and outdoor tourism** – Agritourism operations can capitalize on the demand for outdoor tourism opportunities, as many consumers interested in outdoor activities also have an interest in local food and landscapes. Agritourism operations that can strengthen links between local primary production and landscapes may be able to attract a more visitors (e.g., outdoor cooking and dining experiences, farm tours that provide a connection between products, experiences, and the destination, etc.).

Given Sturgeon County's high-quality primary production, its existing base of diverse small- to medium-sized agribusiness and agritourism operations, and its proximity to major urban centres, the County is in a strong position to take advantage of many of the above-described market trends to grow its agribusiness and agritourism sectors.

3. Document Review

3.1 Introduction

To better understand the current regulatory environment for agricultural activities in the County, the Study Team undertook a document review of current regulations and policies with respect to agriculture-related operations. The Edmonton Metropolitan Region Growth Plan, draft Regional Agriculture Master Plan, Sturgeon County Municipal Develop Plan, Sturgeon County Land Use Bylaw, and Sturgeon County Community Standards Bylaw were reviewed as part of the current state assessment. The review focused on identifying published definitions for agribusiness and agritourism, applicable policies including any specific targets relevant to Sturgeon County, potential applicable current regulations, as well as any noted descriptions or commentary regarding constraints.

3.2 Document Review and Findings

3.2.1 Edmonton Metropolitan Region Growth Plan

Sturgeon County is located within the broader Edmonton Metropolitan Region (the Region). The Edmonton Metropolitan Region Growth Plan (EMR Growth Plan) aims to guide and support growth as it manifests throughout the Region in a "responsible manner that sustains and advances regional prosperity and wellbeing" (EMRB 2017). As it relates to agriculture, the Study Team notes the following:

- There are no formal definitions of agribusiness and agritourism in the EMR Growth Plan, and no specific policies with potential criteria for locating these activities are included.
- The EMR Growth Plan glossary does include definitions for agriculture, agricultural resources, and agriculture value-added as below:
    - *Agriculture: The growing, raising, managing and/or sale of livestock (cattle, pigs, sheep, horses, game birds, poultry (hens, chickens, turkeys, chicks, game birds, other poultry), crops (hay, field crops, tree fruits or nuts, berries or grapes, vegetables, seed) foods or other agriculture products (e.g., trees, greenhouse or nursery products, mushrooms, sod, honey,) horticulture and agri-food related value added enterprises including education, motivated either by profit or lifestyle.*
    - *Agricultural Resources: The land and on-farm buildings, equipment, processing and handling facilities and agri-business activities that contribute to the production, preparation, and marketing of crops, livestock, and livestock products as a commercial enterprise.*
    - *Agriculture, Value-Added: The addition of a process or service to an agricultural raw material being produced by the farmer (producer). This may include some form of processing (milling, drying, cleaning, sorting, slaughtering, distilling (winery) or direct marketing as farm gate sales, farmer's markets or direct distribution.* (EMRB 2017).
- The EMR Growth Plan also provides a definition for agricultural land, but this does not speak to specific activities on the land.
- The EMR Growth Plan does not provide a breakdown or targets for types of activities in the agriculture sector compared to other rural municipal employment types to provide guidance as to where these types of agricultural activities should be located in the County.
- The EMR Growth Plan does not provide guidance for the County's MDP or the Land Use Bylaw (LUB) regarding agribusiness and agritourism to facilitate new development or expansion, inform what scale is

appropriate as an accessory use relative to the principal agricultural use, or what measures are required to minimize and mitigate conflict with nearby landowners and other non-agricultural uses in the County.

3.2.2 Regional Agriculture Master Plan

The Regional Agriculture Master Plan (RAMP) was developed as a framework for agricultural development in the Edmonton Metropolitan Region. As it relates to agriculture, the Study Team notes the following:

- The RAMP does not provide a definition for agribusiness, but does include the following definitions of agritourism, agriculture, agri-food, agricultural uses, agriculture-related uses, and value-added agriculture:
  - *Agri-Tourism Uses: Farm related tourism uses, including limited accommodation, direct-to-consumer sales, agricultural education, recreation and activities that involve observation and participation in the farming operations.*
  - *Agriculture: The growing, raising, managing and/or sale of livestock, crops, horticulture and agriculture related products or services including food, feed, fibre, energy and other complementary value-added activities.*
  - *Agri-food: All aspects related to the production, sale, and distribution of agricultural food including a system of producers, businesses, suppliers, transporters, retailers, and consumers.*
  - *Agricultural Uses: Land uses directly associated with agriculture and includes buildings and structures accessory to and supportive of the activities.*
  - *Agriculture-related Uses: Are uses directly related to agriculture, primarily support agriculture, benefit from being in close proximity to agriculture and provide direct products and/or services to agriculture. (EMRB 2021).*
- The RAMP also provides a definition for on-farm diversified uses which focuses on the need for secondary activities on farms to be directly compatible with principal agriculture, which is at odds with desires to host certain events on agricultural lands:
  - *On-farm Diversified Uses: Are secondary uses and limited in area to the principal agricultural use and are compatible with the principal agricultural use and agricultural uses in the adjacent area. On-farm diversified uses may include but are not limited to home occupations, agri-tourism uses, and uses that produce value-added agricultural products.* (EMRB 2021).
- The RAMP does not provide any targets in terms of what density and/or scale of agribusiness or agritourism activities are appropriate.
- The RAMP has not officially been put into effect at the time of writing as it requires both EMRB and Province of Alberta approval. The draft plan was approved by the EMRB in August 2021 but still requires approval from the province.
- It is intended that the RAMP be integrated into the EMR Growth Plan as part of the 5-year Growth Plan review. Further studies are required to make the policy framework more robust in terms of adding policies for On-Farm Diversified Uses and addressing what scale of agritourism and other accessory uses to the principal agriculture use are appropriate so as to avoid adverse off-site impacts on designated residential districts in the County and to not erode the spatial area of the working farm as the principal use.

3.2.3 Sturgeon County Municipal Development Plan

Sturgeon County's Municipal Development Plan (MDP) was developed in 2014 and is regulated as per Bylaw 1313/13 (Sturgeon County 2014). As it relates to agriculture, the Study Team notes the following:

- The MDP does not include a definition of agribusiness, but it does include the following definitions of agritourism, agriculture, primary industry, and value-added:
  - *Agri-Tourism: Attractions and activities that take place in agricultural areas, involve low levels of tourism development and provide visitors with the opportunity to experience agricultural and/or natural environments.*
  - *Agriculture: The cultivation of animals and plants, and associated industries.*
  - *Primary Industry: Defined by the Government of Canada as land-use activities that harvest or extract raw material from nature, such as Agriculture, oil and gas extraction, forestry, mining, fishing, and trapping.*
  - *Value-Added: The process of producing higher-value goods from raw resources.* (Sturgeon County 2014).
- The County is broken down into neighbourhood areas, some of which have specific policies for locating agricultural activities and subdivision design.
  - Policy example: Promoting value-added agricultural operations to locate to the lands identified in the Legal Crossroads Area Structure Plan (west of the Town of Legal).
- The MDP notes that promoting agricultural diversification and growth is seen as a key to supporting economic health.
  - Policy example: Should develop an agri- and eco-tourism off-site levy bylaw for required municipal roadway improvements required to ensure safe and adequate infrastructure services for agri-tourism and eco-tourism operators. The bylaw is to be supported by a Tourism Strategy that details specific infrastructure improvements required, associated benefiting areas, supportive technical data and estimated costs.

3.2.4 Sturgeon County Land Use Bylaw

Sturgeon County's Land Use Bylaw (LUB) was developed in 2017 and is regulated as per Bylaw 1385/17 (Sturgeon County 2017). As it relates to agriculture, the Study Team notes the following:

- There are no definitions for agribusiness or agritourism in the County's LUB, but there are a range of other agriculture-related definitions such as "agricultural support services", "intensive and extensive agriculture", and "farm help accommodation".
- The LUB outlines one agriculture district (AG) that is defined as follows:
  - *This district accommodates traditional agricultural operations and the supportive services that are essential to grow and sustain the agricultural industry. This district distinguishes between major, minor, and residential where:*
    - *AG-Major are tracts of land 16ha (39.5ac) or larger in size;*
    - *AG-Minor are parcels between 4ha (9.8ac) and 15.9ha (39.3ac); and*
    - *AG-Residential are parcels smaller than 4ha (9.8ac).* (Sturgeon County 2017).

- Bed and breakfast, and farm help accommodation, and intensive agriculture are some of the permitted uses in the County's AG district.
- Agriculture-related uses are a mix of permitted/discretionary uses in additional districts in the LUB.

3.2.5 Community Standards Bylaw

Sturgeon County's Community Standards Bylaw (CSB) came into effect in 2020 and is regulated as per Bylaw 1433/19 (Sturgeon County 2019b). As it relates to agriculture, the Study Team notes the following:

- The County's CSB includes regulations on items such as unsightly properties, vehicles, noise, lights, and composting.
    - All of the sections outlining these regulations indicate that "*nothing shall prevent bona fide Agricultural Practices."* (Sturgeon County 2019b).
- The CSB does not include any definitions for agribusiness or agritourism but does define agricultural practices as follows:
    - *Agricultural practices mean agricultural practices that are conducted in a manner consistent with appropriate and accepted customs and standards as established and followed by similar operations under similar circumstances and without restricting the generality of the foregoing includes the use of innovative technology with advanced management practices.* (Sturgeon County 2019b).
- The applications of the County's CSB is limited to residential districts in the LUB.

4. Feedback from Interviewed Stakeholders

4.1 Interview Engagement Overview

The purpose of the interview engagement as part of the Agribusiness and Agritourism Review and Task Force (AARTF) project was to inform the current state assessment to better understand the current state of agribusiness/agritourism in the County in terms of the County's strengths, real or perceived barriers to growth that operators are facing, real or perceived impacts that agribusiness and agritourism operators have on nearby landowners, and potential opportunities for growth.

Stakeholders were identified for interview engagement and approved by County administration during the current state assessment to ensure:

- a range of value-added agriculture businesses in the County that are not already on the Task Force are represented, and
- a tourism-focused organization as suggested by the Task Force is engaged with.

The Study Team engaged with six stakeholders including agribusiness and agritourism operators in the County, a tourism organization, and a local farmer's market (Table 4-1). The phone interviews focused on the current state of agribusiness and agritourism in the County, land use concerns, and existing regulations and bylaws.

Table 4-1 Interviewed Stakeholders

Stakeholder	Description
Dark Sky Distillery	Dark Sky Distillery is a family operated distillery that creates craft grain to glass gin and vodka.
Manawan Farms	Manawan Farms raises free range pork. The pigs are fed primarily organic grains and pasture in an effort to raise a quality meat as naturally as possible.
Faba Canada	Faba Canada has been one of the largest buyers and sellers of faba beans in Western Canada. Recently a facility in Legal was purchased to produce faba bean protein, and a substitute for peanut butter, with faba beans as the feedstock.
Paradise Acres Ranch	Paradise Acres Ranch is an equestrian centre offering horse training, boarding services, lessons, and equine assisted learning services.
Explore Edmonton	Explore Edmonton is an organization dedicated to market and sell Edmonton as a place to visit through supporting the development of new experiences.
St. Albert Farmer's Market	The St. Albert Farmers' Market is the largest outdoor farmers' market in Western Canada, attracting crowds of 15,000 – 20,000 each Saturday from June to October.

4.2 Results

4.2.1 Agribusiness and Agritourism Activities

4.2.1.1 Sturgeon County

Most agribusiness activities in the County involve value-added processing, farm input manufacturing, and farm support services as identified by operators and organizations. Although there are quite a few small and mid-scale operations, the larger processing facilities tend to be the ones more well-known and active in the County. These include Alfa Tec, and Faba Canada.

Interviewed stakeholders noted that networking with other businesses in the County has been relatively easy. The County's website marketing local producers and agribusinesses has helped market Paradise Acres Ranch and identify other operators in the area. Dark Sky Distillery noted that other operators in the region they are familiar with have come up mainly through introductions made by the County. Where possible, operators are engaging with other businesses in the County to cross-promote and create a joint offering. For example, Prairie Gardens has hosted events where Dark Sky Distillery provided and served the alcohol they produce. Dark Sky Distillery also sources haskap berries from Rosy Farms in the County and has indicated a desire to continue sourcing from County vendors where possible.

Operators interviewed said that there is a demand for agribusinesses and agritourism that is not being satisfied in the County. Examples given by Manawan farms include butcher shops, seed milling, chicken processing, and breweries. Furthermore, agritourism in the County has been noted as being relatively undeveloped (Paradise Acres Ranch). However, there are an increasing number of farms offering farms tours such as Dark Sky Distillery and Lakeside Dairy. Prairie Gardens was the agritourism operator most of the interviewees identified.

4.2.1.2 Surrounding Area

Agribusiness and agritourism in the surrounding area have been growing, according to Explore Edmonton and the St. Albert Farmer's Market. Explore Edmonton noted that Open Farm Days in Alberta has been an eye-opener to many operators about how farm tours can be a meaningful business line. Open Farm Days is a two-day event where Albertans have an opportunity to experience farms and understand where their food comes from.

According to Explore Edmonton, long-table farm dinners, farm tours, fruit wineries, distilleries, and breweries are all examples of activities that have seen increased visitation and interest from the public. Indeed, bookable farm experiences that tend to be culinary focused are becoming more popular in the surrounding area.

4.2.2 Location Advantages

Interviewed stakeholders identified a number of advantages of hosting an agribusiness or agritourism operation in the County:

- Tax advantages for small scale operations.
- Productive agricultural lands for inputs.
- Access to agricultural suppliers and support activities.
- Supportive and active County administration.
- Existing agriculture infrastructure and facilities that can be repurposed or expanded.

- Proximity to the urban customer base and workforce.
- Competitive freight rates compared to other areas in western Canada.
- Local events, like the County Bounty, that showcase the smaller businesses in the County.

4.2.3 Industry Trends

Dark Sky Distillery indicated that there has been increasing interest from St. Albert and Edmonton residents to tour surrounding communities to see where their food is coming from and support local producers. The St. Albert Farmer's Market supported this assertion and also identified that meaderies, distilleries, baked goods, prepared foods, and crafts have seen an increase in vendor applications and do well at the market.

Interviewed stakeholders in the County noted customers participating in agritourism generally are looking to experience an outdoor space and get away from being in an urban environment; this has been especially true during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Paradise Acres Ranch noted that visitors want to experience the process and environment of horse breeding and ranch operations, and Explore Edmonton indicated that farm stays are becoming more popular among people living in nearby cities. Farm visitors value supporting local and spending money that will stay within the community.

Farm-to-table dining experiences were noted as a popular trend for agritourism operations in the County. Agritourism has become almost synonymous with culinary tourism, and more and more restaurants are looking to showcase the farms where they source their ingredients from. The Edmonton culinary community is tight knit, with producers and chefs wanting to support one another. According to Explore Edmonton, there has been an increase in farm table dining experiences and farm tours as a result of these relationships.

Some concerns for the future of agribusiness and agritourism in the County were highlighted by Paradise Acres Ranch, who noted that there has been some decline in agribusinesses in the Region, especially those located on the fringes of urban areas. As the urban center expands, more agricultural lands are annexed and developed. Paradise Acres Ranch noted that up to seven equine businesses have shut-down due to the Anthony Henday ring road construction.

4.2.4 Growth and Opportunity

Many operators highlighted the opportunities available to bundle product offerings with other agribusinesses and agritourism in the Region. Existing collaboration amongst agribusiness and agritourism operators in the County and surrounding municipalities was noted as being underdeveloped. A key barrier in developing these partnerships that was identified by stakeholders is initially establishing relationships with other producers, especially if they do not know what activities are happening in the County.

Stakeholders identified an opportunity for increased farm stays in the County. Explore Edmonton noted that Prairie Gardens has been looking at this offering, and that another Gold Forest Grains (a wheat farm in the County that produces stone-milled flour) participates in Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms where visitors stay and work on the farm as part of an educational experience.

Stakeholders also identified the opportunity for farms to offer more tourism activities as the demand grows for on-farm experiences. Open Farm Days has enlightened many farmers to the demand and value of farm tours. Explore Edmonton stated that there is a gap in the marketing skills farmers for these types of product offerings. To find success, operations should learn how to create a sellable experience and market these products.

Additional value-added processing opportunities were identified by Faba Canada, who noted that many companies are interested in their plant-based protein products and have considered relocating close by to access these ingredients.

The County also has natural assets such as the Sandy Lake Recreation Area. Paradise Acres Ranch highlighted this area as being an opportunity for equine businesses to grow and offer activities like trail riding, camps, and a larger area for teaching student groups.

4.2.5 Land Use Concerns

Interviewed stakeholders were asked about what landowner concerns they are aware of with respect to increased agribusiness and agritourism in the County. The main concerns that were highlighted include:

- increased traffic,
- invasive weeds,
- noise levels,
- available parking,
- emergency response, and
- smells from increased farm activity or processing.

Increased traffic was the most common response from interviewees. Faba Canada expressed concerns around increased traffic from large tractor trailers on a two-lane highway, especially with another large processor, Alfa-Tech, nearby. Other interviewees expressed concerns with road quality being impacted by increased traffic flows through some areas of the County.

Noise concerns were also identified as potential issues for County landowners due to increased farm tours, events, and activities, particularly for events that offer alcohol. Operations with ongoing facility noises (e.g., processing operations) to nearby residences was also a concern that was raised. Some operators mentioned that while residents are used to these aspects of rural living, with increased activity it may be a cause for concern.

Interviewees also highlighted some concerns around invasive weeds. If farm tours and events increase, there is concern that invasive weeds may be carried from one farm to the next, or from the urban area to the County.

Finally, while agribusiness and agritourism operators noted many positive impacts that would result from continued growth in these sectors in the County, Paradise Acres Ranch asserted that the operators are often responsible for the expenses associated with mitigating neighbouring landowner concerns. For example, there is a subdivision close to Paradise Acres Ranch that required a new fence to reduce calves escaping onto the roads and nearby properties. The owner mentioned that there should be a balance between the expenses operators should incur and the County protecting their business from encroaching subdivisions.

4.2.6 Regulations

4.2.6.1 Sturgeon County

The regulatory environment in the County has been well received by the operators interviewed. Dark Sky Distillery has been satisfied with the engagement from the County around permitting. Faba Canada has also had a generally positive experience with the County, stating that the County helped expedite permits and regulations for the facility.

Manawan Farms noted the County's LUB is straightforward, especially with the interactive map tool available online. The owner noted that navigating the regulations have been relatively easy and the County has been supportive of new ideas for his business if there are no major impacts to the surrounding area. The owner also noted that operators in other counties have mentioned that regulations in their municipalities are relatively compared to Sturgeon County and can be restricting for small-scale agribusinesses and not flexible to account for the variety of operations that exist.

One interviewee noted having more difficulty navigating County regulations, especially around what activities require certain permits. Paradise Acres Ranch experienced differing advice from the County when applying for permits for a horse training area. It was unclear what activities required a permit based on whether it was considered part of the agribusiness.

4.2.6.2 Provincial and Federal

The main provincial and federal regulatory concerns from that were identified by interviewed stakeholders include:

- liquor restrictions,
- food inspections, and
- traffic.

Dark Sky Distillery has found it challenging to deal with constantly changing regulations regarding their operation's activities from Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis (AGLC). Coming up with new ways of marketing can be a challenge for small-scale liquor operations as the regulations are unclear.

Manawan Farms stated that provincial and federal food inspection regulations are laid out well, but there are challenges finding a contact to assist in navigating questions.

Traffic concerns have been challenging for some operators. Paradise Acres Ranch has been in the process of getting a road sign directing traffic to her business for over a year with no correspondence from the province. The owner noted that other businesses have installed signs regardless of approval.

Faba Canada noted that the anticipated increase in tractor trailer traffic in the area should be addressed, especially with no shoulders on the two-lane Highway 651.

4.3 Stakeholder Suggestions/Recommendations

Overall, the feedback from interviewed stakeholders regarding Sturgeon County's agribusiness and agritourism support and regulatory environment was relatively positive. Dark Sky Distillery appreciated the support the County provides by purchasing products as giveaways and establishing connections to other agribusinesses in the area they can collaborate with. While the distillery owners have been mostly pleased with the County's support, they did note that there is a lack of commercially zoned multi-purpose space in the County. When expanding, the owners would likely move to a business park. The distillery owners suggested that a location in the County that could support multiple agribusinesses could be beneficial. For example, agribusiness operators located near a farm-to-table restaurant to which they could supply ingredients could function as a "one-stop shop" for visitors from nearby cities, promoting collaboration and communication between agribusiness and agritourism operators in the County.

Other interviewed stakeholders suggested the County work with the operators and neighbors during planning phases of an operation or expanded activity to proactively mitigate any concerns. Once there has been an investment, operators said it can be more complicated to address these concerns after the fact.

Regarding permitting, some operators are looking for clarity in what activities require what permits. Specifically, confusion around permitting with respect to what activities are considered part of agriculture from the County's perspective was seen as a barrier to growth, as the LUB does not clearly define various agribusiness and agritourism activities. Some operators are also looking for support from the County in dealing with the provincial regulatory environment on traffic issues, including signage.

Finally, it was noted that the County could be doing more in terms of supporting agribusiness and agritourism operations. Paradise Acres Ranch stated that other jurisdictions they have operated in have offered more supports for new businesses, such as introducing operators to available funding, grants, marketing, and collaboration opportunities.

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