

4-14-17 Agritourism: Having Fun and Staying Safe

It used to be that libraries were quiet, museums were for looking only and farms were for farmers, not for visiting. Not anymore. It's an evolving world and now, you can talk and paint at your local library, have dinner at the museum and you can visit the farm for concerts and corn mazes, in addition to picking your own fruits and vegetables. There's something to do all the time and that's good for us and for local businesses.

The outdoor events, such as horse shows, blues on the bogs, corn mazes, fund raisers, road races and celebrations are all great fun and a great way for health agents to practice emergency preparedness in ordinary circumstances. Both ordinary and emergency situations quite often require an interdepartmental approach with police, fire, custodial and highway departments. Sometimes, CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) and MRC (Medical Reserve Corps) are also involved in keeping the event a safe one. When there is an emergency event, safety and sanitation are still high on the list of objectives.

Whenever people gather for more than a couple hours, the basic necessities need to be met. People need shelter, a place to rest, food, water, toilets and a way to wash their hands. In providing those basics, there's water to be provided, and then, water containment after it is used. Depending on the location of the event, that may be easy or challenging. When the event is at a farm, there's a good chance that the water supply is from a well. Has it been tested? Is it safe? Is the delivery of the water safe? If used for drinking, then the water should go through hoses intended for that purpose and marked for potable water (safe for drinking). The hoses can be flushed and used safely, just as they can be when you are camping.

In fact, comparing the outdoor event to camping is my most useful reference point for people and resource for me. If we can camp safely (and, yes, we can) then we can provide food and water and toilet facilities in a safe manner. The difference is that when we go to a "commercial" camp site, it has already been set up for safely supplying water and electricity. When we camp in the woods, we are the ones who have control over what we bring and how we set up that camp site. When an outdoor event is organized, however, they are planned by different people in different ways and it may be their first time arranging this kind of event. The basic requirements are there for all on the "to do" list. After water, toilets and hand washing and safe food, that list will also have signage, tents/canopies, and safety of paths, caution with attractive nuisances and awareness of ADA compliance (American Disability Act).

Outdoor events at farms are especially concerning to health agents. The farm owners know how to run their business. But do they know how to prepare for the public visiting their farm? When the public is invited, many of those visitors will not have the same level of knowledge of animals, farm machinery or even the dusty lumpy grounds with attractions for children such as hay bales and barns. Do they know what to avoid and leave alone? Did they

dress appropriately? Did they bring their own seating? Hat? Sunglasses? Water? Sanitizing wipes? Insect repellent?

When the water is delivered for this crowd of visitors to the farm, it is most likely delivered through hoses set up just for that day. Are there breaks/cracks in the hoses? Do they run through mud puddles and manure-strewn fields? Are there backflow preventers in place so that, as water pressure changes, there cannot be a mixing of contaminated water back into the original clean water supply? In response to this concern, each year I receive a notice that is a compilation of reminders from both our Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and our Department of Public Health (DPH). One of those reminders is the story of the water borne illness from E. coli at a fair in New York in 1999. That outbreak, caused by unchlorinated well water contaminated with E. coli, was supplied to several food vendors who used the water to make beverages and ice. And, of course, that was the same water they were using for “washing” and “sanitizing”. That outbreak caused 775 people to be ill, 65 were hospitalized, and 11 developed HUS, (Hemolytic uremic syndrome) a life-threatening condition characterized by microangiopathic haemolytic anaemia, thrombocytopenia, and renal failure and 2 people died. I don’t want this happening on “my watch”, not if I can help it.

In my quest to offer safe outdoor events, I finally found the guidance I had been seeking from experts in the field. I found it in the Agricultural Safety Resources, the National Safety Council and from Timothy G. Prather, Extension Specialist, University of Tennessee Extension who wrote the chapter on *Safety Considerations* in the document, “*Agritourism in Focus*”.

For many years now, this practical approach has been incorporated into Halifax and Plympton’s “Large Outdoor Events: Safety First” regulation. There is also a shorter version available to guide smaller outdoor events. It is useful for fundraisers, Boy Scout, Girl Scout and church events. Other towns have borrowed it to make their parades safer.

We can do this. We can have fun and be safe.

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