

# Guest Lodging on Your California Farm or Ranch

## A Practical Guide

### What's Inside?

- Assessing yourself/farm/ranch
- Permits & regulations
- Planning your farm/ranch stay
  - What are you offering?
- Staffing
- Reservations/booking
- Liability & Insurance
- Finances/pricing/budgeting
- Marketing
- Hospitality & customer service
- Budget template
- Sample waivers & forms
- Resources
- Acknowledgements

# Guest Lodging on Your Farm or Ranch

Offering a farm stay, where working farms and ranches provide lodging to urban or suburban travelers looking for a country experience, can be a win-win for both parties. The farm or ranch diversifies its product offering, thus reducing risk and bringing in additional revenue; the traveler has a unique lodging experience. This guide provides advice and resources for farmers and ranchers considering offering on-farm lodging.

*Scottie Jones, founder and executive director of the US Farm Stay Association and owner of Leaping Lamb Farm Stay, created much of the content in this guide. USFSA is a national trade association of farm stay operators. Learn more at <https://farmstayus.com/>*

A California farm stay is a hosted accommodation on a working farm or ranch with guests paying for the privilege of staying overnight. Guests are often invited to help with the more benign farm chores if they wish (collecting eggs, feeding livestock), and may be offered a tour of the farm or ranch or perhaps a chance to pick fruit or vegetables, observe agricultural activities or participate in a class or workshop or other activity. Farm stay guests are not workers on the farm and are not expected to work for their stay. The farm stay is about the experience, be it relaxation, the ‘unplugged’ nature of the setting, the farm fresh food, or a little education about farming and ranching.

California farmers and ranchers offer a variety of lodging options on their land, including rooms in the family farmhouse, separate guest houses, cabins, yurts, glamping tents, tiny houses, trailers, RVs or rustic campsites. County planning and environmental health departments regulate on-farm lodging and food service to overnight guests. Although California passed a statewide Agricultural Home Stay bill in 1999, each county must still create and enforce its own rules regarding allowances and permitting for farm stays, short-term rentals, camping, and other on-farm lodging for guests. This guide will discuss permitting for California farm stays on page 3, but first you may want to assess whether the hospitality business is right for you and your farm or ranch.

## Assessing yourself/your farm for on-farm lodging

Before you get into the business of inviting guests to stay with you on your farm or ranch, you might want to review the following list of questions:

- How comfortable are you talking with people you don't know? Can you share your experience of what it's like to be a farmer or rancher?
- Can you see yourself as a host, an educator, a tour guide, a reservation clerk, a cook, and a maid? If not, do you know someone who can do some or all of these things for you?
- Do you know how your land is zoned and whether you are allowed to build a cabin or add camping to your property? Have you spoken yet with your county planning department?
- Do you have the necessary cash to invest in a remodel or a building or land grading, as well as all the furniture and amenities necessary to host guests overnight? If not, can you raise the cash?
- Do you have an idea of how many nights you will need to be booked, and at what room rate, to break even on your investment and ultimately to make a profit?
- Have you researched the local



competition: what they charge, what they offer, how often they are booked?

- Have you thought about your legal structure and what you might need to know about insurance necessary to cover your family, your business, and your guests?
- Even if you don't have a website of your own, do you understand how the Internet works and how to use it as a tool for marketing?
- Do you have any training in the hospitality industry in terms of customer service and delivery of experience? If not, have you traveled enough to understand what is and is not acceptable for travelers?
- Finally, and most importantly, have you included your spouse or partner, and family members or others living or working on the farm, in this discussion? Is there a clear understanding of the commitment this will take in terms of time, energy...and your relationship(s)?

If you can answer the above questions with a resounding "Yes!" then proceed cautiously, but consider seriously the added benefit of hosting guests on your farm or ranch. Not only will you diversify your farm income, you will be providing a retreat for some and an education for others, but always a re-connection with the land.

## A California Agricultural Homestay or "Farm Stay"

The **California Agricultural Homestay (or Farm Stay) Guidelines** were established in 1999, and revised in 2008. These guidelines, included in the California Health & Safety Code, provide definition and guidance for county and local health jurisdictions to allow on-farm lodging and meal service to limited numbers of guests. The essence of California Agricultural Homestay guidelines are an allowance for counties to permit working farmers and ranchers to serve meals at any time from a farmhouse kitchen to overnight guests, if the counties decide to allow or permit farmers and ranchers to host limited numbers of guests.

### **California Agricultural Homestay defined:**

- A food facility with 6 or fewer guestrooms
- Restricted to a maximum of 15 guests
- Must be located on and be part of a farm that produces agricultural products as its primary source

of income

- Owner or tenant farmer must reside on property
- Lodging and meals must be incidental to, and not the primary function of the Agricultural Homestay
- Meals or snacks may be served to registered guests at any time
- Price of food must be included in the price of overnight accommodation



***The majority of Agricultural Homestays are single-family style homes with non-commercial kitchens.***

- Permit required from county Environmental Health Department
- No food preparation allowed in sleeping rooms
- General cleanliness and sanitation required
- No commercial refrigeration requirements
- Three-compartment sink or dishwasher that heats to at least 160 degrees F required.
- Handwashing sink, soap & paper towels required
- Adequate food storage required



- City, County, State bed tax (aka: transient occupancy tax)
- Business tax license
- Fictitious name filing with state
- Fire department

### ***Other Agricultural Homestay rules***

- Owner or employee must pass approved and accredited food safety certification exam.
- No live animals (pets included) allowed in dining areas during meals
- Agricultural products grown on the farm (including eggs) may be served to guests, although all meat and poultry served to guests must be slaughtered in a USDA or CDFA approved facility.
- County Planning Departments define permitting needed

**S**ome counties further restrict number of guests, number of rooms or type of lodging allowed. Counties decide in which zones to allow farm stays “by right” or with administrative or conditional use permits. Some counties add agricultural education requirements, although these are hard to enforce. Also hard for counties to enforce is the requirement that agricultural production provides the primary source of income for a farmer or rancher hosting a farm stay. Some counties only allow farm stays on parcels above a minimum acreage lot – 10 acres or 40 acres – or require higher level of permits for farm stays on smaller lots. Many counties follow the state guidelines, allowing 5 or 6 rooms and 15 guests with minimal permit requirements, however all require kitchen inspections and permitting by the Environmental Health Department for meal service to farm stay guests.

### ***Regulation requirements, approvals and other permits that may be required for your farm stay:***

- Building permits
- Use permits
- Health Department
- Water/Sewer

### ***Sonoma County example of permits, approvals needed for a farm stay***

- ***Zoning permit (\$900 - \$1300)***
- ***Food Facility Permit from Dept. of Health Services (\$500+)***
- ***Register with County Tax Collector, collect 12% of lodging fees, file and pay to County every quarter***
- ***CA Dept. of Alcoholic Beverage (ABC) license if serving beer, wine or spirits to guests***
- ***Business Registration (with State of California)***
- ***Fictitious Business Name***
- ***Insurance***

### **Farm/ranch hospitality in the world of short-term rentals**

**F**arm stays fall under the larger hospitality category of “Short-Term Rentals,” that includes all types of accommodations rented for less than 30 days. The largest influence on California short-term rentals growth is Airbnb.

Many California farm stay operators list their farm stay accommodations on Airbnb. In fact, Airbnb includes a category it calls “farm stays.” Many California counties are currently (in 2019) involved in discussions about limiting or restricting short-term rentals, impacting some on-farm lodging. Counties need to weigh the benefits of increased taxes paid by short-term rental operators and increased community support for agriculture against community resistance to short term renters who impact the

community feel and decrease the supply of affordable long-term rentals. Farmers may need to work with their counties to maintain allowances for farm stays with minimal regulatory barriers as counties move to restrict short-term rentals in general.

**Important Note: Make sure your neighbors are on board or your idea may never get out of the regulatory process**

- Talk to your neighbors about your idea and how this might impact the neighborhood
- Good neighbor relations will go a long way
- Part of a permit review is to contact all neighbors for comments
- Be aware that your neighbors' objections during your application process will not necessarily stall or fail a review, but better to not have the complaint registered at all.
- Invite your neighbors over to see your facilities
- Invite your neighbors to any large parties that might affect them with traffic or noise so they don't just feel like the 'neighbors'
- One of the biggest complaints recorded by the Department of Agriculture is neighbor relations, especially if you are near a commercial operation.

### **Some organizations promoting on-farm lodging:**

- Read about one small scale farmer's Airbnb experience: *How to Use Airbnb to Add Value to Your Small Farm or Ranch*
- *Farm Stay U.S.* - The website of the U.S. Farm Stay Association, promoting farm and ranch stays in the United States and providing resources for farm stay operators and visitors.
- *Hipcamp Landshare* - rural accommodations marketing site - If you are legally permitted to offer camping, cabins, or any kind of farm stay or guest ranch on your land, these San Francisco based folks may be good marketing partners.
- *Harvest Hosts* - a program that connects farms and wineries with RV owners. Invite Harvest Hosts' RV owners to park overnight on your property and benefit from the goodwill that motivates them to make purchases.

---

## **Planning your Farm Stay**

Once you have learned the permits and licenses needed to offer lodging to the public on your farm or ranch and assessed yourself, your family and staff, and your neighbors, you are ready to start planning your farm stay.

### **What are you offering?**

What kind of farm stay are you offering? High, middle, or low end (5 star to self-serve)? This will determine and/or be determined by your answers to the following questions. The type of farm stay will determine the amenities and activities offered.

#### **1. Location**

- Where will guests reside on the farm?
- How close to others (if multiple)? – draw a site map
- Will you offer a variety of lodging types?
- Will you accommodate animals traveling with guests (horses, dogs) – where?



## 2. Lodging Facilities

**F**arm stays are unique because guests tend to be more adventurous in what they will accept in the way of new experience.

- Rooms in your home/farm house
- Alternative Lodging\*
  - Cabins
  - Platform tents
  - RVs or RV parking
  - Yurts
  - Tipis
  - Guest houses/cottages
  - Farm house
  - Converted farm building
  - Campgrounds
  - Tree houses
  - Mobile homes
  - Tiny houses (these can fall into the RV category)
- Pets and livestock facilities

\* You may want to check with your county planning department to learn what, if any, types of alternative lodging are allowed in your zoning or your region.



## 3. Infrastructure and Amenities

*Note: Your zoning (or budget) may restrict your choices*

**Infrastructure** (Check off what you have and what you will need to upgrade):

- \_\_\_\_\_ Water and sewer
- \_\_\_\_\_ Electricity
- \_\_\_\_\_ Kitchen or other food prep areas
- \_\_\_\_\_ Parking (depending on capacity)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Access (road access - and disability access)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Prepared campsites, specific locations, or make camp anywhere?
- \_\_\_\_\_ RV hookups: water, sewer, other
- \_\_\_\_\_ Stalls, corrals, runs
- \_\_\_\_\_ Emergency vehicle access
- \_\_\_\_\_ Fencing
- \_\_\_\_\_ Other

### Amenities:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Communal space in a house means YOUR house!
- \_\_\_\_\_ New or remodel, modern or rustic décor?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Access to kitchen, prepared meals?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Private or shared bathrooms
- \_\_\_\_\_ Off-grid amenities (e.g. composting toilets, solar showers)
- \_\_\_\_\_ Internet/phone/TV
- \_\_\_\_\_ A/C and/or heating
- \_\_\_\_\_ Luxury?

## 4. Activities

**S**ome visitors just want to relax and enjoy the countryside. Others may be fascinated by the activities on your farm or ranch and want to learn all about everything. As a farm stay host, you will have to balance the time you need to get your regular work done with time spent paying attention to the interests of your guests. You may find it helpful to offer scheduled activities that your guests can participate in. At the very least, most visitors will enjoy a short tour of your operation.

### Some Things Visitors May Like to Do:

- Help with chores
- Milk cows, goats or sheep
- Pick fruit or vegetables
- Join or watch cattle drives
- Ride horses
- Collect eggs
- Bottle feed baby animals
- Hike or swim
- Hunt or fish
- Classes (cheese, soap, weaving, canning, bee-keeping, etc.)

Check out the *Advanced Search on the Farm Stay U.S.* ([www.farmstayus.com](http://www.farmstayus.com)) website, under “Activities.” You will see about 50 activities listed. Some you might be considering already; some you might find interesting to add.

## Who will run this operation? (Staffing)

Start-up may be different than the daily operations. Decide on all the roles and responsibilities before you begin. Write a job description for all the positions, even if you are doing all of them yourself. Here is a start to your list of positions/responsibilities/tasks to describe:

- Build-out /decorating
- Reservations
- Hosting
- Cleaning
- Cooking
- Marketing
- Grounds keeping
- Other (e.g. classes, tours)

### *If this person is you, how will you:*

- Cover your farm jobs
- Pay yourself
- Find time for yourself (B&B burnout)

### *If this person is a family member or employee:*

- Pick the person best suited for the job of hospitality since farm stays are the business of hospitality and customer service and not necessarily farming.
- Consider who will pick up the jobs on the farm that this person used to do
- Will this be a paid position?

### *When to consider employees:*

- Depending on the farm expertise that may be lost and what jobs pay:
- Would it be more economical to hire someone to: clean, maintain grounds, other?
- To start, good to know all the jobs necessary but start to consider alternatives early

**Tip:** Depending on the size and complexity of your farm stay, between reservations and activities, the job could take as little as 2 hours/day and as many as 8 hours.



## Reservations: Booking your guests

There are many ways to take reservations for your lodging(s). All have upsides and downsides, but, at the end of the day, the overarching goal is to make sure you don't have guests showing up for the same room at the same time! Here is our review of some of the things you need to know before you book your first guest and, from there, the pros and cons of different methods for taking reservations.

### **BEFORE TAKING ANY RESERVATIONS, YOU WILL NEED:**

#### **A Terms & Conditions Policy** (See Appendix B for sample T&C Policy)

This discusses everything from cancellations and refunds, to guest behavior (e.g. No Smoking), check-in and check-out times, etc.

- Include this on your website, as well as a print-out in the guest unit, so it can be referred to easily. Make it clear, clean, and simple.
- While you may have 'rules', especially about cancellations, try to be creative if your guests are unhappy (e.g. with non-refundable reservations, offer to re-book another time).
- The best way to come up with these policies is to look at how others do it and combine the parts you like, tailored to your needs. Often you will find this information on a farm's website

#### **Waiver** (See Appendix B for sample Waiver)

This provides for a clear understanding about the dangers of working farms and ranches. Your guests acknowledge and accept responsibility for their actions.

- Include this on your website. If you use online

reservations, add a box they must check to say they agree with the terms. Have a printed copy to be signed at check-in (our lawyer's preferred method).

- Similar to Terms & Conditions, check waivers used by other farms and ranches.
- A good rule of thumb is to have your lawyer review both your Terms & Conditions and Liability Waiver. (Presenting the boiler plate to your lawyer will save him or her time, and save you money.)

### Lodging/Business Identification Number

Many California local communities and counties collect lodging tax. Lodging taxes are often used for tourism marketing, so this is a good thing.

- You will need to check with all relevant agencies to find out what they require from you in terms of registration, and what percentage of tax to charge your guests.
- You are responsible for not only collecting lodging tax (room tax), but submitting it to the taxing institution on a regular basis (e.g., monthly, quarterly).
- You are usually credited a small percentage of the payment due to cover your administrative costs.

### Details of Pricing

Do you charge by room, by person, by season, by night, by week, minimum nights, double occupancy...?

- Be clear about your fees, including room tax and cleaning fees, if applicable.
- The simpler the better. Guests love a bottom line.
- Specify deposits (refundable?), balance due dates, payment options, credit cards you accept, cancellation rules, etc.
- Be ready to negotiate rates with travelers used to asking for discounts. If you don't discount, that's okay, but don't be offended that they ask.



## TAKING RESERVATIONS - THE METHODS

Here is a quick list of the options, from least-to-most technical, but not necessarily least-to-most expensive when you consider your time and attention.

- Reservations booked via email or phone. This is the way most of us start out, and it's pretty self-explanatory.
- Custom Reservations - Created from templates, plug-ins, social media
- Booking Software (e.g., ResNexus, Reservation-Key, SuperInn) - Commercial sites that will handle reservations for you through your own website, with a seamless look.
- OTAs (Online Travel Agencies, e.g., Airbnb, VRBO, Hipcamp, Glamping Hub) - Commercial sites that will handle reservations for you through their websites
- Large Aggregator Sites (e.g., Booking.com, Travelocity, Expedia, TripAdvisor)
- Other (e.g., AllTheRooms)

*For a detailed discussion of the pros and cons of these various methods, "sign up" on <https://farmstayus.com/> as a farmer, go to "Farmers Guide" and then to the "Comprehensive Farm Stay Business Guide – Reservations: How to Guide." You will have to enter a bit of information, including your name, phone, email and address, but you do not have to fill out the whole form to get logged in.*

### Farm Stay USA RECOMMENDATION: ONLINE BOOKING

It may be tempting to reject online reservations for the perceived impersonal aspects, but we believe providing this option to travelers is a necessity for increasing bookings.

The traveler who wishes to stay on your farm or ranch is more likely to do so if you make it easy for them to book. Easy means... at any time of the day or night, on the Internet, using computers, tablets, or smartphones, immediately.

Farming or ranching is your main business, but hosting guests now puts you into the hospitality and travel industry, where online reservations are a best practice.

**A**re you worried about your guests' expectations if you don't speak with them ahead of time? Make sure when they receive their reservation confirmations, they also get a copy of:

- Your Terms and Conditions
- Your Liability Agreement
- Your contact information
- And anything else you think they should know (e.g., types of clothes and shoes to pack, the nearest town with a grocery store, miles from the airport and transportation options, etc.)

Consider sending an email one week before guest arrival acknowledging the reservation, welcoming them, and opening the door for any last minute questions. Many reservation systems have customizable, automated emails that can be sent out, so you won't have to remember this task.

### ONLINE RESERVATION COMPANIES

Here are a few of the online reservation companies that some farm stay operators use:

- ResNexus: <https://resnexus.com/>
- ReservationKey: <http://reservationkey.com/>
- SuperInn: <https://www.superinn.com/>
- Hipcamp: <https://www.hipcamp.com/>
- Airbnb: <https://www.airbnb.com/>
- VRBO: <https://www.vrbo.com/>
- Glamping Hub: <https://glampinghub.com/>

## Legal and Insurance

**T**o manage your risk, you usually will want to have discussions with both your lawyer and your insurance agent once you have decided what you are going to offer.

*To discuss with your lawyer:*

- **Business structures (entity):**
  - Sole Proprietor
  - Partnership
  - Limited Liability Corporation,
  - Sub-S Corporation
  - C Corporation

*Tip: Most farms are either Sole Proprietor or LLC structures. It has to do with limiting your liability but there are pros and cons to these so discuss with your lawyer.*

- **Terms and Conditions and Release from Liability Waivers - Tips:**

- Least expensive way to handle this: Write your own after looking at other examples, then have reviewed by your lawyer
- Ch. 5 Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California, 2nd Edition has information about your liability risks, both for your guests and for your farm. Also has some templates
- Appendix B provides an example – reviewed by an Oregon lawyer
- T&C is different than a Liability Waiver



**Insurance: to discuss with your farm or homeowner's insurance agent:**

- What kind of business policies do they sell?  
B&B?  
Farm business?  
Equine?  
Special Event?
- What kind of policy(ies) do you need?
- How about an umbrella policy? Will it cover the business?
- What monetary amount of coverage do you need?
- What will it cost? (Prices can vary from \$500 to \$25,000, so shop around.)

**Tips:**

- A Buying Liability Insurance Worksheet with questions for your agent is included as Appendix C.
- Be honest with your agent, but don't embellish information
- Sometimes using a broker is easier/better than shopping around
- Not a lot of underwriters so you don't want your name to be associated with denial of coverage

## Financials

This section includes discussion of:

- Start-up projections
- Pricing
- Operating Revenue and Expense Projection
- Building a budget

**F**or your planning purposes, a budget template is included as Appendix A, at the end of this guide. An excel version of this budget template, with formulas already entered, is available for download at: <https://ucanr.edu/sites/agritourism/activities/Accommodations/> To use this budget form, adjust the line items to fit your needs and enter numbers that fit your operation into all the yellow-colored squares. As you adjust the numbers in the yellow squares, you will see the bottom line shift.

**Start-Up: How much is it going to cost to get the first person in the door?**

These will be estimates to start, but will have to be



filled in later with hard costs. Costs will depend upon your location and what you want to do, ranging from creating a campsite space to building a small cabin or guest house. In our budget template, we have assumed paying back the startup costs over 5 years from operation income, but you can adjust the time needed to pay back start-up expenses by changing the formula.

**Start-up costs include:**

- Structures or remodel – build out cost
- Infrastructure necessary (utilities, access, signage, etc.)
- Furnishings & accessories (bedding, kitchenware, decor, etc)
- Supplies
- Insurance
- Legal
- Marketing
- Permits and licenses
- Website development

**Pricing: What to charge...and for what?**

This is where you decide what type of operation you would like to run, because all your other decisions will flow from here.



## ***Operating Expenses (20-30% of revenues on average):***

These are some ordinary expenses to consider – you may have others.

- Accounting/bookkeeping
- Banking/merchant services (credit cards)
- Dues/memberships
- Food
- Insurance
- Housekeeping
- Maintenance/repairs
- Marketing/ advertising
- Phone/Internet/Hosting
- Payroll
- Supplies
- Utilities
- Loan payback

### **1. Assess your “assets” e.g. what are you selling?**

What is your land like? Is it scenic and attractive? What buildings, rooms, structures will your guests be housed in? What amenities are included? What is your location? Remote, popular with tourists, close to a town or park, off a dirt road? What is your experience with hospitality, your family & staff availability, level of customer service offered?

**2. Research your area.** What are others charging for lodging in your area (hotels, B&Bs, farm stays)? What will your lodging be most comparable to in terms of amenities offered? Look at a simple fee structure (easier for guests), e.g. flat rate all year vs. seasonal rates. Will you charge for extras (classes, activities, etc.)?

***Now, based on your research, what do you think you can charge for your lodging?***

**3. Project the number of nights** you expect to be booked.

**4. Determine your anticipated gross annual revenue,** using the budget template, by entering the number of nights expected to be booked and your estimated price per night.

**5. Evaluate - Is this enough?** Do you need to do more? In the budget template, keep substituting numbers until the math looks reasonable for your location, your industry, and your time and attention.

- Make sure the math supports your desire to do this!
- Also, shoot low for the first several years until you get some traction and referrals.

## ***Put It All Together - Building a Budget***

Once you have an idea of your start-up costs, the price you intend to charge, the number of days you expect to be booked, and your operating expenses, start assembling a trial budget that accounts for the costs of starting and operating your enterprise: start-up, insurance, permits, labor (including yours), marketing/advertising expenses, contracted help, fees and supplies. You could also factor in wear and tear on your buildings, driveways and other infrastructure (depreciation).

There will always be discrepancies between your projected and actual budgets. The important thing is to remember to log everything – from the hours you spend showing your guests around to the cost of fresh flowers on the table to the wages paid to your staff. Sound record keeping will help you know if you’re losing or earning money and how you can adjust spending or prices to make your enterprise profitable.

Use the **Excel budget template here:** <https://ucanr.edu/sites/agritourism/activities/Accommodations/>

**More financial templates:** <http://www.score.org>  
For free consulting and low-fee classes, contact your local Small Business Development Center (SBDC).

# Briefly: Marketing and Internet Savvy

## Your online presence

If you are not comfortable using the Internet to market your business, find a friend or family member who is. You need to play where your guests play and, for the most part, this is the place!

## Website – Yes, you do need a website

- This is yours; you create it (or pay a designer to create it), and as such have control over its content, look, and feel.
- Referred to as your domain name or URL (ex. [www.myfarm.com](http://www.myfarm.com))
- This is where you tell the world who you are and what you offer

## What Makes a Good Website?

- 1) Simple URL
- 2) Easy navigation- how to get from A to B
- 3) Good photographs
- 4) Limited copy
- 5) Easy to read
- 6) If selling, easy to buy
- 7) Clean layout
- 8) Contact information easy to find
- 9) Clear, simple descriptions
- 10) Tells a story about the people behind the business
- 11) Good reflection of your 'brand'

## Use Google Analytics

This allows you to track online how well your website is performing. It will also show you the source of inquiries so you can tell what kind of marketing is doing best. You will need to insert Google Analytics code on your website. This is a Very Useful tool.

## Social Media

(You don't need to participate in all of these. Pick what works for you. Start slowly.)

- **Facebook** – name of your farm/ranch, not your personal listing (free)
- **Twitter** – name of your farm/ranch; can tie to Facebook posts; limited characters allowed (free)
- **Instagram** – individual using #farm name on photos or account from farm (free)



- **Pinterest** – name of your farm/ranch; followers like photos better than words (suggestions: canning, flowers, landscapes, etc.)(free)

- **YouTube** - You can set up your free channel and post multiple videos here - linked to other media

## Other important places to list your farm stay business:

- **Google business listing** – free; includes address, phone, hours, photo
- **Local CVB** (Convention and Visitor's Bureau) (usually free)
- **Local Chamber of Commerce** (not usually free, but may be important for referrals and local support)

- **State Tourism Office** ("Visit California" can be free in some cases –

talk with your local tourism office for ideas and how to best connect)

- **UC Agritourism Directory** – free: [www.calag-tour.org](http://www.calag-tour.org)

## Online marketing websites to consider

- Niche: U.S. Farm Stay Association (<http://www.farmstayus.com>)
- Vacation Rental sites
  - \* Vacation Rental By Owner (VRBO)/Homeaway
  - \* Airbnb
  - \* Flipkey
  - \* Hipcamp
- Bed and Breakfast sites
- Travel sites
  - \* Booking.com

## Don't ignore the potential for free press:

Contact local news organizations, bloggers or travel writers with a story pitch. Use a hook such as: Grand opening, seasonal, baby animals, general interest, historical, etc.

**Word of Mouth:** Get yourself listed (and follow up with response to both good and bad reviews)

- Trip Advisor
- Yelp
- Guests are your best marketers! – ask them to post a review on Trip Advisor, Yelp, Airbnb or other sites you use. Consider offering incentives to guests for referring friends who book with you.

# Hospitality and Customer Service – Dos and Don'ts

## **Do:**

- Respond to inquiries right away (within 24 hours)
- Put Terms and Conditions of booking and Liability Waiver in writing for signature
- Be honest about your accommodations
- Ask about expectations at onset of visit
- Present clean rooms and premises where people sleep and use facilities
- Guests who sleep well are happy guests – invest in comfortable beds and pillows!
- Thank your guests (send thank you notes)
- Confirm reservations
- Include contact information in all correspondence and on website
- Go over farm rules upon guest arrival
- Take guests on tour and point out any dangerous and off-limit areas
- Train employees (and family) on polite interaction with guests
- Take care of complaints immediately
- Understand that unhappy customers will tell 30 people about their experience (or potentially many more if they use the Internet)
- Treat your guests the way you would like to be treated if you were on vacation
- Have a guest book for comments
- Leave an instruction book for: how to, emergency procedures, contact numbers, etc.
- This is a repeat: cleanliness of accommodations is invaluable for repeat business and customer referrals



## **Don't:**

- Leave guests unattended on arrival, unless arranged in advance
- Promise something you can't deliver
- Be too stubborn about refunds if a guest is really unhappy and wants his/her money back -- holding fast to a policy may cost you more in the long run than the money owed
- Communicate only via email if there is a problem
- Allow children to roam the farm without their parents

## **Take-Aways:**

- Someone on the farm needs to like to be around people. Your guests will remember this person.
- Some stays are about basic farm education; others are about leaving guests alone. Ask!
- Accidents can happen – have a proactive plan in place (and band-aids/tweezers on hand).
- Guests self-select when coming to a farm. Most are polite and honored to be allowed on your farm.
- Do the extra little things and you will exceed expectations, which can have more marketing mileage than just about anything else you do.
- It's your farm, so you control the schedule. If you don't want to be open at a certain time, block the dates!

## Appendix A: One Year Budget Template - Farm Stay

Here is a starter budget template for a farm stay or on-farm lodging. This budget template, as an Excel spreadsheet with formulas already entered, is available for download here:

<https://ucanr.edu/sites/agritourism/activities/Accommodations/>

<b>Income</b>		Price of room or facility #1 rental per night		
		# of nights booked per year		
		Gross annual income from room/facility #1		0
		Price of room or facility #2 rental per night		
		# of nights booked per year		
		Gross annual income from room/facility #2		0
		Price of activity #1		
		# of tickets sold for activity #1		
		Gross annual income from activity #1		0
		Merchandise sales income		
		Farm product sales to farm stay guests		
		<b>total annual income</b>		0
<b>Start-up costs</b>	Facility	Structure purchase, build or remodel		
	Infrastructure	Utilities, septic, water, lights, etc.		
		Access - roads and ADA changes needed		
		Signage		
	Furnishings	Bedding, kitchenware, décor, etc.		
	Legal fees	Set up business structure		
		Liability waivers and other forms		
	Permits, Licenses	Food Facility license, food handler training		
		Zoning permit		
	Marketing	Website development		
		<b>Total Start-up costs</b>		0
<b>Operating Expenses</b>				
		Accounting, bookkeeping		
		Credit card fees, merchant services		
		Dues, memberships		
		Food		
		Insurance		
		Housekeeping		
		Maintenance/repairs		
		Marketing/advertising		
		Phone/internet/Hosting		
		Payroll		
		Supplies		
		Utilities		
		Interest on loans		

	Depreciation	Wear and tear on facility & infrastructure (based on 30-year life, so = (facility startup cost + infrastructure start-up cost)/30	0	
		Farm products expense (estimated at 60% of farm product sales income)	0	
		Merchandise expense		
		Travel		
		Other		
		<b>total operating expenses</b>		0
		<b>Net annual operating income/loss</b>		0
		<b>To pay back start-up costs (amortized over 5 years)</b>		0
		<b>Net income with pay back of start-up costs</b>		0

## Appendix B: Terms & Conditions and Liability Waiver EXAMPLE

### I. POLICIES

1. We are sorry, but dogs are not allowed at our farm since we have many free-range animals. We have our own dogs and cats running around the property. Please let us know if you are afraid or have issues with our domestics and we will try to make arrangements to that effect.
2. No Smoking inside the cottage. If you smoke outside, please crush and dispose of all cigarette butts in a safe manner since we are (ex.: surrounded by the forests of the Coast Range). If there is a smell of smoke or we have to clean up after you, there will be an additional fee.
3. Check-in is 4:00 PM and check-out is 11:00 AM. These times are negotiable with the stated acknowledgement of your hosts.
4. Deposits: A 50% deposit is required to hold all reservations. This will be applied to your balance due at the end of your stay as long as there is no damage.
5. Payments of all rents are due upon departure either by check or credit card. Your credit card receipt will read "name on your merchant services account".
6. Cancellations: Reservations cancelled 21 days or more prior to arrival will receive a full refund, less a \$25.00 processing fee. Reservations cancelled 20 days or less may result in payments being forfeit if we cannot re-rent the cabin. There are no refunds for unused nights resulting from late arrivals or early departures, except under extraordinary circumstances which will be at the discretion of the owner.
7. A charge of \$25.00 will be assessed for each returned check.
8. There are no refunds due to mechanical failure, natural disasters, or weather.
9. Please abide by any additional 'rules' posted in the cottage. These are for the safety of both you and the farm residents (animals and people). A farm has inherent dangers and we will do our best to point out the obvious ones; however, guests will hold harmless XXX Farm from all claims, suits or action of any nature arising out of activities of their party.
10. XXX Farm reserves the right to refuse service to anyone.
11. Violation of any federal or state laws, company policies or house rules are all grounds for immediate eviction without refund.
12. Receipt of your deposit and registration form will secure your reservation.

## **II. RELEASE, WAIVER OF LIABILITY, AND INDEMNITY AGREEMENT**

When you check-in, we will have you sign this agreement. Please be sure to read it completely before your arrival.

1. I agree to RELEASE, WAIVE, DISCHARGE AND COVENANT NOT TO SUE any entity or individual involved in any way with the ownership, management, control and/or maintenance of the XXX Farm, and/or their employees, officers, directors, management, employees, agents (collectively and individually referred to herein as "Releasees"), from all liability to me, my personal representatives, assigns, heirs, and next of kin for any and all loss or damage, and any claim or demands therefore on account of injury to the person or property or resulting in death and whether caused by the negligence of the Releasees or otherwise.
2. I hereby ASSUME FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR AND RISK OF BODILY INJURY, DEATH OR PROPERTY DAMAGE due to the negligence of Releasees, and any of them, or otherwise while using or staying at XXX Farm.
3. I agree to INDEMNIFY AND SAVE AND HOLD HARMLESS the Releasees and each of them from any loss, liability, damage, or cost (including but not limited to attorney fees) that they may incur during and/or as a result of any activity of the undersigned while at XXX Farm, whether caused by the negligence of the Releasees or otherwise.
4. (When applicable) I am the parent/guardian of a minor child and do hereby give my approval of his/her participation in any and all of the activities at XXX Farm. I agree to the above terms and conditions for myself and on behalf of the minor.
5. I acknowledge that any review of these issues are subject to local county venue.

### **WE RESPECT YOUR PRIVACY!**

All of the information collected on this site will be kept strictly confidential and will not be sold, rented, disclosed, or loaned to any entity outside XXX Farm except the bank processing institutions that are involved in completing your purchase.

Any information you provide will be held with the utmost care and will not be used in ways that you have not consented to.

We NEVER store credit card numbers on our site. Only the bank processing institutions see this information.



## Appendix C: Buying Liability Insurance

Call several companies to compare rates and coverages.

Some suggested questions to ask each company or agent:

- Is there a deductible?
- If yes, how much?
- Does the insurance apply to
  - my premises and operations liability?
  - my products and operations liability?
  - my contractual liability to others?
  - my personal injury liability to others (libel, slander, invasion of privacy)?
  - my advertising injury to others?
  - my property liability damage to others?
  - incidental medical malpractice liability resulting from my helping an injured person
  - non-owned watercraft liability?
  - host-liquor liability?
  - court costs for defence - above limit or included in liability policy limit?
- Is each of my employees added as an additional insured?
- Is the premium a set fee?
- Is the premium based on a percentage of gross sales or on client days?
- Do I have to belong to an association to purchase insurance?
- If yes, what is the cost of membership?
- Does the insurance agent understand my proposed enterprise?



# Resources

**Farm Stay USA website:** <https://farmstayus.com/>

The website of the U.S. Farm Stay Association, a national trade association of farm stay operators, includes extensive resources for farmers and ranchers offering lodging or considering doing so. On this site are more complete discussions of topics covered briefly in this guide, as well as access to a full series of **Farm Stay Best Practices webinars**. Webinar topics include (each topic is a separate webinar, viewable as a recording):

- Farm Stay Start-up Toolkit
- Protecting your Farm and your Guests - Insurance and Liability Considerations
- The Farmer Host - Hospitality
- Accommodations - One Star to Five
- Marketing Basics
- Reservations - Booking Your Guests for a Farm Stay
- Taking Good Photos
- Adding a Farm Store for Additional Revenue
- Avoiding Burnout in Your Farm Stay Hospitality Business
- Food on the Farm: Cooking It, Serving It, Teaching It
- Marketing Beyond Social Media
- more webinars to come...

To access these resources, “sign up” on <https://farmstay-us.com/> as a farmer, go to “Farmers Guide” (using the menu) and then to the “Members’ Only Content”. To sign up, you will have to enter a bit of information, including your name, phone, email and address, but you do not have to fill out the whole form to get logged in, and there is no cost.



**California Agritourism** website by University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (UC SAREP) - <https://ucanr.edu/sites/agritourism/>

**Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California**, a 150 page peer-reviewed manual written by UCCE advisors and available through UC ANR Catalog - <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=3484>

**Hipcamp Landshare** - rural accommodations marketing site - If you are legally permitted to offer camping, cabins, or any kind of farm stay or guest ranch on your land, these may be good marketing partners.

**California Bed and Breakfast/Agricultural Homestay Food Facilities Guidelines**, from the California Conference of Directors of Environmental Health: <https://www.ccdeh.com/documents-search/18-bed-breakfast-ag-homestay-food-facility-guidelines-1/file>

**Vermont Agritourism Guides** by the Vermont Agritourism Collaborative - <http://www.uvm.edu/vtagritourism/>

**Extension Training for Agritourism Development** by Rutgers University New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station - <http://agritourism.rutgers.edu/training/modules.html>

**Integrating Safety into Agritourism** - a website created by the National Children’s Center for Rural and Agricultural Health and Safety, including walk-throughs, checklists and resources to implement safety best practices - <https://safeagritourism.org/>

# Acknowledgements

1. Scottie Jones, founder and executive director of the US Farm Stay Association and owner of Leaping Lamb Farm Stay in Alsea, Oregon, created much of the content in this guide. USFSA is a national trade association of farm stay operators. Learn more at <https://farmstayus.com/>
2. Sonoma County Example of Permits, Approvals Needed for a Farm Stay (page 4) is from the University of California Cooperative Extension Sonoma County: <https://ucanr.edu/sites/CESonomaAgOmbuds/Agritourism>
3. Appendix C - Insurance Liability Worksheet - is from *Agritourism and Nature Tourism in California, Second Edition*, 2011, available through UC ANR Catalog



This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, through the Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program under subaward number EW17-012. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.



United States Department of Agriculture  
National Institute of Food and Agriculture

---

This guide was created by the University of California Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (UC SAREP), a Statewide Program of UC Agriculture and Natural Resources. For more information about UC SAREP agritourism programming, visit: <https://ucanr.edu/sites/agritourism/>

or contact Penny Leff, UC SAREP Agritourism  
Coordinator at [paleff@ucdavis.edu](mailto:paleff@ucdavis.edu)  
or 530-752-5208.

Published online September 2019

