

Agritourism practices on U.S. goat operations as part of the NAHMS Goat 2019 study

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Introduction

Agritourism is any practice that brings the general public onto an agricultural operation and is a growing industry. Agritourism public health risks include physical safety hazards, food safety concerns and zoonotic disease transmission. This study evaluated management practices on goat agritourism operations and identified areas where mitigations could potentially be introduced to decrease public health risks for goat agritourism operations.

Materials and methods

NAHMS is a nonregulatory program within USDA APHIS VS that was initiated in 1983 to collect, analyze and disseminate data on animal health, management and productivity across the U.S. In 2019, NAHMS, in collaboration with the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), conducted its second national cross-sectional study to collect health and production information about the U.S. goat industry.

The NAHMS Goat 2019 study included 24 of the top goat-producing states, representing 76.6% of U.S. goat operations with 5 or more adult goats. Using the NASS list frame, producers with 5 or more goats were personally interviewed by NASS enumerators and federal or state veterinary personnel from July 1st through March 20th, 2020. Operations were eligible to complete the on-site agritourism questionnaire if they had completed the other study questionnaires, allowed the general public onto their operation, and if the general public had access to areas or facilities on the farm that housed or contained animals, feed, manure or farm equipment.

Results

The on-site agritourism questionnaire was completed by 86 operations. The average number of annual visitors per operation was 1,393 visitors, but 51.8% of operations had less than 100 visitors per year. The highest percentage of visits occurred in April.

Overall, fewer operations allowed visitor access to high-risk areas, such as kidding areas or manure piles. Most operations allowed visitors to interact with adult goats that were not kidding (94.2%), weaned kids (91.9%) and preweaned kids (87.2%). Fewer operations allowed visitors to interact with newborn kids and does that were kidding (38.4 and 26.7%, respectively).

About half (53.5%) of the operations allowed visitors to feed goats, with 89.1% of operations allowing feeding (hand or bottle) from outside the pen and through the fence and 63.0% allowing feeding inside the pen.

There was a clearly defined transition area that separated animal areas from non-animal areas on 53.5% of operations. Of those operations, 39.1% had transition areas marked by visible and easily understood signage that included animal area expectations, and 83.7% used a guide to escort visitor groups through the goat visitor areas.

Overall, 70.9% of operations had hand-washing stations with soap and water available to visitors exiting the visitor areas. On average, these operations checked the hand-washing stations 1.6 times per day when visitors were present.

Warnings to visitors regarding any risks (health-related or physical) were communicated on 83.7% of operations, with 9.7% of those operations having signage present. About 97% of operations communicated required policies by the use of signs (20.5%) and/or verbally (97.6%).

Food and/or drink was available on 32.6% of operations. Of those operations, 39.3% served unpasteurized products, and 10.7% served food and drink in an area where animals had ever been kept or where there was possible animal contact.

Significance

As the goat agritourism industry becomes increasingly popular, the public health implications of operations' practices grow more important. Basic hand-washing stations should be appropriately available. Further, general signage about risks, policies and flow of visitor traffic improves communication. Continual data collection and dissemination of results to stakeholders will improve best practices and provide operations the necessary tools to practice effective risk mitigation, leading to successful operations where the public enjoys learning about agriculture.

