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2012 Achievement Awards

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Virginia Association of Counties
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Call for Entries



2012 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 1, 2012

Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. Deadline: June 1, 2012.

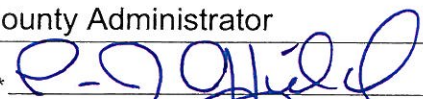
Program Information

Locality Augusta County
Program Title Fields of Gold Agritourism
Program Category Regional Collaboration

Contact Information

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Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name Patrick Coffield
Title County Administrator
Signature* 

*Entries without this signature will not be accepted.



Fields of Gold

Shenandoah Valley Agritourism Initiative

Program Overview

Fields of Gold is a collaborative regional project to promote agritourism, involving six counties and five cities in the Shenandoah Valley: Counties of **Augusta, Bath, Highland, Rockbridge, Rockingham, and Shenandoah** and the Cities of Buena Vista, Harrisonburg, Lexington, Staunton, and Waynesboro. The Fields of Gold program has brought together local government officials and agritourism representatives from localities across the region to work together on a comprehensive marketing, tracking, and capacity building initiative, leveraging resources of the various partners to benefit agriculture, a vital economic asset in the Shenandoah Valley.

The Challenge

Home to over 6,000 farms and three of the five largest agricultural counties in Virginia, the Fields of Gold region has a rich agricultural history and agriculture remains a significant portion of its counties' economies. More than 25 percent of Virginia's agricultural revenue comes from the six counties included in the Fields of Gold region. Today, the partner localities of Fields of Gold share a common challenge of growing pressure to remain competitive, profitable, and sustainable in the global market economy. By combining two important

industries of the Shenandoah Valley, agriculture and tourism, Fields of Gold attempts to help alleviate those pressures while allowing the region's rural and urban communities to prosper, protect, and enhance agriculture as a unique cultural heritage.

Fields of Gold is an economic development initiative. It is intended to create and retain jobs on the farm, expand tourism jobs off the farm, and nurture an environment for entrepreneurship. A well-developed agritourism system in the Shenandoah Valley can aid in reversing negative economic trends by opening up new, profitable markets for farm products and services while providing a unique travel experience for a large regional market. Additionally, Fields of Gold strives to establish better linkages between agricultural producers and consumers which strengthen the local food system and invigorate the region's economy. Fields of Gold's success relies on the cooperation and support of its member localities and partnerships with the private sector.

Process of Collaboration

Prior to Fields of Gold, a number of individual agricultural related efforts existed in the Shenandoah Valley, but no integrated regional approach to fostering the development of agritourism had been instituted. An opportunity existed in collaborating as a region to evaluate, improve, and promote its local assets through a common linkage of agriculture and tourism.

In early 2011, local leaders in the Shenandoah Valley met to look at ways to take advantage of this high interest in agriculture and tourism and to develop a program from which all will benefit. These discussions laid the foundation for Fields of Gold as a partnership between local governments, tourism entities, and the farming community to promote regional agritourism. Support was received from elected officials and a number of public and private

organizations (see attached list). The region's economic development entity, the Shenandoah Valley Partnership (SVP), was involved from the onset. State agencies were also consulted including Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, and Virginia Tourism Corporation.

Local government officials agreed that for Fields of Gold to become an effective regional agritourism program, a number of steps would have to be taken. These steps included surveying all the different agritourism businesses in the region, mapping these businesses, hosting educational workshops, conducting an economic impact analysis, participating in outreach efforts, and building partnerships with organizations and farmers, and developing a marketing and business plan. All of these processes were guided by committees that were formed and comprised of local government officials, the private sector, and stakeholders from the participating localities.

How the Program Was Carried Out

Within several months of the first discussions, six counties and five cities committed to developing Fields of Gold as a regional agritourism program. Nine of the localities also contributed funding to the initiative. These funds were then used as leverage for a CDBG Regional Planning Grant funded by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, with Augusta County as the grant designee.

After the leveraging funds from the localities and the CDBG grant were received in October of 2011, committees began organizing and monitoring the steps that had been defined to make Fields of Gold an effective agritourism program. An online survey was created to gather data on the size and types of agritourism establishments in the region, their products and

locations as well as to evaluate relevant local agritourism policies. Members of the committees contacted agritourism businesses in their localities to encourage them to complete the survey. Data from the survey was then used to build base maps in ArcGIS. These GIS maps were used to create educational maps and a Google map of agritourism businesses in the Fields of Gold region (see attached asset map). Furthermore, the survey information was instrumental in preparing the economic impact analysis. To promote the Fields of Gold concept, the first agritourism festival was held in Augusta County in October of 2011. This festival attracted more than 600 visitors and 50 agritourism vendors.

The Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission (CSPDC) played an important role in carrying out the planning process. The CSPDC helped organize and staff committee meetings, collect and analyze survey data, and design the maps. Additionally, the CSPDC produced promotional flyers and posters, built web pages, participated in the economic impact analysis, and led a number of agritourism educational workshops for Fields of Gold.

Results

By working collaboratively, the six counties and five cities in the Shenandoah Valley were able to design and establish Fields of Gold as a regional agritourism program. Using the localities' funds and a CDBG Regional Planning Grant, Fields of Gold has produced the most comprehensive guide to agritourism in the Shenandoah Valley. Over 150 agritourism operations have taken the survey for Fields of Gold. Agritourism businesses ranging from trout farms, to pick-your-own farms, and farmers markets have enrolled in the Fields of Gold program.

The localities of the Shenandoah Valley have designed the Fields of Gold program so that it assists different agritourism businesses. The Fields of Gold map and guide to agritourism

businesses has been categorized to promote the counties' farm stands and wineries, as well as the cities' locally-sourced restaurants and stores. Additionally, Fields of Gold has helped localities address policy issues related to agritourism businesses such as zoning, signage, and business licenses.

Fields of Gold has brought together the farming community, agritourism owners, localities, and state agencies to promote the Shenandoah Valley as an agritourism destination. Local government officials benefit from the economy of scale Fields of Gold offers for promoting agritourism, rather than each locality operating its own agritourism program. Working together, local governments are able to share ideas and resources to make Fields of Gold a better agritourism program. Through the efforts of many, Fields of Gold resulted in expanded public-private partnerships, cost-savings to localities to initiate an agritourism program, a baseline of data to evaluate the program's progress, and tools to assist agritourism entrepreneurs to be successful.



Central Shenandoah Region

Planting the Seeds for a Regional Agritourism Program

Program Background

The Central Shenandoah Region has a rich history in agriculture. Agriculture remains important to the Region's identity and economy. The Region is also recognized for its beauty and recreational and cultural attractions. A regional agritourism program is ideal for supporting both of these industries.



Serving 21 localities, the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission (CSPDC) is positioned to coordinate the necessary activities to develop an

agritourism program for the Region. The program has been named *Fields of Gold* to reflect the Region's fertile farmland and abundance of agricultural products as well as the program's potential for economic impact and expanded travel experiences.

Program Focus

Fields of Gold will focus on the promotion and marketing of agritourism activities. It provides the mechanism for bringing together partners to implement a coordinated and well-designed marketing strategy for the Region. By working collaboratively, the Region can create a destination with greater drawing power that benefits farming as well as other tourism related activities.

Program Expectations

- ☛ Opening new profitable markets for farm products, services and experiences
- ☛ Giving the general public opportunities to enjoy farming and other outdoor activities and attractions
- ☛ Generating expenditures by tourists including fuel, meals, lodging, retail purchases, and other attractions
- ☛ Rebuilding valuable connections between rural and urban populations about farms and food production
- ☛ Distinguishing the Region as an agritourism destination

For additional information, please contact:

Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission

112 MacTanly Place
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Website: www.cspdc.org



Agriculture

- 911,000 acres of farmland
- Over 6,000 farms
- Home to three of the top five ag-producing counties (Rockingham, Augusta, and Shenandoah)
- Over a quarter of the total value of agricultural products sold in Virginia are from the Central Shenandoah Region
- One of the few places in the world where food, fuel, fiber, and feed can be grown without irrigation

Tourism











- In 2009, travelers spent over \$890 million in the Region
- Outdoor and cultural activities are among the most popular reasons for visiting the Region
- Region includes the Blue Ridge Parkway, Shenandoah National Park, George Washington and Jefferson National Forests, and the headwaters of the James and Shenandoah Rivers
- Connected to larger markets by Interstates 81, 66 and 64

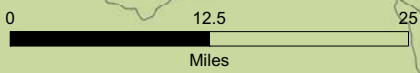
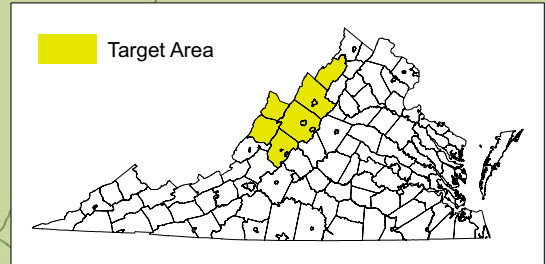
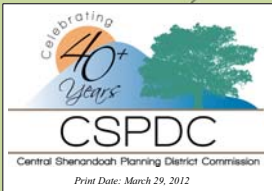
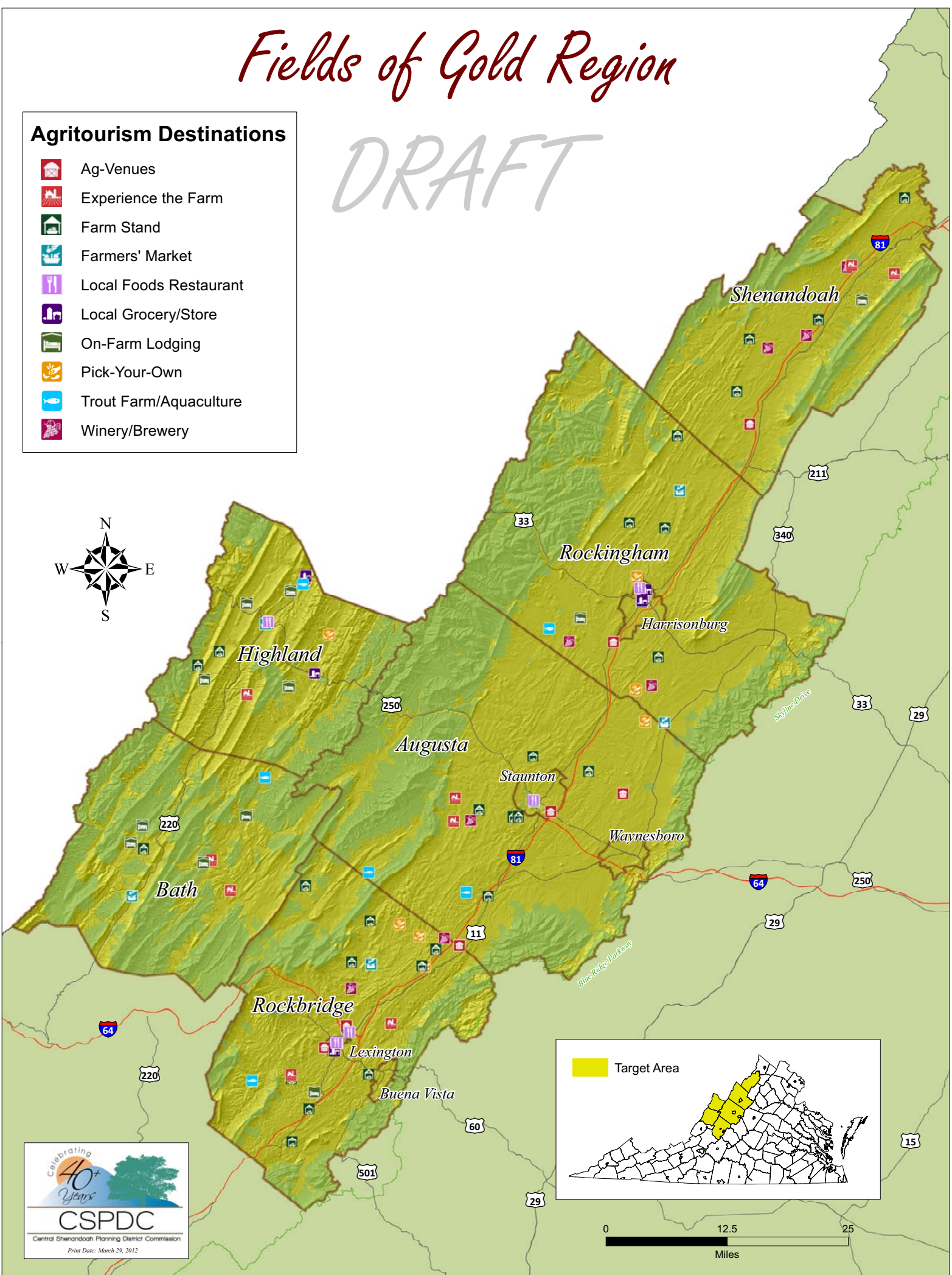
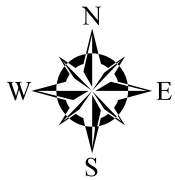


Fields of Gold Region

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Agritourism Destinations

-  Ag-Venues
-  Experience the Farm
-  Farm Stand
-  Farmers' Market
-  Local Foods Restaurant
-  Local Grocery/Store
-  On-Farm Lodging
-  Pick-Your-Own
-  Trout Farm/Aquaculture
-  Winery/Brewery



Fields of Gold Agritourism Initiative Supporters

The Honorable Mark R. Warner, United States Senate
The Honorable Robert W. Goodlatte, United States Congress
The Honorable Emmett W. Hanger, Jr., Senate of Virginia
The Honorable R. Creigh Deeds, Senate of Virginia
The Honorable Benjamin L. Cline, Virginia House of Delegates
The Honorable R. Steven Landes, Virginia House of Delegates
The Honorable Tony O. Wilt, Virginia House of Delegates
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Buena Vista City Council
Harrisonburg City Council
Lexington City Council
Staunton City Council
Waynesboro City Council
Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission
Shenandoah Valley Partnership
Augusta County Farm Bureau
Augusta County Industrial Development Authority
Center for Rural Virginia
Greater Augusta Regional Chamber of Commerce
Greater Augusta Regional Tourism
The Highland Center
James Madison University
Lexington & the Rockbridge Area Tourism
Rockbridge County Farm Bureau