



Sturgeon County

Agribusiness Agritourism Review Task Force Final Recommendations Report

April 12, 2022



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Message from the Agribusiness Agritourism Task Force

"Our role as members of the Sturgeon County Agribusiness Agritourism Review Task Force has been to conduct a review of best practices and perspectives relating to agribusiness and agritourism, and to provide Council with specific recommendations for Sturgeon County.

In doing so we heard from a cross-section of the Sturgeon County agricultural sector, area landowners, planning experts, and other stakeholders. We issued surveys, reached out via mail, print and social media, issued and evaluated surveys, and offered opportunities for affected landowners to present directly to our Task Force.

Our work also involved a review of the current state in Sturgeon County and an examination of what other Canadian jurisdictions are doing to support the diversification of the agricultural sector while considering the interests of area landowners. We considered all these technical and stakeholder inputs as we developed specific recommendations for Sturgeon County.

The consensus of our Task Force is that the recommendations provided within this Report provide the regulatory framework to support the continued growth and diversification of Sturgeon County's agricultural sector while also providing sufficient measures to mitigate potential impacts on other landowners that may result from agribusiness and agritourism activities.

It has been a pleasure to serve the community on this review, and we wish to convey our sincere appreciation to all those who contributed to its positive outcome."

Community Members

Cathy Gilbert

Cathy Gilbert (Apr 1, 2022 08:58 MDT)

Cathy Gilbert, Task Force Chair

Tam Andersen

Tam Andersen (Mar 31, 2022 08:23 MDT)

Tam Anderson

David Benejstorf

David Benejstorf (Mar 30, 2022 21:26 MDT)

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Debbie Foisy (Mar 31, 2022 19:42 MDT)

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Council Members

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Deanna Stang, Councillor, Division 5, Vice Chair

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Mayor Alanna Hnatiw

Sturgeon County has a long and prosperous agricultural history. The County contains approximately 194,250 hectares (480,000 acres) of agricultural land, plentiful Class 1 soils, and generally outstanding growing conditions. Primary agricultural production has been a key contributor to the County's economic health for generations. As a significant and important economic resource, supporting agriculture and increasing the viability of the agricultural sector is a priority for Sturgeon County.

Agriculture is evolving and there is increasing interest and need for growth beyond primary production to include agricultural processing, value-add opportunities, diversification of agriculture through innovative agriculture practices, and related activities such as agritourism. Sturgeon County is well-positioned to take advantage of value-added and diversified agribusiness and agritourism opportunities given its strong agricultural base and its proximity to Edmonton and other regional markets.

Several agricultural operators within Sturgeon County have already diversified and have incorporated agribusiness and agritourism activities within their operations. The County boasts numerous green houses, u-pick farms, value added processing, agricultural experiences, and other attractions.

Municipal approval processes and regulatory mechanisms have not kept pace with social and economic shifts to allow for more diversified agricultural opportunities. Current County regulations do not consider the wide variety of opportunities and uses being sought by operators nor do they provide an effective means to manage the impacts of these activities (increased noise, traffic, etc.).

Sturgeon County Council recognized the need to undertake a review of agribusiness and agritourism and provide investment certainty for the agricultural community while ensuring that stakeholders are heard.

The County is a sought-after location for agribusiness investment, agritourism expansion and development. As investors approach the County with plans to build their business here, they require certainty.

The current Land Use Bylaw does not provide investment certainty nor clarity around many types of agribusiness and agritourism developments and where they may be located.

The Agribusiness and Agritourism Review Task Force has worked hard to provide recommendations that strike the right balance between the interests of current and future operators and their neighbours.



Agribusiness and Agritourism Review

On March 9, 2021, Sturgeon County Council adopted Bylaw 1538/21, which approved the agribusiness agritourism review and the creation of a community-based task force to support Council in evaluating related economic opportunities, regulatory requirements, landowner perspectives, and overall best practices in this area.

The Task Force was comprised of representatives of local agribusiness and agritourism sectors as well as two representatives from Sturgeon County Council.

Bylaw 1538/21 is attached as [Appendix A.](#)

Mandate and Deliverables

The scope of the Agribusiness and Agritourism Review and the mandate of the Task Force was to:

1. Evaluate the current state of agribusiness and agritourism in Sturgeon County, including economic impact; any real or perceived barriers to agribusiness or agritourism growth and success; and identify the needs and expectations of Sturgeon County's businesses and landowners.
2. Review local, provincial, and national agribusiness and agritourism regulatory best practices including an evaluation and distinction between general agriculture, agribusiness and agritourism. Included as well is a review of appropriate licensing requirements or regulations related to hosting of events on agricultural parcels and the real or perceived impacts (positive and negative) that agribusiness and agritourism operations of different types and sizes have on surrounding landowners.
3. Recommend and undertake an engagement and communication strategy with key stakeholders.
4. Produce a "What We Heard" report summarizing the consultation feedback and comments.
5. Present a Final Report containing the Task Force findings and recommendations on potential regulations and policy for Council consideration.

Guiding Principles

The Task Force considered the following guiding principles when evaluating, reviewing, and recommending the regulatory policy:

- Agriculture is a vital economic sector within the County.
- Support for the continued viability of agricultural operations is essential.
- Farm diversification is a mechanism to increase the economic viability of farming operations.
- Municipal regulatory competitiveness and assurance (clarity, consistency, fairness, practicality, ease, etc.) is important to support investment, including in diversified agricultural opportunities such as agribusiness and agritourism.
- Potential impacts of potential development and activities related to agribusiness and agritourism, must be considered as they relate to utility capacity, roads, parking, traffic, public safety, noise, waste generation, etc.
- Potential impacts of potential development and activities related to agribusiness and agritourism as they relate to the use, enjoyment, value, and economic opportunity of adjacent lands must be considered, and adjacent landowners deserve the opportunity to comment on such impacts. regulations and policy for Council consideration.

Review Process

The review launched in June of 2021 with the selected Task Force members. Sturgeon County provided administrative support to the Task Force. Specialists in agriculture and land use regulation were recruited to assist in a professional current state assessment of agritourism and agribusinesses in the County and researching best practices in other jurisdictions.

The first five meetings were held virtually due to COVID-19 gathering restrictions, which the Task Force believed limited the level of engagement.

The meetings did move to a hybrid format once provincial restrictions permitted in-person meetings.

In November 2021, the Task Force shifted focus on appropriate Land Use Bylaw considerations and the provision of operating criteria for those wanting to hold commercial events on agricultural parcels.

Economic development strategies needed to support agricultural diversification were also shifted to be within the mandate of other committees such as the Economic Development Advisory Board.

Stakeholder Engagement

Engagement occurred throughout the project with a variety of stakeholders, landowners, and the public, to allow for input on potential issues and opportunities related to agribusiness and agritourism.

Initial engagement included an online survey to provide awareness about the project and collect input on agribusiness and agritourism practices. Respondents were specifically asked to reflect on land use compatibility and issues such as noise, odour, traffic, parking. Respondents were asked to provide ideas on solutions to overcome obstacles relating to agritourism and agribusiness.

The survey launched on November 1, 2021, and remained open for three weeks, closing on November 21, 2021. For specifics and details, refer to the What We Heard Report, December 2021 in [Appendix C.](#)

Work continued as the Task Force worked to provide clarity on the activities and definitions that should be

considered within the Land Use Bylaw. The Task Force discussed the needs of operators, as well as reviewed concepts and strategies from other jurisdictions.

A brief overview of initial definitions and core criteria was then included within a survey to agritourism and agribusiness operators and property owners adjacent to these operators. Information was mailed to 384 properties (36 agribusiness/event operators and 348 adjacent landowners), of which 39 responded to the survey. The survey summary is provided in [Appendix C.](#)

The mailout also included an invitation for those who wanted to make a presentation to the Task Force. Fifteen people took advantage of the opportunity and either sent in their submissions or presented to the Task Force on January 20, 2022. A list of presenters and submissions are provided in [Appendix C.](#)

Issues Identified

The Task Force reviewed all the information gathered from the best practice and jurisdictional review, the surveys, and the stakeholder presentations. Although there was recognition of agricultural operators' desire to diversify their agricultural income, several concerns related to agribusiness and agritourism developments and events were identified.

- **Event regulations** - Conversations were needed to determine if events such as weddings should be related to agribusiness and agritourism or considered its own entity, and whether there will be limits placed on the number of events to minimize impacts on adjacent landowners. If so, can this be done on a per week, per year, or permanent vs temporary basis.
- **Noise and hours of operation** - Given the increased intensity of proposed uses, discussion was had on how the County can limit noise impacts and hours of operation. A key factor was the differentiation between bona fide agriculture practices and intensified uses.
- **Proximity to neighbors** - The distance between intensified uses and adjacent landowners has a significant impact on how those parcels will be affected. This can also be related to the size of the parcels, which gives operators the ability to spread out or distance themselves and minimize those impacts.

- **Parking and traffic** - As the intensity of agribusiness and agritourism increases, the more important this factor becomes. Operators must ensure their business has adequate onsite parking room for its visitors to reduce safety concerns. Similarly for traffic, as the surrounding road infrastructure must be able to accommodate the increased number of vehicle trips resulting from intensified uses. These uses can impact all landowners along the access roads that service these parcels.
- **Enforcement** - How will these regulations be monitored? A set of rules must be established that does not restrict the ability to enforce, but also ensures that operators adhere to thresholds and conditions outlined for their business.
- **The right to farm** - There are various opinions on agriculture in Sturgeon County. Some residents wish for a continued “traditional primary production” style of agriculture, while others seek agribusiness and agritourism opportunities to diversify income on the farm and explore new agricultural practices.
- **Educating the public** - Communication with the public will be of the utmost importance to ensure a common knowledge of “permitted” and “discretionary” uses and how this relates to agricultural operators and permitting in Sturgeon County.
- **Consultation with neighbors** - With greater intensity uses, consultation with neighbours is important to ensure all opinions are considered with respect to intensified uses.
- **Business components for consideration** - Farming in the future means new opportunities to diversify income and provide jobs to those in the region.

Regulatory Options

The Task Force considered regulatory options/approaches that would address the regulatory gaps that currently exist with Sturgeon County's Land Use Bylaw.

Option 1 – Create a Blended Agritourism and Diversified Agriculture Use:

define Diversified Agriculture as “use” that includes activities associated with agritourism for inclusion in the Land Use Bylaw and associated regulations and thresholds.

Option 2 – Create Separate Agritourism & Diversified Agriculture Uses:

define both Diversified Agriculture and Agritourism as “uses” for inclusion in the Land Use Bylaw and associated regulations and thresholds.

Option 3 – Create a New Agriculture District:

create a separate Land Use Bylaw District (zoning) that allows for uses associated with more diversified agricultural uses including processing, value added activities as well as agritourism activities

In addition, the Task Force asked administration to finalize a definition for an **Event Venue** that could be included in the Land Use Bylaw to provide the opportunity for those wishing to hold commercial events (e.g. weddings) on agricultural lands.

The Agribusiness Agritourism Review Task Force puts forward the following recommendations for Sturgeon County Council's consideration and support.

- The Task Force believes the recommendations are consistent with the Guiding Principles stated herein.
- The recommendations are intended to support innovation and diversification of the agricultural sector.
- The recommendations provide oversight and opportunity for the impacts that may result from these more intensive activities to be appropriately managed through the Land Use Bylaw and development permitting processes.

The Task Force recommends:

1. That the following amendments to the Land Use Bylaw be supported:

- **Add: the following Definitions of Uses**

Event Venue means a use primarily intended to hold events and includes the provision of facilities to enable entertainment, public assembly, and/or the preparation of food and beverage services. This use does not include bed and breakfast, recreation facilities, visitor accommodation, or home-based business.

Diversified Agriculture means an agricultural use that brings additional traffic to the agricultural parcel than those anticipated in the AG - Agriculture District. Typical activities include value added agricultural processing, retail sales of agricultural products and products complementary and accessory to the agricultural use, and allows for commercial experiences related to the enjoyment, education, or activities and events related to farming or farm life. This use does not include home based business, intensive agriculture, event venue, agriculture support services, Cannabis Production and Distribution, or Cannabis Retail Sales.

- **Update the following Terminology**

Event means a limited term commercial activity or gathering that may include entertainment, food and beverage services, additional parking, and other additional services. Examples may include weddings, ceremonies, retreats, parties, corporate functions, concerts, tradeshow, markets, and farm suppers.

Guest Unit means an attached or detached room, cottage, cabin, yurt, or campsite that is designed to be used as temporary accommodations for one or more people. All guest units provide for sleeping and sanitation, although sanitation may be provided through shared bathrooms. A guest unit may be equipped with a partial kitchen.

- **Amend AG - Agriculture District**

to include **Event Venue as a discretionary use** (AG Major, AG Minor and AG Res parcels)

to include **Diversified Agriculture as a permitted use.**

- Create a new **AG-2 District** that supports more intensive and diversified agricultural uses as permitted uses.
 - Process other amendments as required to support alignment and consistency across the Land Use Bylaw.
2. That a public communications plan be developed and implemented regarding the updated bylaw / regulations, educating residents on what Diversified Agriculture is and is not.
 3. That Council support municipal fee waivers for re-zoning and/or development permitting fees for 2022, for existing agritourism, agribusiness and event venue operators needing to come into compliance with the new regulations.
 4. That ongoing agribusiness and agritourism economic development opportunities be considered through the Economic Development Advisory Board and the Agricultural Services Board, and that Council explore additional governance options (sub-committees, etc.) for this sector in the future.
 5. That County Administration internally trial an Impact Matrix for new Diversified Agriculture applications, assessing the tangible effect of applications and assessing their appropriate use classification, with results brought back for Council by August 2024 to determine effectiveness and potential implementation.

Sturgeon County is a sought-after location for agribusiness investment, as well as agritourism expansion and development. Agribusiness and agritourism present excellent opportunities for existing operators in the County to diversify and augment their income to support continuation of their agricultural operations as well as provide opportunities for new investment in agriculture.

The Agribusiness and Agritourism Review Task Force has worked conscientiously to ensure that the recommendations contained within this Report enable opportunities to diversify and expand agriculture, while ensuring sufficient regulatory oversight to protect County infrastructure and neighbour interests.

The Task Force reviewed agribusiness and agritourism best practices in other jurisdictions. We engaged with stakeholders through surveys, interviews, and presentations to understand current operator concerns and concerns of those who live adjacent to these uses.

The creation of two new use definitions for “event venues” and “diversified agriculture” proposed for inclusion in the County’s Land Use Bylaw will allow operators expanded opportunities to reinforce the viability of their operations.

The recommended creation of a new Land Use Bylaw District that specifically acknowledges the opportunity to create areas within the County that support agricultural

activities that may generate additional traffic, customer visits and nuisance beyond those generated by traditional primary agriculture, provides investment certainty for those wanting to locate within the County as well as certainty for those who have a right to know what to expect when adjacent to lands identified for these activities.

Moving forward, the Task Force recommends support for innovation and diversification of farm income through the Economic Development Advisory Board and Agriculture Services Board. Additionally, that the County consider ongoing education and awareness regarding agriculture and the need to support these diversified agribusiness opportunities for the ongoing health and growth of the agricultural sector in the County.

The Agribusiness and Agritourism Review Task Force has utilized their experience, insights, and hard work to provide Sturgeon County Council with recommendations that could provide the regulatory certainty and define many of the uses that will assist existing agricultural operators to plan for the future and for Sturgeon County to attract new investment.

We express our appreciation to Council and the community for your trust and consideration of our recommendations.



A. Agribusiness and Agritourism Review Task Force Bylaw - 1538/21

B. Review Process - Supporting Documents

- [Current State Assessment, December 2, 2021](#)
- [Summary of Four Comparator Municipalities' Regulatory and Policy Requirements, December 2021](#)
 - [Rocky View County MDP](#)
 - [Rocky View County Special Event Reference Guide](#)
 - [Strathcona County Urban Service Area](#)
 - [Bremner Urban Service Area](#)
 - [Strathcona County Comparator documents](#)
 - [Strathcona County Tourism Strategy & Implementation Plan](#)
 - [Ontario Comparator Documents](#)

C. Stakeholder Engagement - Summary Documents

- [What We Heard Report, December 2021](#)
- [Operator and Adjacent Landowners Survey and Inputs - Summary Report](#)
- [Submissions to Task Force Meeting January 20, 2022](#)