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Spud, berry, dairy tour to focus on businesses

By Sara Bredesen
Regional Editor

Organizers are putting the finishing touches on a 2 1/2 day agricultural tour that will take visitors to eight food-based businesses and a university research station during peak fall colors in central Wisconsin Sept. 29 to Oct. 1.

"I thought agriculture was on the back burner for many years, and now it's moving to the front burner," said Harold Altenburg, owner of Altenburg's Country Gardens near Wisconsin Rapids and the originator of the "2008 Spud, Berry and Dairy Tour: AgVentures in Central Wisconsin."

Tour participants will visit PandR Packing, an onion packing facility that services national brands such as **Green Giant**, Fresh Farm and SuperValu; Russet Potato Exchange, Wisconsin's largest fresh potato packer and Midwest's largest vertically integrated potato supplier; and the Hancock Agricultural Research Station and its new potato storage research facility.

Visitors can see the dairy side of agriculture at the 3,800-cow Central Sands Dairy near Bancroft and family-owned Wisconsin Dairy State Cheese at Rudolph.

The fall tour dates were planned to catch the last of the potato harvest at Heartland Farms, the largest potato grower in Wisconsin, and the beginning of the cranberry harvest and processing at Glacial Lake Cranberries and Ocean Spray at Wisconsin Rapids.

Altenburg's Country Gardens is offering a hayride through a forest, pumpkin patch and corn maze.

"It's a night hayride, and it is getting close to the Halloween season, and we intend to make it very interesting," Mr. Altenburg said.

Sara Brish, director of sales and marketing for the Stevens Point Area Business and Convention Bureau, said the tour will take visitors into businesses that don't usually open their doors to the public.

"We're able to go in and see firsthand how the product is made, or in the instance of Central Sands Dairy, to see how the methane is made from manure," Ms. Brish said. "Some of these places are state-of-the-art."

The tour originally targeted agriculture professionals, but as the project grew, organizers realized it had a much broader interest.

"As more and more people become involved in the food we eat, we're so removed from where it comes from," Ms. Brish said. "Our knowledge and appreciation has diminished so much. This tour shows those that attend firsthand where our food comes from and what it takes to put a can of cranberries or Craisins together, or a bag of potatoes."

Meals during the tour will feature locally produced food organized by the Central Rivers Farm Shed, a local advocacy group for "Buy Local, Buy Wisconsin," and by local chefs.

"All the food will have a local emphasis," Ms. Brish said.

"I know central Wisconsin doesn't know - and I'm pretty sure that the Midwest doesn't know - that we have this agricultural gem right here," Ms. Brish said. "Whether it's cheese or packing or cranberries or milk, whatever it might be, we have such huge assets right here, and we're so happy to be able to showcase them."

Guests can take the guided bus tour with transportation and meals for \$199 per person or add two nights at the Sleep Inn and Suites in Plover for \$349 per person. Rates are reduced for multiple occupancy. Reservations for the tour are required before Aug. 1.

Ms. Brish said there are already plans under way for a 2009 tour.

More information about the tour and registration materials are available online at www.centralwisconsin.org or by calling the Stevens Point Area Business and Convention Bureau at (800) 236-4636.

Sara Bredesen can be reached at stbrede@gmail.com.

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