

West Virginia Maple Producer Survey Report

Agritourism Readiness, Producer Support Preferences, and Mountain State Maple Days
Development

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De-identified, aggregated results only | n=13 | Fielded Dec 5–12, 2025 | Prepared December 27, 2025

Confidentiality note: This report intentionally excludes any identifying information. Results are summarized only in aggregate and are intended to inform program design and partner coordination.

Abstract

Mountain State Maple Days (MSMD) is a statewide agritourism initiative that connects the public with West Virginia maple producers through sugarhouse visits, tastings, and seasonal experiences. This report synthesizes de-identified survey responses (n=13) from West Virginia producers to assess agritourism readiness, producer support usage and barriers, training preferences, and development priorities for MSMD and the broader maple sector. Findings indicate strong interest in MSMD participation alongside uneven feasibility to host visitors during peak production. The most prominent barrier to accessing supports is informational friction—many producers are uncertain what resources exist and when deadlines occur—combined with the limited time available during syrup season. Producers prefer training formats that are short, practical, and schedule-flexible (live virtual evenings and self-paced modules). Recommendations focus on reducing participation friction by offering multiple MSMD participation lanes (visitor-ready, reservation-based, and market-ready), centralizing support discovery, providing modular readiness assets (signage, marketing templates, packaging/label support), and adopting lightweight impact tracking suitable for seasonal operations.

Keywords: maple syrup, agritourism, Mountain State Maple Days, visitor readiness, producer training, rural economic development, West Virginia.

1. Introduction

West Virginia's maple sector sits at the intersection of working forests, small business development, and tourism. For producers, the syrup season compresses labor, decision-making, and operational risk into a short window defined by weather and timing. Mountain State Maple Days (MSMD) functions as a public-facing entry point into this sector, creating opportunities for direct sales, education, and long-term customer relationships. However, successful agritourism is not guaranteed; it depends on site access, safety, staffing, visitor flow, and communications—requirements that can collide with the realities of peak production.

This survey was conducted to understand how producers currently engage with agritourism and MSMD, what kinds of supports they use, what prevents access to those supports, how producers prefer to learn, and which development priorities would most strengthen MSMD. The aim of this report is to translate those signals into actionable guidance for MSMD organizers and partners.

2. Methods and scope

This report summarizes 13 survey responses from producers in West Virginia. Responses were self-reported and include a mix of multiple-choice selections, scaled ratings, and short open-ended inputs. Results are presented as counts, percentages, and interpretive themes. Given the sample size, findings should be treated as directional and used to inform program design, training architecture, and partnership coordination rather than to estimate statewide prevalence with statistical confidence.

3. Results

3.1 Producer profile and operational scale

Respondents represented a split between family/owner-operated farms (54%, 7/13) and hobby or small-scale producers (46%, 6/13). Tap counts ranged from 30 to 2,250, with a median of approximately 250 taps (mean ~552). This spread signals that MSMD and related supports must be designed for multiple operating realities. Larger operations may have more infrastructure but face intense seasonal production pressure, while smaller operations may have limited visitor infrastructure and staffing even if production pressure is lower.

3.2 Mountain State Maple Days participation patterns

Participation patterns indicate both a stable core and a strong recruitment pipeline. Nearly half of respondents reported participating in MSMD annually (46%, 6/13). An additional 38% (5/13) indicated they have not participated yet but are interested. One respondent reported participating some years (8%, 1/13), and one indicated no interest (8%, 1/13). These results suggest MSMD is not facing a persuasion gap so much as a feasibility and onboarding gap: many producers are open to participation but need pathways that fit their site conditions and seasonal capacity.

3.3 Agritourism activity mix and readiness spectrum

Producers reported a range of agritourism activities over the past three years, with guided tours and tastings/demonstrations most common. Some respondents reported collaborations with restaurants or breweries and occasional workshops/classes, while a subset reported no agritourism activities. This mix reflects a readiness spectrum rather than a binary ready/not-ready divide. For many producers, the question is not whether they value agritourism, but which format is feasible without disrupting production or increasing safety risk.

When asked how feasible it is to host visitors during peak production, responses skewed toward lower feasibility, with a median response of 2 on a five-point scale and an average near 2.8. While some respondents rated hosting as highly feasible (4–5), more rated it as low feasibility (1–2). This distribution matters for MSMD development: if participation is implicitly defined as open sugarhouse hours during peak season, MSMD will unintentionally exclude many producers who would otherwise participate through alternative models.

3.4 Reported impacts of Maple Days-style agritourism

Producers reported uneven short-term sales impacts from agritourism weekends. Some indicated modest increases (e.g., 1–25%), while others reported larger gains (including 26–50%, 51–100%, and at least one report of doubling). A minority reported no change, and several indicated they did not track or were unsure. This pattern is consistent with the reality that sales outcomes depend heavily on site access, visitor flow, product readiness, staffing, and promotional reach. It also highlights a measurement gap: without simple ways to track visitor counts and basic sales bands, impacts remain ambiguous and harder to learn from.

Beyond immediate sales, responses suggest that longer-tail outcomes—reputation, loyalty, and repeat purchasing—are meaningful benefits for many participants. However, a smaller set of responses indicated negative impacts related to hosting. These negative experiences should be interpreted as critical program

design data: they point to the need for right-sized visitor models, safety boundaries, staffing supports, and clearer visitor expectations so that participation strengthens businesses rather than creating burnout.

3.5 Support usage, helpfulness, and barriers to access

Use of business supports varied across respondents. Training/webinars and state promotional opportunities were among the most commonly used supports, while smaller numbers reported cost-share or equipment support, mini-grants for signage/labels/marketing, and one-on-one technical assistance. A notable subset reported using no supports in the last three years.

The clearest barrier to support uptake was informational friction: 85% (11/13) reported they are not sure what supports exist or when deadlines occur. Time burden during syrup season was also a major constraint. These findings imply that the support ecosystem may be functioning for those who access it, but discovery, timing, and administrative load prevent broader uptake. In practical terms, a centralized supports menu and deadline alert system may do as much for statewide capacity as creating new programs.

3.6 Producer training preferences under seasonal constraints

Seasonal capacity is the defining constraint for training design. Ninety-two percent of respondents (12/13) reported having only 0–2 hours per week during the season for trainings or applications. Within that constraint, producers preferred live virtual training (often best suited to evening delivery) and self-paced modules. These preferences point toward micro-learning: short, practical modules that deliver one usable outcome at a time, supported by optional live Q&A sessions for troubleshooting and peer learning.

3.7 Branding importance and readiness bundle interest

Respondents rated the importance of a statewide West Virginia maple brand relatively high, with an average rating of approximately 4.08 on a five-point scale and most rating the importance as 4–5. This suggests that brand development is a shared lever for growth, benefiting both producers who host visitors and those who primarily sell through markets, retail partners, or wholesale channels. Interest in a bundled ‘ready-for-tourism’ package was also substantial but not universal, indicating that any bundled support should be modular and optional rather than mandatory.

4. Discussion and implications for MSMD development

The survey results point to a consistent structural pattern: producers broadly support the goals of MSMD and recognize the value of agritourism, but participation feasibility is uneven during peak production. This has direct implications for MSMD’s participation model. If MSMD remains implicitly defined as on-farm, open-house hosting during peak boil, the program will continue to attract a subset of producers while leaving a large ‘interested but not yet’ group without a clear, feasible entry point. A more resilient MSMD model treats participation as an umbrella with multiple lanes and allows producers to select the format that matches their safety, staffing, and site conditions.

The single strongest barrier signal relates to the discovery and timing of supports rather than perceived usefulness. This implies that program development should prioritize the invisible infrastructure of communication: a centralized supports menu, clear deadlines, eligibility summaries, and time-to-apply estimates. In a seasonal industry where most producers have only 0–2 hours per week for additional tasks, reducing friction is not a convenience—it is a prerequisite for participation.

Training preferences reinforce this conclusion. Producers are not rejecting training; they are selecting formats that respect seasonal constraints. Training that is short, practical, and available on demand is more likely to be adopted, especially when paired with live virtual sessions that focus on troubleshooting rather than lengthy presentations. MSMD can increase readiness by building training around operational pain points: visitor safety boundaries, signage and wayfinding, a simple visitor loop design, tasting station flow, and how to write an accurate listing that reduces confusion and mismatched expectations.

5. Recommendations

Recommendations below are designed to align with the dominant constraints and preferences reflected in the survey: limited in-season time, uneven hosting feasibility, high value placed on coordinated promotion and branding, and strong interest in practical readiness assets.

5.1 Implement three MSMD participation lanes

Establish participation lanes that allow producers to opt into MSMD without adopting a single hosting model. A three-lane structure can normalize multiple valid forms of participation and reduce attrition caused by misfit hosting requirements.

- Visitor-Ready Lane: on-site open hours, tours, tastings (best for sites with safe access, staffing, and clear visitor boundaries).
- Reservation / Small-Group Lane: scheduled visits that control volume and reduce safety and staffing strain.
- Market-Ready Lane: pop-ups, farmers markets, retail partners, restaurant/brewery collaborations, and off-season tours for producers not positioned to host during peak boil.

5.2 Build a modular readiness bundle (optional, not mandatory)

Develop a single application that allows producers to select the modules most useful to their operation. The bundle should emphasize practical assets that directly improve safety, visitor flow, and promotional readiness, while avoiding excessive reporting requirements.

- Signage + wayfinding starter kit (parking, check-in, safety boundaries, tour loop).
- Plug-and-play marketing kit (caption templates, photo prompts, event listing template).
- Packaging/label support (templates and/or small cost-share where feasible).
- Coordinated listing syndication across WVMSPA/WV Tourism/CVB partner channels.
- Optional micro-grant for event staffing or access improvements (parking/wayfinding basics).

5.3 Design training as micro-learning with evening virtual options

Develop a short series of micro-modules (15–25 minutes each) that producers can complete independently, complemented by live evening Q&A sessions. Training content should focus on operational readiness outcomes rather than broad theory.

- Module examples: ‘Design a safe visitor loop,’ ‘Tasting station flow,’ ‘Listing that sets expectations,’ ‘Right-sized hosting models,’ ‘Basic event measurement.’
- Delivery: recordings + downloadable one-page checklists; optional live Q&A office hours.

5.4 Reduce discovery friction through centralized communication

Publish a single 'Maple Supports Menu' that lists available opportunities, deadlines, eligibility, and time-to-apply estimates, and mirror it across partner websites. Pair this with opt-in deadline reminders (email or text).

5.5 Adopt lightweight impact tracking to support learning and funding

Provide a one-page impact tracker that producers can complete in under one minute at the end of an event day (visitor estimate, top products, sales band, referral source). This approach supports program learning and strengthens external reporting without imposing heavy administrative burden.

6. Limitations

This survey reflects a small sample (n=13) and should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all West Virginia producers. Results include self-reported estimates and may be influenced by differences in recordkeeping, experience level, site conditions, and seasonal variability. Despite these limitations, the strongest signals—especially around time constraints, discovery barriers, and training preferences—are consistent enough to guide immediate program improvements and to inform the design of future, broader data collection.

7. Conclusion

The survey findings suggest MSMD has meaningful momentum and a significant 'next wave' of interested producers. To convert that interest into sustainable participation, MSMD should reduce friction (especially support discovery and administrative load), normalize multiple participation models that match differing readiness levels, and invest in practical readiness assets and micro-trainings designed for the realities of syrup season. A statewide brand narrative and coordinated promotion can act as growth multipliers, particularly when paired with simple measurement tools that allow producers and partners to learn from each season without adding undue burden.

Appendix A. Key aggregated metrics (n=13)

Metric	Aggregated result
Operation type	54% family/owner-operated (7/13); 46% hobby/small-scale (6/13)
Tap count range	30–2,250 taps; median ~250; mean ~552
MSMD participation	46% annual (6/13); 38% interested but not yet (5/13); 8% some years (1/13); 8% not interested (1/13)
In-season available time	92% report 0–2 hours/week for trainings/applications (12/13)
Top access barrier	85%: unsure what exists / when deadlines occur (11/13)
Brand importance	Average rating ~4.08/5; most rate 4–5 (9/13)
Bundle interest	54% interested/very interested (7/13); 31% neutral (4/13); 15% not interested (2/13)