By any name — “ecotourism” or “agritourism” — visits to rural Midwest hold economic promise

The term “ecotourism” is most often associated with visits to undisturbed natural areas, but perhaps it’s time to broaden that definition — to include enjoying the scenery and studying the plants and animals found on America’s farmlands. A perfect example of this is occurring in west-central Kansas.

Tourists flocked this spring to the area’s ranches that provide a habitat to the lesser prairie chicken, a species of grouse known for the males’ elaborate calls and showy displays of reddish-orange air sacs while performing spring mating dances.

In 2018, the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism worked with a few ranch owners to allow the public to view the birds on their property. This past spring, people came to Scott County, Kan., from 30 different states and 11 foreign countries. Ranchers make between $200 and $600 for a few hours of visitors, with nearby businesses reaping economic benefits as well.

“Visitors learn that ranching and wildlife management can go hand in hand,” says Michael Pearce of the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism. “Ranchers learn that good wildlife management can provide additional income and even improve the ranching options.” All the while, he adds, “the birds get more opportunities to thrive.”

Whether it’s labeled “ecotourism” or “agritourism,” this type of visitor activity is possible in many of the Midwest’s rural areas. Pearce suggests that rural regions recognize what wildlife or agricultural attractions they have to offer, and then get them on tourism lists.

Rural legislators, Kansas Sen. Mary Jo Taylor says, can help lead the way for their communities. “Ecotourism and agritourism are not mutually exclusive,” she adds, “and this activity [in Kansas] is a prime example of possible collaborations that legislators need to support.”

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 5,300 farms across the Midwest participate in some form of tourism or recreation, bringing over $130 million to farm operators. To open up their land to outsiders, farmers sometimes require state-level changes in permitting, zoning and land-use statutes, along with stronger liability protections.

Risk and liability are hard, if not impossible, to totally eliminate, but a number of states have laws to help reduce the risk. For example, in 2016, Ohio passed legislation (SB 75) protecting farmers from liability for injuries due to “risks inherent in an agritourism activity” on farms — a move designed in part to help agritourism operators secure private insurance for the new activities on their land.

Ohio’s SB 75 also limited local zoning authority over agritourism, and ensured that farmland would still be classified as an “agricultural use” for tax-assessment purposes. In the Midwest, most states have liability laws specific to agritourism; two exceptions, though, are Michigan and Iowa, where statutes on recreational-use liability apply.

Another consideration for states: What kind of legal protections should landowners have if visitors contract illnesses — for example, from physical contact with animals? Currently, only Ohio and Iowa have these types of liability protections in statute.