

THIRD PARTY FOOD SAFETY AUDITS OF SPECIALTY CROP OPERATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Recent outbreaks of food-borne illnesses associated with fresh produce have led consumers to question the safety of fruits and vegetables. We have seen the television 24/7 reports of spinach with E coli 0157:H7 (September – October 2006) and peanut products contaminated the Salmonella (2008-2009). We also heard all the negative publicity all summer falsely implicating tomatoes with Salmonella (Summer 2008). When in reality the contamination was from jalapeno peppers. These large publicized recalls are in general erroneously believed to be the result of large corporate farming practices. As a result an increasing number of consumers are buying locally-grown produce. They feel good about buying home-grown produce at farmer's markets, road-side stands, and neighborhood markets, since this allows them to buy directly from people they know and trust. This buying trend has opened new markets to small- and medium-sized farms which sell at these local outlets. These very markets could be ignored by consumers if many food- borne illnesses are associated with a few bad production mistakes. Since consumers are feeling good about "buying local", grocery stores are starting to carry locally grown produce but are always concerned about liability associated with food-borne illness. People involved in food safety on a daily basis know that a 100% totally safe food is economically impossible but we need to strive to reduce the probability to as low as realistically possible. The best tool for accomplishing this is the third party audit that evaluates certain production practices know to produce better fruits and vegetables. A third party audit is when a totally independent party visits the farm production area and evaluates the field and/or facility in terms of its ability to produce safety, quality foods.

GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES (GAP)

GAP is short for "Good Agricultural Practices". Good Agricultural Practices are recommended procedures that producers should use to minimize their produce from certain bacteria that are of serious health concern and other environmental hazards such as hazardous chemicals and physical hazards like stones and glass fragments.

The goal of the program was the fact that prevention of contamination is much more effective than corrective actions after contamination has already occurred. Good Agricultural Practices are scientifically based guidelines to reduce or eliminate microbial contamination of fresh produce in the field and in packing houses.

POTENTIAL SOURCES OF ON-FARM CONTAMINATION

There are many possible ways for produce to become contaminated by harmful microorganisms during production, harvest, and handling. While contamination can occur anywhere in the flow of food from farm to fork, our focus begins on the farm.. Sources of Potential On-Farm Contamination include;

- Soil
- Irrigation water
- Animal manure
- Inadequately composted manure
- Wild and domestic animals
- Inadequate field worker hygiene
- Harvesting equipment
- Transport containers (field to packing facility)
- Wash and rinse water
- Unsanitary handling during sorting and packaging, in packing facilities, in wholesale or retail operations, and at home
- Equipment used to soak, pack, or cut produce
- Ice
- Cooling units (hydrocoolers)
- Transport vehicles
- Improper storage conditions (temperature)
- Improper packaging
- Cross contamination in storage, display, and preparation

THIRD PARTY AUDITS

Almost every major food company and retailer requires that their suppliers be inspected or audited on a regular basis. Most audits are now third party meaning an independent third party audits the farm or facility. The auditing firm will want to see records and documents related to your pest control program if required, list of training of your employees, a HACCP plan if you have one and any type of record-keeping /control program they think is important to the safety of your product. The audits are generally very thorough and quite complete. The audits are so designed to effectively determine if your operation is performing those food safety programs that are shown to minimize the probability of a recall or worse yet, a food-borne outbreak.

COMMERCIAL AUDITS

Available Food Safety Audits include USDA GAP, GlobalGAP, PrimusLabs, and SQF. The requirements for these audit plans will most likely be the basis for the Food Safety Modernization Act requirements. They can be found online.

USDA GAP - <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/HarmonizedGAP>

GlobalGAP- <http://www.globalgap.org/>

SQF - <http://www.sqfi.com/>

PrimusLabs- <http://www.primuslabs.com/services/primusgfs.aspx>

DEVELOPING A FOOD SAFETY PLAN

For several years the ability of writing food safety plans was only for the larger producers who could afford to have a full time employee whose main job was to write and implement food safety plans. In December 2011, FamilyFarmed.org released a free, easy to use online tool for small and mid-sized producers to write their own customized food safety plan. This was certainly a monumental effort and if utilized should dramatically reduce the incidences of food borne illness. The online tool can be found at the following website.

<http://onfarmfoodsafety.org/how-to-get-food-safety-certified/>

THE FUTURE

Food Safety audits in the form utilizing Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) will continue to be important in food safety. More resources are continually becoming available for small farmers.

SELECTED READINGS;

- 1) Washington State Department of Agriculture; USDA Good Agricultural And Good Handling Practices; An Audit Verification Program for the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Industry;
http://www.agr.wa.gov/Inspection/FVInspection/docs/GHP_GAP_Presentation.pdf
- 2) Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables.
<http://www.fda.gov/Food/GuidanceComplianceRegulatoryInformation/GuidanceDocuments/ProduceandPlanProducts/ucm064574.htm>
- 3) Food Safety Begins on the Farm. A Grower's Guide
http://wcmorris.com/gap/files/cornell_guide.pdf.
- 4) Brady, P.L. and Morris, J.R. 2005. Production and Handling Practices for Safe Produce.. <http://arkansasagnews.uark.edu/978.pdf>.
- 5) Cornell University has an excellent website with numerous GAP material.
<http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/indexhighspeed.html>.

