

Produce safety future focus of supermarkets, farmers and consumers

March 20 2012

(Medical Xpress) -- Shoppers will continue to see the Fresh Local Produce sign in supermarkets, but stores will increasingly require growers to show proof of good agricultural practices, according to Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences researchers.

Good [agricultural practices](#) -- GAPs -- are food-safety standards that reduce the risk of on-farm produce contamination, according to Daniel Tobin, a doctoral candidate in Agricultural and Extension Education and the principal investigator in the study. GAPs include recommendations for safe irrigation methods, use of raw and composted [animal manure](#), worker health and hygiene, post-harvest handling practices and traceability procedures.

On-farm, food-safety measures are critical, Tobin noted. The U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) estimates 48 million [foodborne illnesses](#), including 3,000 deaths, occur each year in the United States. Previous research indicates that there is a rising number of reported outbreaks in fresh produce.

For Pennsylvania produce growers to maintain wholesale market opportunities, they will have to put forth substantial effort to comply with and verify their on-farm, food-safety practices, the researchers reported in recent issues of *Food Control* and the *Journal of Extension*.

"Growers, therefore, will need GAP training and educational materials," Tobin said. "General training about potential on-farm, food-safety

hazards and [preventative measures](#) no longer will be adequate. To achieve maximum impact, the curriculum must focus on implementing and documenting GAPs so growers will be prepared to pass a GAP audit.

"In response, supermarkets have been implementing policies that require their fresh produce suppliers to attend training workshops on farm food safety and/or to verify compliance with food-safety standards through fee-based, third-party certification. In TPC an independent, third-party auditor conducts an on-site inspection to determine whether a supplier's practices and procedures comply with a certain set of standards, such as GAPs."

Produce growers who need to verify GAP conformity through third-party compliance can select among several audit agencies. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service, in association with state departments of agriculture, offers a voluntary audit program that growers can use to verify on-farm food-safety practices. Private companies also offer audit services, but their GAP standards and documentation requirements can vary from company to company.

The Food Safety Modernization Act, signed into law in early 2011 by President Obama, mandates the Food and Drug Administration to establish mandatory minimum standards, based on known safety risks, for produce growers to implement and document.

To help develop a relevant GAP training curriculum that meets the needs of Pennsylvania growers, Penn State researchers surveyed supermarkets that operate in the state to determine their food-safety policies and practices that affect local produce growers.

Pennsylvania consumers also were surveyed because they help drive demand for produce. The researchers found that consumers are highly concerned about the safety of the produce supply.

"Assessing American consumer perceptions regarding produce safety is particularly important, because those perceptions will allow actors within the supply chain to better meet consumer demand," Tobin said. "Using data collected from Pennsylvania consumers, our study documents how consumer demographics -- and their preferences for specific attributes in fresh produce, such as local, organic and inspected for food safety -- affect their produce-safety perceptions."

Such an analysis provides important information for those seeking to implement practices that reduce the risk of foodborne contamination, Tobin explained. A clearer understanding of consumer produce-safety perceptions and preferences will allow these groups, including growers and supermarkets, to make better-informed decisions regarding their food-safety policies and practices.

Also involved in the study were Joan Thomson, professor emerita of agricultural communications; Luke LaBorde, associate professor of food science; and Jessica Bagdonis, doctoral candidate in Agricultural and Extension Education.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Produce safety future focus of supermarkets, farmers and consumers (2012, March 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-03-safety-future-focus-supermarkets-farmers.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--