# Farmers need help to plow through new food safety regulations

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Agricultural extension educators should take a flexible approach in teaching farmers about the changing landscape of food safety regulations, according to Penn State researchers.

"We should try to focus on creating programs for growers so that they can do what they need to do economically to stay viable as they face new regulations and standards that can be complex and intimidating," said Daniel Tobin, doctoral candidate in agricultural economics, sociology and education.

The researchers said that farmers who attended an extension workshop on food safety standards to reduce of the risk of foodborne illnesses understood the material, but many hesitated taking action on that new information.

"We know that skills and attitude are part of the puzzle to try to help farmers make changes necessary to comply with standards," said Tobin.

"However, the new standards may intimidate growers, and it becomes much harder to try to change behaviors with a one-size-fits all approach to education."

The recently passed Food Safety Modernization Act set safety standards on how farmers grow, harvest and handle fresh produce to reduce the risk of foodborne diseases. The new regulations to minimize food safety risk include testing for water safety and better managing manure storage.

To add to the complexity, small farms—operations with under $25,000 in annual food sales to local stores and consumers—are exempted from these federal regulations. However, distributors and grocery stores are increasingly implementing their own separate standards on food safety, said Tobin, who worked with Joan Thomson, professor emerita, and Rama Radhakrishna, professor, both of agricultural economics, sociology and education, and Luke LaBorde, associate professor of food science.

Current food safety training programs typically focus on the USDA standards, even though many of the farmers run small operations that are exempted from the standards, said Tobin. A better approach may be to create customized and more modular training programs that fit the individual farmers' needs.

"We can provide those types of workshops that look at the federal standards, but, because growers see it as being so messy, it makes it harder for them to adopt the practices," said Tobin. "We may want to take a step back and adopt a flexible approach that can deliver the information to different groups based on different needs."

The researchers, who released their findings in the online version of *Food Control*, examined surveys taken by 176 farmers immediately before and immediately after they attended a one-day workshop on USDA standards on good practices. The farmers then completed the survey again six months after the workshop.

The results showed that the farmers' knowledge of the standards improved after they took the workshop. However, the delayed evaluation signaled that their confidence in implementing the standards decreased during the months after the training session.

"What it indicates is that a linear process between knowledge and action

does not always exist," said Tobin. "New knowledge and new skills do not always translate to increased action."

Because some farmers who run small operations that are not exempt from private and government requirements may believe that foodborne illness is mostly a concern of large farms, the researchers also suggested that extension educators convey the risks of avoiding and benefits of enhancing food safety on the farm.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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