

Is Your Product Ready? Learning the Lingo and Surviving a Produce Safety Audit

Elizabeth A. Bihn, Ph.D.

Produce Safety Alliance, Dept. of Food Science, Cornell University, NYSAES-Hedrick Hall,
630 W. North Street, Geneva, NY 14456, eab38@cornell.edu, 315.787.2625

Food safety is not necessarily the natural starting point for discussions about marketing produce to institutional buyers, but it is an increasingly important topic to understand. For many growers, this generates the question why? Here are some short answers and definitions that may help answer that question.

Q. Why should farmers who want to sell fresh produce to institutions know something about food safety?

A. Many institutional buyers require fresh produce suppliers to be certified by a third party audit organization to verify food safety practices, such as Good Agricultural Practices, are being used on their farms.

Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs)

Any agricultural management practice or operational procedure that reduces microbial risks or prevents contamination of fruits and vegetables on the farm or in the packinghouse.

Third-Party Audit Organizations

An independent organization hired by the farmer (or in some cases the buyer) to audit their food safety practices. This requires the farm to have a written farm food safety plan and for a person from the audit company to visit the farm to conduct the audit. Prices for the audit vary and there are many organizations that offer audits (e.g. USDA-AMS, Global GAP, PrimusLabs).

Q. Why would buyers require third-party audits?

A. Third-party certification is meant to provide verification to the buyer that the produce they purchase is grown and packed under conditions that result in safe, wholesome fresh produce. Safe food is important for many reasons, primary among them being the health of consumers. Many institutions, such as hospitals, day care centers and nursing homes, feed individuals who are immunocompromised due to illness or age. It is also important from a liability standpoint to have standards that help assure the produce they buy is safe.

Q. Do all institutional buyers require third-party audits?

A. No. Buyer requirements for food safety practices vary widely. Some have no requirements, some require that growers have food safety training, some require a written farm food safety plan, and some require a third-party audit.

Q. If I pass an audit, does it mean my produce is 100% microbiologically safe?

A. No. Since fresh produce is not cooked or treated in anyway that eliminates all food safety risks, there is no way to guarantee safety. This is why it is important that all fresh produce growers understand food safety risks that exist on the farm and take steps to reduce food safety risks.

Q. Who pays for the third-party audit?

A. The grower. In some cases, buyers will pay for the audit or provide partial reimbursement of expenses. Sometimes there are grants available through such organizations as the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets (NYSDAM).

Q. What do I need to do to have a third-party audit?

A. First, you need to have a written farm food safety plan. The plan needs to be implemented on your farm with recordkeeping in place to document your practices. Second, you need to contact the audit organization to schedule an audit.

Q. How do I know what audit company to contact?

A. That depends. Some buyers require a specific third-party audit, so they will specify which audit organization is acceptable. If the buyer accepts any third-party audit, growers tend to select the audit that is most affordable and easiest to understand.

Q. What does Betsy recommend?

A. I recommend that every grower learn about GAPs and understand how produce safety impacts their farm. With the first ever produce safety regulation scheduled to be final in October 2015 as part of the Food Safety Modernization Act's Produce Rule, all growers need to be aware of produce safety issues. It does not matter if you have a small farm or a large farm. If you are growing fresh produce that you sell to others, you need to know about produce safety.

Q. How do growers get started and learn more about produce safety and third party audits?

A. There are many ways to get started. For New York Growers, there are in-person trainings being offered this winter throughout NY. These trainings are done in collaboration with Cornell University, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and NYSDAM. This collaboration allows growers to gain information about GAPs as well as third party audits offered through the USDA-AMS. You can also take an online GAPs course. Visit www.gaps.cornell.edu to find a training location near you or for more information about the online course. In addition to these offerings, there are consultants, third-party audit organizations, and other Land-Grant Universities that offer educational materials and training courses about both GAPs and third party audits.

Summary

There are certainly other questions that could be added to this list, including questions about the Food Safety Modernization Act's Produce Safety Rule and the impact it might have on marketing fresh produce. The key point is that growers should realize that understanding and implementing produce safety practices may be required by many buyers, as well as by federal regulation. The good news is that there are resources available to help growers. Please visit the National GAPs Program (www.gaps.cornell.edu) and the Produce Safety Alliance (www.producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu) for more information.