



A COMMITMENT
TO **FOOD**
SAFETY



CanadaGAP: helping producers and packers demonstrate food safety vigilance on the farm



For many fresh fruit and vegetable producers and packers in Canada, issues surrounding food safety have, in recent years, topped a growing list of concerns posing a potential threat to their industry. Compliance with food safety standards is demanded by the customer, and also by the marketplace.

In response, producers and packers must take steps to manage risk, implement food safety procedures on the farm and document those procedures to provide proof that they are following the procedures, should it be required by their customers. The CanadaGAP Program was designed by the Canadian Horticultural Council (CHC) to help producers and packers achieve that by documenting the care they are taking to prevent fresh fruits and vegetables from becoming contaminated.

CanadaGAP consists of national on-farm food safety standards and a certification system for produce suppliers. Six crop-specific manuals were developed for producers and packers to document all food safety-related procedures. The manuals contain comprehensive guidance based on a rigorous hazard analysis using HACCP principles.

“ We know once (our suppliers) comply with a standard such as this...they have built a comprehensive food safety foundation, so that for us is a positive aspect.” Aruna Spears, Loblaw Companies Ltd.

DESIGNING A USER-FRIENDLY, “MADE IN CANADA” OFFS PROGRAM

Since its beginnings, CanadaGAP’s objective has been to deliver a food safety program that is both accessible and user-friendly, and to simplify the process for the producer.

“One goal has always been to limit the amount of extra paperwork to be done by an already busy producer or packer,” says Heather Gale, CanadaGAP National Program Manager. Additional paperwork and added costs were two things no producer or packer wanted to incur.

Both the industry and the CHC agreed the best way for producers to minimize time and reduce costs would be to develop “ready-made” materials such as:

- Generic HACCP models which have been developed so farms are not expected to create their own HACCP plan.
- The OFFS manuals, which are designed to be used “off the shelf” to minimize the amount of writing that producers and packers need to do to document their programs.
- Written procedures so producers and packers are not required in most cases to create their own Sanitation Standard Operating Procedure (SSOP).

Another objective has been to deliver a program that is national in scope. “It’s important to have a consistent food safety standard across the country, so that producers are not faced with multiple, expensive audits,

and they know exactly which standard they should be following,” says CHC Executive Vice-President Anne Fowlie.

Likewise, in the United States, a multitude of food safety programs for produce exist. Efforts are currently underway on

a “harmonization” project which aims to define a standard for produce food safety, thus reducing the audit burden for producers. The CanadaGAP program developed by the CHC is one of the standards being considered with a view to harmonizing existing standards.

WHY BECOME CERTIFIED?

CanadaGAP offers not only templates for producers and packers to follow in order to mitigate risk, but also third-party audits that lead to certification, and independent proof that the standard is being met. In short, a grower or packer goes through the manual and completes the necessary paperwork to show that he is in compliance with the applicable manuals, and then undergoes an audit in order to become certified.

Demand for certification under the CanadaGAP Program has grown over the past year. Increasingly, retailers, food service

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DID YOU KNOW?

The cost of certification can range from approximately \$650 to more than \$1,000 annually. Producers and packers who enrol in the CanadaGAP Program have various certification options. Costs vary depending on the certification option their customers require, the scope of their operation and where their facility is located. Visit www.canadagap.ca for more detailed information.

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companies and food processors require suppliers to be enrolled in or certified by a food safety program. To date, Canadian companies Loblaw Companies Ltd., McCain Foods Canada, Simplot Canada and Lamb-Weston require their growers to become enrolled in the CanadaGAP Program. Other customers are increasingly recognizing that CanadaGAP-certified companies have implemented a credible food safety system within their operations.

In a May 2009 interview with U.S. produce publication *The Packer*, Aruna Spears, senior director of quality assurance for produce at Loblaw Companies Ltd., stated that the CanadaGAP standard is a comprehensive, all-encompassing approach. "We know once (our suppliers) comply with a standard such as this...they have built a comprehensive food safety foundation, so that for us is a positive aspect." She also noted that full government involvement (all manuals are vetted for technical soundness by provincial and federal government officials) adds further credibility to the program.

By enrolling in CanadaGAP, producers and packers will experience

FOOD SAFETY FROM FIELD TO FORK



By Yves Leclerc, Director of Agronomy, McCain Foods (Canada)

The face of agriculture and the food industry is ever changing. In recent years, one of the most important changes that farmers and food processors have had to adapt to is the need to provide information.

Today's consumers and customers are interested to know not only the nutritional value of the food they purchase, but also how food is grown and handled all along the food chain. Food safety, environmental sustainability and traceability have become important aspects of farming. Customers and consumers want the reassurance that their food products are safe to eat and are produced in an environmentally sustainable manner.

Some companies have been at the forefront of these changes and have actively participated in the creation of Canadian-made solutions to meet the needs of the agricultural industry.

The agronomy team at McCain Foods (Canada) was particularly interested in developing quality assurance programs and tracking processes that would not only be comprehensive enough to meet the requirements of all customers and consumers, but also easily implemented on the farm. Being able to trace the raw material from the seed to the factory and to ensure the safety and sustainability of the practices used to grow the potatoes processed was essential.

When the implementation of these various programs began, it was important to find grower-friendly solutions that would meet the needs of all partners in the potato supply chain. Some processors require its contract growers to fully implement the Canadian Horticultural Council On-Farm Food Safety Program (CanadaGAP™) and the Environmental Farm Plan, as well as an electronic data collection system on the farm which allows growers to capture and send all their traceability information electronically back to the processors.

For growers, these solutions help them meet the information requirements of their buyers and avoid the trouble and cost of managing a number of programs.

Processors, contract growers, consumers and customers are benefiting from these efforts and doing their part to ensure a safer and more sustainable food supply.

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consistent audits, performed by auditors who are trained in the requirements of this program specifically, and understand the realities of farming and field packing. Auditors are monitored and overseen by a third-party certification body, which also reviews all audit results and ensures the integrity of the assessments. Any complaints or disputes related to the audits are handled by the certification body. Ongoing, regular review of certification body performance is undertaken by the CHC.


MAINTAINING CREDIBILITY AND ACCESS TO INTERNATIONAL MARKETS

The CHC is also pursuing benchmarking of its program to the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) and GlobalGAP requirements, in order to obtain recognition of equivalency with foreign customers who are requiring internationally benchmarked programs.

Once benchmarked, CanadaGAP will have equivalent status to other internationally recognized food safety programs (e.g., JapanGAP, ChileGAP, New ZealandGAP,

etc). CanadaGAP-certified producers and packers will be positioned to meet customer requirements for compliance with GFSI or GlobalGAP standards.

“We want CanadaGAP to become a major player in the global industry,” says Gale. With over 700 farms enrolled in the program so far and the GFSI benchmarking process close to completion, this goal is surely not far off. ✦



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BENEFITS TO CANADAGAP PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Why should you participate in the CanadaGAP Program? It's simple! Certification to the CanadaGAP Program offers the following benefits for producers, storage intermediaries and packers whose customers are requiring them to be OFFS-compliant.

- Consistency of audits
- Oversight of auditor performance
- Access to international markets



HEATHER GALE NAMED ONE OF "40 LEADERS UNDER 40" BY *PRODUCE BUSINESS* MAGAZINE

In June 2009, CanadaGAP Program Manager Heather Gale was recognized by *Produce Business* for her tireless and outstanding work in guiding Canada's fresh fruit and vegetable industry through the successful development and implementation of an On-Farm Food Safety (OFFS) program.

Produce Business conducted an extensive, widespread search throughout the industry to elicit nominations for top young industry leaders under the age of 40.