



Up to speed on food safety?

CanadaGAP certification satisfies about 90 per cent of suppliers' requirements.

By Judie Steeves

Consumer food recalls are the industry's worst nightmare, but food safety certification programs are now available to help prevent the contamination of food that can result in such costly recalls.

The largest program in Canada is the independently-operated, not-for-profit CanadaGAP (Good Agricultural Practices) certification program providing food safety standards and certification that is recognized by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) standard required by most retailers.

It was developed by producers, for producers.

Chairman of the board of CanAgPlus, the corporation that owns and operates the CanadaGAP program, is currently Jack Bates of Tecarte Farms of Delta. The Bates family farm produces blueberries, as well as milk and potatoes.

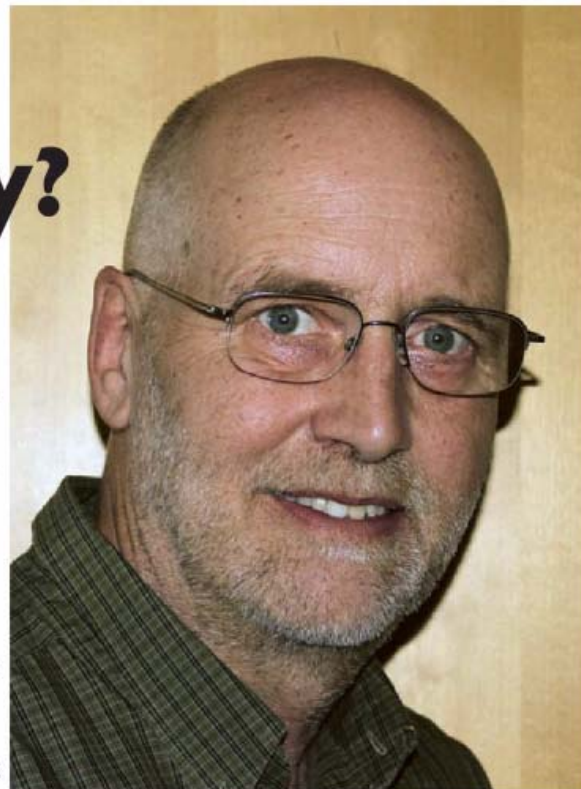
Although certification by the CanadaGAP program is not required in this country, it is a requirement of most retailers, so growers have fewer options for marketing their fruit if they are not

program in B.C. is Joe Lariviere, who is also an industry consultant. He warns one of the challenges for producers is being aware of the slightly different requirements under different food safety programs.

While most retailers require GFSI standards, some take it a step further and add their own restrictions to that standard, like membership warehouse club Costco, which last year required that growers permit them to do on-farm water testing twice a year, and require contamination risks in the field be reduced by use of only certain types of personal water bottles by pickers, amongst other additions. Some berry packers have their own requirements as well, notes Lariviere.

However, he says CanadaGAP certification satisfies probably 90 per cent of suppliers' requirements.

With CanadaGap, the majority of producers are audited annually during harvest, he explains. It's a scheduled audit, as opposed to one that is unscheduled, driven by a complaint or concern. However, the producer is contacted beforehand for even an



Joe Lariviere is an auditor for CanadaGAP, which can help growers meet the international food safety standard.

unscheduled audit. The next step is unannounced audits.

Lariviere has a few tips for growers regarding compliance with the CanadaGAP program.

He notes the most common reason for failure of an audit is employee hand-washing, so he recommends that growers ensure there are hand-washing facilities set up that are convenient for pickers to use. These stations should be well-stocked with soap, potable water and paper towels.

Employee compliance can be a

problem, he admits, particularly when there are a lot of employees, such as at harvest time. However, it's important to invest the time to train employees on when and how to wash their hands, and make sure clean, well-stocked facilities are handy to where they are picking or working.

Paperwork is a challenge for some growers, although with the CanadaGAP program forms are made available for growers, to help them comply more easily with such requirements as keeping spray records and maintaining records of washroom cleaning.

It's particularly a problem when English language skills are not strong, he notes.

Several forms must be filled out annually, while others are ongoing forms, such as chemical application records, harvest and shipping records.

Lariviere recommends growers use the checklist provided with the program to ensure all documents are filled out. It's a waste of energy to put on the proper sprays or ensure the bathrooms are cleaned regularly, but then to simply neglect the quick and easy task of making a note of what was done, after it's been done.

"It's about a change in attitude and altering some of the day-to-day routines, allowing a few minutes to document what you're doing. Don't be intimidated by the forms," he advises.

Lariviere notes the program is always evolving and where an 80 per cent score on an audit was a pass last year, the threshold will be 85 per cent this year. Only about three per cent of participants would be affected by the change, he says.

If a grower fails an audit, he recommends they immediately take steps to fix items where they lost points, so they can be certified.

If it was a handwashing item, it's far easier to fix than if the wrong spray was used on the crop, he notes.

He also recommends that all growers—including those who passed their audit—look at the previous year's audit and make whatever changes are needed to ensure a higher score is achieved the next year.

Another change to this year's CanadaGAP requirements is that training is now mandatory for anyone applying chemicals. Before, they could be applied under the supervision of someone with the training.

There is an online short course available, or that person could take the

Pesticide Applicator Certification.

For more information or to learn about other changes to this year's certification, go to the website: www.canadagap.ca

Once there, growers can ensure their CanadaGAP Manual has been updated by clicking on the Manuals Download tab and refer to the Main Changes or Revisions. Annually, review the manual and complete the Confirmation Date and initial at the end of each section, he advises.

Lariviere also recommends completing an internal audit, using either the audit checklist or the self-declaration and self-assessment checklist prior to the third-party audit. They can be found under the Tools tab on the website.

Above all, he advises that growers use their time strategically. "Within the context of your operations, not all CanadaGAP program requirements are of equal significance to food safety.

"Use the scoring on the audit checklist to prioritize any required corrective actions. Pay special attention to any relevant questions which are highlighted in yellow. Non-compliance with these items could result in an automatic failure."