

Food safety programs

How to get a basic food safety and traceability program up and running

By Treena Hein

As we all have heard many times, there are numerous benefits of having a food safety program in place. Many Canadian fruit and vegetable producers who have implemented a program have accessed new markets, increased their awareness of their overall farm business process and boosted operational efficiencies, on-farm food safety programs lead at the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) Colleen Haskins says. They also “have the best records they have ever had, and feel better knowing they are doing what they can to keep their product safe for the consumer,” she adds.

Haskins recently asked a few producers to share their thoughts publicly on putting a food safety program in place, and co-owner of Peter Jennen Farms Ellen Jennen was happy to oblige. The Jennens use high tunnels and irrigation to grow high-quality strawberries, raspberries and blackberries in Thamesville, Ont.

“I feel it was a good exercise in having great records for the crop, and feeling confident that the product we produce is safe, traceable and this is something we can be proud to have,” Jennen says, “which gives us better opportunities in the marketplace.”

Owner of Berryhill Farm in Watford, Ont., Tony Hogervorst instituted a food safety program some years ago, and achieved Canadian Horticulture Council CanadaGAP certification in 2012. (CanadaGAP is recognized by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) and involves third-party audits.)

“As a result of our food safety certification, we have gained a substantial new customer, which helps us to justify our food safety investment, and will help to ensure our future viability,” Hogervorst says.

Berryhill Farm ships thousands of pounds of vegetables to wholesale, retail and food processing markets throughout southwestern Ontario and into the U.S.

Adoption of food safety programs for the approximately 15,000 horticultural producers in Canada is still a voluntary process and finding national statistics on what percentages are presently participating is difficult. In B.C., more than 280 farms



have adopted a recognized program, and more than 3,300 producers have participated in food safety education during the past six years, manager of the Agri-Food Safety and Quality Unit at the Food Safety and Inspection Branch of the B.C. Ministry of Agriculture Linda Wilson reports. We also know CanadaGAP has distributed more than 5,500 manuals since 2006 and, although only about half that number represents CanadaGAP-certified farms, executive director at CanadaGAP Heather Gale says the manuals are an excellent tool for anyone who wants to get started with food safety.

“The manuals were designed to be used off the shelf to minimize the producers having to write their own procedures or hire a consultant to help figure out what they

need to do to put food safety practices into place,” Gale says.

While a farmer may still need expert advice to assess specific risks, Gale notes that the program materials are “very comprehensive,” and include record-keeping templates and specific guidance on how and when to do various tasks.

A good strategy for someone newly implementing food safety in Gale’s view would be to look through the CanadaGAP manual and identify which sections apply.

“In many cases, all or most will apply,” she explains. “Then, just start working through the applicable sections. The key with food safety is that all of the practices taken together have a cumulative effect on minimizing risk. So we don’t highlight certain sections as being more important

than others.”

On the topic of traceability, which is closely tied to food safety, CanadaGAP provides a complete recall toolkit, which Gale says would be good for someone starting out to implement immediately. Also available within the manuals and other training resources on the CanadaGAP website are specific items like hand washing signs, controlled access signs, checklists and other tools that can be printed ‘as is’ or modified as the user likes.

Beginning the process of implementing a food safety program can seem daunting, but with the right tools, support and time designated to the process, it can be readily achieved

Haskins counsels Ontario growers interested in creating a food safety program within their operations to identify who would like to see you put one in place, or may require you to have one in the future (buyer, retailer, wholesaler?) and the reasons why you’d like to institute a program (increased operational efficiencies, market access?). Then, she advises identifying the program or program requirements you wish to pursue. Enrolling in an official program should be considered, she notes.

“Many buyers look for proof of due diligence or confirmation that you meet the stated requirements. A third party audit is usually required to provide this confirmation.”

The next step is to become extremely familiar with the requirements you are interested in or that exist within the program you’ve chosen.

“Many programs will also include information regarding traceability and how

to use this to support your recall procedures,” Haskins adds.

If you don’t understand anything or feel you need more detail, she advises reaching out to OMAFRA food safety staff, a consultant or those within the food safety program itself. Once your policies and procedures are in place, Haskins says the next step is to train all that will be doing the associated tasks and ensure that tasks are done properly.

The first step in setting up a basic food safety program in B.C. in Wilson’s view is to become knowledgeable. Designed especially for small-scale farms that have never had a food safety program is the B.C. Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Guide, produced by the Ministry of Agriculture. It offers help to identify food safety risks with self-guided checklists and flowcharts, and tools to minimize those risks.

“Once a producer has become familiar with the B.C. GAP Guide, and has followed all the steps and is maintaining records,” Wilson says, “he or she may decide to become certified from a recognized On-Farm Food Safety (OFFS) Program.” This program is available in national or international format, and the B.C. government offers financial incentives to adopt GAPs and/or to obtain OFFS certification.

Pitfalls and challenges

Among the challenges of putting an on-farm food safety program in place for the first time, cost is the first Gale identifies.

“But more often, it’s taking the time to work through the program and implement new procedures,” she observes. “Reading the manual and ensuring a good understanding of the terms and concepts takes time and effort.”

Gale notes that a third challenge can lie in achieving buy-in across the business (where everyone understands the necessity for change and is fully on-board).

Haskins identifies a pitfall in not seeking assistance to fully understand the requirements of buyers or of a chosen program.

“When producers have made the decision to work towards program certification, often it is left to when the season is in full production, and therefore does not leave enough time to fully complete the program requirements. Producers need to ensure there is enough time to collect sufficient records (three months’ worth) prior to the scheduled audit,” she says.

In Wilson’s view, there are very few challenges for a farm to become food safe

in light of existing programs and support.

“There are significant technical and financial supports currently available to enable producers to learn, adopt and adapt to a recognized...system,” she says. “The many advantages – including expanded market access, recognition of being a safe food producer, and protection of public health – far outweigh any pitfalls. Today, more and more buyers of fruits and vegetables and the general public want to know where their food is coming from and that it is safe. In B.C., most commercial producers recognize that maintaining certification of food safety is essential to marketing their product.”

“Beginning the process of implementing a food safety program can seem daunting, but with the right tools, support and time designated to the process, it can be readily achieved,” Haskins concludes. “Once you have completed the implementation, the reporting and documentation requirements associated with the program will begin to feel routine as they become part of your day-to-day operations.” **FS**

For more information

<http://www.canadagap.ca/becoming-certified/getting-started>

In Ontario, call 1-877-424-1300, or visit the website: www.ontario.ca/goodagpractices

B.C. GAP Guide can be accessed in four languages - Chinese, English, French, Punjabi and Spanish <http://www.agf.gov.BC.ca/foodsafety/GAP/default.html> or call 604-556-3001

<http://www.omafr.gov.on.ca/english/food/foodsafety/producers/berryhillprofile.htm>

B.C. funding for implementing traceability is available. Call 604-556-3001 or visit <https://www.bcac.bc.ca/ardcorp/program/traceability>

