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Retail

Loblaw seeks CanadaGAP compliance from suppliers

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By Tom Karst

Brampton, Ontario-based retailer Loblaw has asked its Canadian produce suppliers to meet CanadaGAP audit standards or an equivalent benchmark, said Aruna Spears, senior director of quality assurance for produce for Loblaw Cos. Ltd.

Those equivalent standards include GlobalGAP or SQF 1000, sources in Canada said in early March. Spears would not comment about the 1,000-plus store retailer expectations for U.S. suppliers.

"The message we have sent out to our vendors is that we are asking them to, over this coming year and really on annual basis going forward, to be able to comply with the standard," she said in April.

She said the CanadaGAP standard offered a step up from the annual food safety review or audit. "For us, it's moving to a more comprehensive, all-encompassing approach," she said.

"We are our expecting our vendors to work very hard at this and achieve compliance."

Mary Ann Fiori, controller with Mor Gro Inc., Leamington, Ontario, said the greenhouse grower-shipper said food safety demands from Loblaw and other retailers have required extensive documentation for about three years. She said More Gro is CanadaGAP-certified.

"Before you just did it, but now as you do it, you have to document, document, document," she said.

All supervisors have their own departments and are responsible for updating log books every day. Those log books are reviewed when a third-party



company performs an audit, she said.

"You get graded by that, the log books and the whole company's operations," she said.

Fiori estimated documentation for food safety purposes takes at least four hours per week.

In 2006, Loblaw implemented a food safety procurement policy based on food safety standards that were in place prior to the establishment of the CanadaGAP last year. "This recent announcement takes it to the next step," said Heather Gale, CanadaGAP National Program Manager at the Canadian Horticultural Council, Ottawa, in late March.

In Ontario, Fiori said each produce company must present a third-party audit certificate in order to get a marketing license from Ontario Vegetable Growers and to do business with chain stores.

Heather Gale, CanadaGAP National Program Manager at the Canadian Horticultural Council, Ottawa, said Loblaw has been supportive of food safety compliance in the past.

In 2006, Loblaw put in place a food safety procurement policy based on food safety standards that were in place prior to the establishment of the CanadaGAP last year.

"This recent announcement takes it to the next step," Gale said in late March.

Spears said suppliers in Canada have not resisted the approach so far.

"A lot of our suppliers were actually asking about (CanadaGAP) in past meetings we had last year, so it is certainly not an overall surprise, and I think a lot of them do welcome the approach we are taking," Spears said in early April.

"I think the tremendous advantage with the CanadaGAP program is that it is being internationally benchmarked to GlobalGAP and GFSI and that gives it the credence that some of the other global benchmark standards have, and I would not see why any other retailers would not also then accept this as an equivalent to GlobalGAP and GFSI."

Spears said that could save growers money.

"Ultimately, I would see this as a way that we would minimize impact on the vendors in terms of being able to bundle their audits, so to speak," she said.

The standard was attractive to Loblaw because it offers more than a simple audit.

"We know once (our suppliers) comply with a standard such as this, we know they have built a comprehensive food safety foundation, so that for us is a positive aspect."

The process

Philip Hunt, food safety consultant with Hunt Food Service Ltd., Calgary, Alberta, said he has worked with greenhouse growers going through the process of CanadaGAP certification.

After heavy early resistance, he said more and more suppliers are becoming certified now that Loblaw is insisting on the standard.

"Everybody is jumping on the bandwagon," he said.

The CanadaGAP certification consists of eight different manuals which apply to different commodities.

"You sign off that you are in compliance with the manual," he said.

A grower goes through the manual and does the necessary paperwork to show that the company is in compliance with the applicable manuals, and then calls for an audit.

The certification, accompanied by annual audits, is valid for four years. After that time, growers have to go through the process again, Hunt said.