



MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF ON-FARM FOOD SAFETY

All eyes are on OFFS and traceability standards, but Canadian growers are measuring up.

IN RECENT YEARS, it seems the ink has barely dried on a report in the media about a food-borne disease outbreak when another takes its place. With the increased scale of production and exportation on farms come increased risks—and food safety and traceability standards implemented on the farm are a natural first line of defence.

Across Canada, increasing numbers of potato producers are becoming certified under the Canadian Horticulture Council's on-farm food safety program, CanadaGAP. The program is designed for everyone involved in the Canadian horticulture industry—producers, packers and storage handlers—in order to minimize the potential for disease from the first sprout to the dinner plate.

CanadaGAP standards are divided into two commodity-specific manuals modelled on internationally-recognized Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point guidelines, and rigorous audits are performed regularly to ensure certified producers continue to meet those standards.

In 2010, CanadaGAP was officially recognized by the Global Food Safety Initiative—the only Canadian food safety program to have benchmarked the global standard—and has recently updated its manuals to reflect revisions to GFSI requirements that came into effect in 2011.

Heather Gale, CanadaGAP's national program manager, reports that over 2,000 producers are now enrolled to be certified, nearly double that of last year's enrolment. Among these are 450 potato producers and packers, who "have demonstrated outstanding commitment to CanadaGAP," according to Gale. "We continue to hear positive feedback about using the CanadaGAP manuals. Some producers have told us that implementing the program has helped them streamline other forms of record-keeping; for example, field management and crop yield, and has given them additional data to improve overall farm management."

Industry Norms

Beyond the practical benefits the program can offer, industry requirements have definitely played a role in propagating CanadaGAP's acceptance among producers. Most, if not all, major potato buyers (including McCain Foods Canada, Simplot Canada, Lamb Weston, Cavendish, Loblaw

Companies Ltd. and Wal-Mart Canada, among others) require that producers are either CanadaGAP-certified or certified to an equivalent GFSI-recognized program, explains Gale. The safety and traceability standards don't mean consumers will necessarily know which farms their produce came from, but the businesses marketing the produce will have that information at their fingertips.

"CanadaGAP certification is a business-to-business assurance. Customers, such as processors, retailers and food service companies, request proof of certification in order to accept a producer or packer's product," says Gale. "The product itself does not contain any mark of the certification. It is not visible to consumers because it is not the product itself that is certified, but rather the company's food safety processes and practices, which the auditor has witnessed being followed effectively on-farm."

In a food-borne illness-related emergency, such as last year's deadly outbreak of listeria bacteria in Colorado cantaloupes, traceability records can be used to track the outbreak to its origin, where authorities can work with producers to isolate or correct the problem. And retailers and processors are able to serve as intermediaries between producers and consumers to deliver everyday assurances that food comes from farms certified under food safety programs such as CanadaGAP.

According to Yves Leclerc, director of agronomy for McCain Foods Canada and a member of the CanadaGAP technical working group, even though the industry's food safety norm has made it necessary that growers adapt to safety standards in order to meet customers' needs, they have more than risen to the challenge. "For growers, if they are in a contract with a processor, they must be certified. More and more it is becoming a requirement," he says.

"It's already an old program in a way—[the standards have] been around since 2002—and producers are used to it. It's a lot of paperwork, but overall growers understand the need for it. Most big changes on their farms have been made already. And the paperwork is becoming easier because, more and more, electronic data collection systems are being used to simplify the system. Overall, [CanadaGAP is] bringing clarity to the system, which is positive. And, ultimately, it is positive for the consumer," says Leclerc.

Providing Assurance

For many growers, CanadaGAP's on-farm food safety and traceability measures mirror practices they have always maintained on their farms—it's often the requirement for paperwork documenting those measures that's new. Keith Kuhl, president of his family-owned operation Southern Manitoba Potato Company and chair of the Canadian Potato Council which

operates under the CHC, farms land that his grandfather farmed. His company has produced potatoes for the fresh market as well as for processing and seed for over 50 years. Several years ago, when the CHC began looking at food safety standards, Kuhl's business implemented the standards as they were introduced—which meant that practices really did not change.

"The food safety standard for CanadaGAP basically documents safe practices we've always had on the farm," explains Kuhl. "Other than having significantly more documentation, we haven't really had a change in practices because we've always had a strong track record for producing food safely."

Not all farmers were wholly welcoming of the CanadaGAP program—not necessarily because implementation meant a great deal of change on the farm, but, at least in part, because of the paper trail requirement. "There were a few people who weren't

as happy about it, which I think was largely just resistance to change, and certainly the record-keeping and paperwork is one of the changes," says Kuhl. "The other thing is that whenever you go through a change like this your costs go up. There's nothing in place to assure producers they will recoup the additional costs, which come from hiring extra staff and so

"The food safety standard for CanadaGAP basically documents safe practices we've always had on the farm."

Keith Kuhl

on. The assumption is that market prices will hopefully increase to allow a higher return from your investment."

But Kuhl sees the increased demand for traceability records as a positive trend for the industry on the whole. Referring to the Colorado listeria incident, Kuhl says tracing on-farm food safety records is the best method for quickly limiting the damage in a worst-case scenario.

Additionally, on-farm food safety records provide a necessary link between the end consumer and the grower, which is otherwise lost in Canada's increasingly urbanized society. "It used to be the case that a huge percentage of Canadians had a very direct link to the farm. During the summer, people would travel from cities to the farms and collect produce. Today, very few people have any idea of what goes on at the farm. Because of that shift, we, as producers, need to be able to provide assurance to the average consumer that we're using safe practices."

And most producers are more than happy to offer that assurance. "Virtually all processing potato producers have become part of the food safety program and are in full compliance," he says.

If on-farm food safety and traceability requirements are quickly becoming, or are already, a baseline business practice for most potato producers in Canada, the only challenges most of them need to focus on now are the usual variables—consumer preferences and the weather. **Julienne Isaacs**