

PROVIDING ASSURANCE in the Face of Crisis

CHC tackles food safety concerns by addressing them straight-on and representing members locally, nationally and abroad

For the past 88 years, over 150 grower groups consisting of 20,000 fruit and vegetable producers and packers from across the country have looked to the Canadian Horticultural Council (CHC) to represent their interests to government and affiliated industry, particularly in times of crisis.

The early 1990s brought about new challenges for the global agri-food sector. Highly publicized outbreaks of E. Coli, pathogens and bacteria in meat and fresh produce caused the entire food system to come under intense scrutiny. This led to the development of official food safety programs among various commodity sectors, and eventually the creation of Canadian Food Inspection Agency in 1997, primarily to address growing pressures on government to enhance food safety.

Like most industry associations, the CHC acts as the voice for the sector it represents. When faced with threats to their business — as was becoming the case in the mid-1990s due to the undermining of consumer confidence brought about by crises in some companies — the CHC needed to be proactive on behalf of its members. As an association, the CHC would also have access to funding for producers that was available only to national organizations through the federal government.

A STRATEGIC VISION FOR FOOD SAFETY

“The Canadian fresh produce industry needed a food safety program that was practical and doable on the farm, affordable and national in scope, and that would have national and international credibility,” says CHC Food Safety Coordinator Heather Gale. In order to meet the needs of the industry, the CHC undertook the role of developing a toolkit and program that provided the structure and demonstration of due diligence for participating producers and packers. The CHC



Q: DOES CANADAGAP CERTIFY FRUITS AND VEGETABLES FOR FOOD SAFETY?

A: No. CanadaGAP certifies the producer or packer’s operation, *not* the product. Certification means that an operation meets the required food safety standard and is being maintained on an ongoing basis. This involves having a third party auditor come to the farm or packing-house and review OFFS manual(s) and related records, visit the facilities and interview the operator and staff, and assess conformance to the program. The certification body reviews the results of the audit and makes the certification decision.

Q: WHO NEEDS TO BE OFFS-CERTIFIED?

A: The Certification program is open to producers, storage intermediaries and packers who need to demonstrate to their customers that they are implementing on-farm food safety programs and/or following the CHC OFFS Manuals.

If your buyer is asking specifically for the CHC OFFS certification, you should enrol. If you are not sure what your customers are requesting, contact them. Some buyers are asking their suppliers to implement the manuals, but this is not the same as requiring certification. The certification is being requested by buyers who wish to ensure that the CHC OFFS Manuals are being implemented effectively by their suppliers (e.g., Loblaw Companies Ltd., McCain Foods Canada, Simplot Canada, Lamb-Weston). As customers become more aware of the CHC Program, demands for multiple OFFS audits are expected to decrease.

would also ensure members received the necessary information and tools to allow the sector to be proactive.

In 1998, the federal government announced the Canadian OFFS Recognition Program and pledged funding to national producer organizations that developed food safety programs. The CHC then began developing the initial *On-Farm Food Safety Guidelines for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables*. This was the first commodity-specific manual for potato producers and packers, and was released to the industry in 2003. McCain Foods began requiring their growers to implement the CHC potato program the same year.

The *Guidelines* preceded the formation of commodity-specific working groups, made up

of technical experts, buyers and end-users, and industry representatives with on-the-ground experience, who developed generic HACCP models and manuals detailing good agricultural practices for fresh fruit and vegetable production, packing and storage. The manuals were field tested and ultimately vetted for technical soundness by provincial and federal governments.

The implementation stage of the CHC's food safety program began in 2008. Today, the program — now known as CanadaGAP — offers not only a set of templates for producers to follow in order to document food safety procedures, but also the opportunity to undergo third-party audits that lead to certification under the program.

"It's an amazing milestone for the CHC," says Gale. "The program has come



a long way in a relatively short period of time."

As the CHC moves forward, approaching its 90th year in 2012, food safety will remain an integral issue affecting the work CHC does. "Suppliers of fresh fruit and vegetables face a highly competitive business," says CHC President Steve Levasseur. "We're here to provide our members with the tools they need to succeed in this industry." ✶



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