

To: CanadaGAP Program Participants and Other Stakeholders
From: Heather Gale, Executive Director, CanadaGAP Program
Date: March 18, 2020
Subject: Impact of Coronavirus (COVID-19) on CanadaGAP Audits and Food Safety

The situation with the coronavirus (COVID-19) is evolving rapidly. The intent of this communication regarding CanadaGAP audits and food safety is to update you on the impact as we see it today. Further communication will be provided as changes to the situation warrant.

Audits

A number of program participants have audits that are already scheduled and are coming up in the next few weeks. Depending on which Certification body (CB) is providing your CanadaGAP audit, you may be contacted by the CB to determine when your audit will occur. If you have questions about audits that were planned for the near future, we encourage you to contact your certification body for more information. Audits that were planned for the coming weeks may have to be postponed due to limitations on travel or concerns about exposure to potentially infected individuals. Certification bodies may also have their own internal policies to which they are adhering related to travel restrictions, etc. Note that each CB's approach may change as the situation evolves.

Certificates

The Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), to which the CanadaGAP program is benchmarked, has communicated to CanadaGAP that based on risk assessment, certification bodies may be able to extend certificates for up to six months under extraordinary circumstances. CanadaGAP certification bodies will be contacting program participants in the event that the CB cannot proceed with planned audits at your operation, and will provide information about certificate extensions. If you have concerns about the timing of your certificate expiry, we encourage you to contact your certification body.

At this point, Certification bodies are still expected to proceed with an audit during the extension period. In addition, monitoring and surveillance activities (e.g., regular communication, desktop review of records, phone interviews, etc.) may be required for CBs to ensure ongoing compliance with food safety requirements within the certified operation. Depending on the continuing impact of the coronavirus, CBs may have to consider other approaches to on-site auditing (e.g., virtual or remote alternatives). At this time, GFSI does not support any substitute for on-site audits but they are evaluating the options because of the rapidly evolving situation.

Food Safety Impact

We have received questions about the safety of food products. To date there is no evidence that COVID-19 is transmissible via food (i.e., it does NOT appear to be a foodborne illness). Following are some links containing helpful information about transmission routes:

1. European Food Safety Authority (EFSA): <https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/news/coronavirus-no-evidence-food-source-or-transmission-route>

CanadaGAP® is a program developed in Canada to promote Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) for fruit and vegetable suppliers.

2. U.S Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): FAQ's – scroll to “How it Spreads”
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html#spreads>
3. U.S Food and Drug Administration (FDA): FAQ's – scroll to “Food products”
<https://www.fda.gov/emergency-preparedness-and-response/mcm-issues/coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-frequently-asked-questions>
4. Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC): how COVID-19 spreads –
<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/coronavirus-disease-covid-19.html>
5. World Health Organization (WHO): how COVID-19 is spread – <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses> (See FAQ near the bottom: “Is it safe to receive a package...”)
6. Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) – scroll to “Food Safety” -
<https://www.inspection.gc.ca/information-for-industry/eng/1584462704366/1584462704709>

We will keep you informed if further scientific information comes to light.

Impact on Supply of Food Safety-Related Items

We have received inquiries about a shortage of hand sanitizer. We have been reassured by public health officials that the current shortage of supplies is expected to be short-lived; they do not expect empty shelves to continue indefinitely. Officials have been making efforts to communicate with the public that there is no need for panic or for hoarding of supplies. There has also been clear communication that the issue is not with suppliers, but rather with excessive demand as people stock up. The situation is expected to ease over the coming weeks; please be patient.

If you are experiencing an immediate issue with lack of supplies and need guidance on alternatives, please follow expert recommendations (e.g., on making your own hand sanitizer) and retain the instructions to show your auditor.

Stay Safe and Healthy

In these uncertain times, we understand that there are many challenges facing everyone in the industry: program participants, retailers, manufacturers and distributors, auditors and certification bodies, and your families. As always, we are here to help with any questions or concerns.

