Vegetarian Newsletter

A Horticultural Sciences Department Extension Publication on Vegetable and Fruit Crops

Eat your Veggies and Fruits!!!!!

Issue No. 557 May 2010

North Florida Small and Large Vegetable Farmers Build Food Safety Plans

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A recent University of Florida pilot program brought 25 vegetable farmers in North Florida one step closer to developing a complete food safety manual for their farm. It seems like every fresh fruit and vegetable grower in the U.S., large or small, is aware that meeting food safety requirements has become perhaps the dominant challenge for them to meet over the next few years. Florida is one of the main fresh produce states in the nation with much of the product shipped out of the state to other northern destinations. Much of this product movement comes from larger operations which have been progressive in developing and implementing food safety programs on their farms and in their packing facilities. In many cases, the large size of the operation requires new full time personnel to be hired to manage the process.

Just to be clear, food safety programs are being required by the buyers and are not government regulated or mandated programs. This is true in most states for all fresh produce; however, in Florida one exception exists for fresh tomatoes. In Florida, the state legislature approved a program known as Tomato Good Agricultural Practices, T-GAP for short, requiring all tomato producers who sell more than 50 lbs of tomatoes to a single customer in one day to have an approved food safety program enforced by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. This law was initiated by the tomato industry to reduce the risk of Florida grown tomatoes being associated with a food borne illness.

As increasing pressure from buyers on farmers has emerged, more small and mid-sized farmers in Florida are becoming aware of the need to develop their farm food safety plans. Now the struggle! Most of these smaller farms do not have the financial capacity to hire personnel to develop and implement the plans. These are the farms where the farmer and perhaps other family members do everything themselves. However, many small fresh fruit and vegetable growers in North Florida have been participating in University of Florida Extension training programs for food safety as they recognize this coming trend. After initial food safety trainings in 2009, participating farmers indicated they were ready to begin developing their own food safety plan, but needed help from Extension to move forward. This group of farmers represented farms ranging in size from one acre to 300 acres of fresh produce, but most
with less than 50 acres. Because many of these were smaller scale operations, they needed to develop the plans themselves as they could not afford the few thousand dollars required to hire someone to conduct training and develop the plan and manuals required.

The opportunity to help these farmers came through a newly developed educational program of the University of Florida, The Small Farms Academy [http://nfrec.ifas.ufl.edu/academy/index.shtml](http://nfrec.ifas.ufl.edu/academy/index.shtml). The Academy, located at the North Florida Research and Education Center – Suwannee Valley (NFREC-SV) near Live Oak, FL was able to partner with Dr. Keith Schneider, UF Extension Food Safety Specialist, to develop a training strategy and some documents that compliment Primus Labs web tools. The funding support for this pilot training program came from USDA Specialty Crops Block Grant funding in Florida administered through the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Local leadership in planning the training strategy was developed by regional Extension agents Linda Landrum and Bob Hochmuth who also put together a team of county extension agents and other volunteers to assist in implementing the trainings. It was decided by Landrum and Hochmuth to develop the pilot trainings around an on-line “build your own” food safety manual provided free to farmers at the Primus Labs web site, [www.primuslabs.com](http://www.primuslabs.com). The development of a complete farm food safety manual is not an easy process regardless of which tool is used, but the Primus Labs site seemed to be the most complete, with a relatively user- friendly menu driven system. Landrum and Hochmuth co-taught the two day trainings with every farmer or farm family members at a computer logged onto the site. If a farmer requested to attend the training, but was not comfortable with the computer, a University of Florida or Florida A&M Extension agent, or staff members from the NFREC-SV, Florida Farm Bureau, or Florida Department of Agriculture were provided as a “training buddy” for the two days. The “training buddy” assisted the farmer with the computer aspects of the program. Less than one-quarter of the farmers requested this assistance.

Because there was greater interest in developing manuals for the farm and ranch (fields), two sessions for the farm and ranch manual were conducted with a single session for the packing facility category. The farm and packing facility plans require separate manuals and therefore, required separate trainings.

The training sessions provided great interaction and dialogue between farmers and trainers, resulting in learning from each other. Since each farm was different, the success of the trainings was due to the fact that all participants understood the value of being patient with their fellow classmates so everyone could move through the manual development tool together. By the end of the two-day sessions, the farmers were able to maneuver through the site and felt confident they could refine their plans once back at their farms. At the end of the training session, farmers left with a completed food safety document (plan) including the standard operating procedures (SOPs) and record keeping logs required. In addition, the training included the exercise of working through a “self-audit,” which helps provide the farmer with insight on the strengths and weaknesses of their plan. Farms also received a bag of training materials that included reference books, hand washing signs, worker training DVDs and other information that will be helpful in actually implementing the day to day requirements back at the farm. At the end of the Packing Facility training, a question and answer session was conducted with Steve Hoak, a third party food safety auditor with Glades Crop Care, so farmers could become more familiar with the audit process.
After all three training sessions were conducted, 25 farms had developed their own Farm and Ranch plan and 13 had developed plans for the packing facility. Participating farms came from throughout North Florida representing 13 counties. Discussions are underway to develop educational programs to continue support for these farms including farmers hosting other farmers to share how they have implemented their plans. For further information on this program contact Linda Landrum or Bob Hochmuth at 386-362-1725 or for general information on food safety programs in Florida, go to http://fshn.ifas.ufl.edu/foodsafety. Future plans include training opportunities for more farmers, including greenhouse operations and development of a “train the trainer” program to extend this information to other Extension agents throughout Florida.
Farmers and training helpers working on-line to develop their food safety plans. Photo by: Elena Toro, Suwannee County Extension.