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Conducting HACCP Audits Down on the Farm

Forrest Stegelin

HACCP, or Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points, has historically been an activity viewed as an effective and rational means of assuring food safety from harvest to consumption. With media headlines putting the blame for food-borne illnesses and deaths on the farm or source of production (spinach and leafy greens, grains, and even peanut butter), concerned consumers are asking direct-marketing entrepreneurs what principles, guidelines, actions, or applications they are pursuing to ensure food that is safe, not just healthy and nutritious. “Organic” was not the solution to the questions posed—consumers wanted specifics that correlated with the responses and actions reported in the news media.

Fresh fruit and vegetable producers throughout the Southeast suddenly realized marketing entailed more than just the “four P’s”—product, price, place, and promotion; now marketing included people (consumers and employees) and a prescription for prevention of food-safety alarms. Identity preservation was even being included in purchasing agreements by grocers who were caught in a dilemma: how to show support for local production *and* guarantee safe food for their customers.

Since HACCP was already an accepted program in the foodservice and food retail-distribution chain,

applying a HACCP-type program at the source of supply on the farm seemed a logical consequence to the questions being posed by industry and the public. Preventing problems from occurring is the paramount goal underlying any HACCP system. HACCP, itself, is a systematic approach to the identification, evaluation, and control of food-safety hazards. Seven basic principles are employed in the development of HACCP plans, including conducting a hazard analysis and determining and identifying the critical control points. However, there is no “one-size-fits-all” when developing a HACCP plan out in a field of fresh produce.

This study focuses on the nuances of developing guidelines for application of HACCP principles on two commercial vegetable farms where produce is picked and packed for sale off the farm as well as picked for sale at a roadside market, and a small fruit pick-your-own direct market. Consumer confidence in the produce, the farm, and the producer was the goal. Determining just how far growers should go to gain that confidence added an unforeseen dimension to developing the HACCP-type programs for these direct marketers. Conducting audits as an initial pre-HACCP activity using checklists developed with the producer-marketer entrepreneur in mind was essential.