



Food safety has always been a concern and is an important issue with respect to both domestic and international food supplies.

Through the U.S. Produce Safety Initiative of the 1990s, the emphasis and focus on produce safety was increased to ensure that the nation's food supply, whether grown domestically or internationally, was safe. As a result, the U. S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) developed guidelines for the produce industry with the overall goal of minimizing the possibility of microbial contamination of food. Those guidelines, known as Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), have become increasingly important and necessary to the produce industry.

GAP and GMP are used extensively by domestic and foreign produce growers to improve and ensure the safety of their produce. Growers reduce the risks to fresh fruit and vegetables by developing

and instituting comprehensive education and extension programs on their farms. GAP guidelines are primarily associated with field production practices, whereas GMP guidelines are aimed at storage and packinghouse practices.

The events of Sept. 11, 2001 brought about a heightened awareness of food safety and, more important, the traceability of fresh produce. Traceability of fresh produce from the production field to the consumer's table improves the safety of our food supply by identifying and minimizing microbial and alternative sources of contamination in a timely and efficient manner.

Certification

As a first step in the certification process, all producers should register with the FDA, after which they will be issued a federal identification number. The FDA sets the guidelines known as GAP and GMP. The guidelines can be accessed at <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/prodguid.html>.

A producer who participates in the program and uses the guidelines outlined by the FDA is not only protecting the health of consumers, but also is reducing financial risk that could jeopardize their operation. Participating producers are audited, inspected and validated by an independent third party. These companies provide a checklist to growers to complete the auditing and inspection processes associated with certification.

Compliance

Producers/packers/shippers must comply with 70% of the guidelines to pass certification. Certain conditions outlined in the checklist are mandatory, and failure to meet them can result in certification fail-

ure if they are detected. Examples include the determination of an immediate food safety risk, a violation of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) or state pesticide regulations and failure to test and/or treat water sources.

Two critical components of GAP and GMP are the education of employees and maintenance of facilities. Producers should stress personal hygiene and ensure that all employees are provided a copy of safety guidelines. Employees working in a packing facility should not wear jewelry or body adornments, but they should wear hair nets. It is also extremely important that sanitary facilities be provided to employees to promote personal hygiene and sanitary activity, such as frequent hand washing. Communication and cooperation between a producer and his/her employees is essential for GAP and GMP guideline compliance.

GLOBALGAP

There has been increasing interest in exporting sweet potatoes produced in the United States to other countries, especially to the United Kingdom and continental Europe. At the same time, there have been rapid changes in laws, regulations and attitudes of consumers and the produce marketing industries regarding produce quality and pesticide residues. The term EUREPGAP, which has been replaced by GLOBALGAP, is an acronym for the Euro-Retailer Produce Working Group (EUREP) combined with Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). GLOBALGAP guidelines and standards are used widely by fruit and vegetable producers and shippers in Europe and around the world for the certification of Good Agricultural Practices. More information can be obtained from GLOBALGAP (<http://www.globalgap.org/>).

A producer who participates in the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) program and uses the guidelines outlined by the FDA is not only protecting the health of consumers, but also is reducing financial risk that could jeopardize their operation.

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GAP GMP EUREPGAP GLOBALGAP and Sweet Potato Producers

