

## PRESENTATION TO HOUSE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE ON PRODUCE SAFETY: WHAT ARE GAPS, FSMA AND PTI, WHY SHOULD I CARE, AND WHAT IS EXTENSION DOING ABOUT IT?

### Produce Safety – what is it and why is it important?

The numbers of produce farms in Vermont are increasing - from 506 in 2007 to **814 in 2012**. In 2012 they contributed **over \$21 million in sales** (up from \$13 million in 2007). (Figures are from the U.S. Census of Agriculture)

- Since the 1970's the **U.S. has been seeing a steady increase in food borne illness outbreaks** associated with produce eaten raw – ex: spinach E. coli in 2006, listeria in Cantaloupe in 2011.
- **GAPs = Good Agricultural Practices** - these are basic hygiene and sanitation practices (cleaning contact surfaces, when raw manure is applied, etc...) to reduce the risk of contaminating fruits and vegetables with microbial pathogens. Unlike dairy and livestock industries, hygiene and sanitation in the produce industry has never been regulated before – 1998. Until 2011, GAPs were voluntary, but large supermarkets and chain restaurants required third party audits to certify that farmers were following these practices.
- **FSMA = Food Safety Modernization Act**, signed in 2011 – turn GAPs into regulation, largely in response to pressure from consumer advocacy groups concerned because lost loved one to a food borne illness, FDA gone through 2 rounds of proposing and revising rules for various size farms, will be finalized this summer and begin to implement this fall
  - **Congressional mandate** to not make overly burdensome to small farms
  - **Covered under FSMA**
    - **Farms that do over \$500,000 in gross sales in produce**
    - **Farm that do over 50% of their gross sales from produce to wholesale markets or over 50% of sales are over 275 miles away from farm**
    - The reason for the focus on the largest farms is not that small farms or direct marketers can't make people sick, but rather it is because only 20% of the largest farms in US grow and distribute 80% of the produce. The FDA is focusing on these largest farms because they have the potential to make the most people sick
- **PTI = Produce Traceability Initiative** is a Federal and Industry effort, separate from FSMA, to have electronic information systems in place for produce recalls – this will mean expensive new software and hardware for barcodes for growers who want to sell to the wholesale market

### Why should VT legislators care?

1. **Economic viability of VT produce: the marketplace is changing and this will affect the ability to get VT product into wholesale markets** – regardless of FSMA, markets are asking for produce safety
  - a. Hannafords and Price Chopper require – 3<sup>rd</sup> party GAPs audits
  - b. Black River Produce (distributor) gets audited – they are asking farmers for their food safety plans
  - c. Whole Foods – growers must buy a unique code and barcode system for Produce Traceability Initiative
2. **Increased costs:** Most Vermont farms are using aging infrastructure – usually old dairy barns, that will need considerable improvements to meet these new sanitation requirements, as well as additional time during each work week for record-keeping, as well as the annual costs of getting audited. (See documents on Costs of GAPs)
3. **Will VT be regulating?** The Agency of Agriculture is currently exploring how they will be addressing produce safety regulation: What are other states doing? If we don't but MA & NY does....what will that mean for VT farmers who sell in neighboring states?

## What is Extension doing?

**Ginger Nickerson:** UVM Extension Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Produce Safety Coordinator, provide education, training and technical assistance in one-on-one and group settings, and conduct research.

### Examples from Past year

- Informing **farmers on proposed changes to rules in FSMA**
- **Packshed project** - providing practical information to growers on materials, costs and design of wash/packsheds and renovating dairy barns for produce safety
- Training Windsor State Prison inmates in **GAPs and GHPs for Vermont Commodity Program** (Salvation Farms) food going from local farms to food shelves and food banks
- Developing **training program for gleaners** throughout state on produce safety (working with Salvation Farms on this)

### Examples for Upcoming Year

- Working with Stan Ward to assess current **traceability systems** for produce growers and make recommendations for appropriate technologies for small and mid-scale farms on traceability systems that will bring them into compliance with Federal and market-driven requirements
  - USDA-AFRI project: **Defining And Overcoming Economic Factors Hindering Adoption Of Food Safety Practices By Small And Medium Sized Farms In The New England Region** with food safety and horticulture personnel from all 6 New England states (funded at just under \$500,000)
  - **Practical Produce Safety Trainings** with goal of all produce growers in VT having produce safety plans in place (total growers that have already received some training in GAPs or PPS = 235/ out of a potential 800 diversified veg and berry growers in VT )
  - Participating in multi-state planning effort to **develop a Post-Harvest Technology Center** for the Northeast (led by Chris Callahan, UVM Extension Agricultural Engineer) that would help New England growers improve produce quality and safety and market access and distribution.
2. **Vern Grubinger:** is conducting research on quality of wash water used for processing produce
  3. **Hans Estrin:** VVBGA PSA (333 VVBGA members) creating their own produce safety peer-reviewed accreditation program – working closely with the Agency of Ag, Dept of Health and buyers. Local buyers are involved in effort, but we do not know how the larger marketplace will respond

## How can the Ag Committees help?

1. **Stay educated:** Understand that whether coming from the marketplace or regulators produce safety will have a significant impact on economic viability of produce farming in VT
2. **Think creatively about surface water quality** – Quality of irrigation water that is being sprayed overhead on fruits and vegetables (vs. through drip irrigation tape laid on ground) is one place where FDA is concerned that microbial contamination can occur. The standard they are using is E.coli - the challenge is that most surface waters nationally will not meet FSMA standard of 235 E.coli CFU's per 100 ml water –testing and addressing will create more costs for farmers
3. **Support any funding initiatives that could help farmers improve farm infrastructure:** irrigation systems, packsheds, cold storage – using old barns – hard to clean, lots of cracks for rodents, etc...