

Fresh produce growers learn ways to prevent foodborne illnesses

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Fresh produce growers learned ways to reduce food safety risks and qualify for Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) certification at a workshop during the annual Wyoming Farmers Marketing Association meeting earlier this month in Casper, according to Cole Ehmke, University of Wyoming Extension specialist.

Ehmke says 48 million Americans, or 1 in 6, get sick from [foodborne illnesses](#) every year. That statistic prompted the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), which requires farmers to take preventive measures against [food safety](#) risks once the Food and Drug Administration finalizes rules to enforce the law.

Illness-causing pathogens, such as salmonella and E. coli, come from a variety of sources. The most common source is fecal matter, Ehmke says, which can be spread by water, wildlife, waste and workers.

Simple steps like [hand washing](#), using clean equipment and keeping wildlife away—things many farmers already do—can reduce contamination. What's more difficult is keeping the records to prove it, which FSMA will require, he adds.

Documenting food safety efforts is required if farmers want GAPs certification. GAPs are market-driven, voluntary practices farmers can implement to reduce food safety risks, Ehmke says.

Purchasers of fresh produce such as restaurants, retail stores and

institutions (such as schools, care facilities and prisons) may require GAPs certification or at least a written Farm Food Safety Plan.

Growers passing a GAPs audit—an on-farm inspection part of the certification process—will likely comply with FSMA rules, too, Ehmke says.

"There is a cost for the auditing process, but the certification provides a point of distinction from other producers," he says. "At this point in time, producers with annual sales of \$25,000 or less are not required to be audited. But it is most certainly to their advantage to follow GAPs practices to produce their products in ways that reduce the risk of foodborne illnesses."

Establishing a food safety plan and designating someone to oversee it is a good idea, Ehmke says. The plan identifies the policies and practices on the farm and should be enforced, even for visitors.

"A food safety plan is an opportunity for ag producers to identify the food safety risks on their farms and the common sense methods they'll use to reduce them," he says. "Cleaning things regularly and well is central."

Elizabeth Killinger, a GAPs trainer with Nebraska Extension, says, "Farmers need to provide adequate restroom facilities for workers and keep them clean and stocked with supplies. Proper hand washing is a big step toward preventing illness."

Farm operators also need to be familiar with symptoms of foodborne illnesses. Sick workers should be sent home, or at least given a task that can be done without touching produce.

"Farmers do many of these things already," Killinger says. "If they are

required to have GAPs [certification](#), then they just need to get organized and document all of it. This will mean changing a few things for some producers, like in the timing of when they apply compost or how often they test their water for contagions."

Many producers use manure to fertilize crops and improve soil, but they must be careful. FSMA and GAPs allow untreated manure on soil before planting, but it's better to treat it, she says. Manure can be passively treated by letting it sit in a pile for six months. It also can be actively treated, or composted, by turning the pile periodically over a 45- to 60-day period.

Composted manure can be applied at any time as long as it is composted properly and meets FSMA microbial standards. More caution must be taken with passively treated or raw manure.

"It will still have some pathogens in it, so avoid using it for root or leafy crops or apply it at least 120 days prior to harvest," Killinger says. "For other crops whose edible portion doesn't come into direct contact with the soil, it's safe to apply it 90 days before harvest."

Before harvesting, growers should check if there's evidence of animals or workers not complying with hygiene rules. If so, they shouldn't harvest the crops in affected areas, Killinger says.

While packing produce, Killinger suggests labeling boxes with the farm's name, a field number and the date. Traceability is critical in case of an outbreak and a recall, she says.

Provided by University of Wyoming

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