



Developing a Farm Food Safety Plan

Creating a farm food safety plan is one of the best investments you can make in your growing operation.

By Beth Scheckelhoff

Do you grow edible crops in a greenhouse or other structure? If the answer is yes, then you and your staff will want to invest time and effort in developing a “farm food safety plan” (FFSP) for your operation. A FFSP is a detailed record of your operation’s commitment and adherence to growing, harvesting, packing and shipping safe produce.

WHY HAVE A FFSP?

In this day of increasing governmental regulation, it may surprise you to know that the newly enacted FDA Food Safety Modernization Act does not require growers to develop a FFSP. However, the development of a plan is one of the best investments you can make in your production operation.

Operations with a FFSP reap numerous benefits. The process of developing the plan requires you and your staff to think about, discuss and put into writing important pieces of information, such as the operation’s food safety

policies, standard operating procedures, corrective action procedures and key recordkeeping logs. These are necessary and powerful pieces of information for all members of your team to understand and follow to consistently grow a safe product. This information also can help prioritize short and long-term investments that need to be made in the operation.

A FFSP also is required for obtaining good agricultural practices (GAPs) certification through USDA or a third-party. GAPs certification often enables growers to sell their produce to “new,” larger markets leading to enhanced income opportunities. For example, many smaller growers find it difficult to access wholesale markets that can more widely distribute seasonal or locally grown produce items. These markets often require growers to obtain GAPs certification before accepting their product.

WHERE DO I START?

The biggest hurdle for growers interested in developing a FFSP is getting started. Many readily available templates

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can be found online. The Produce Safety Alliance at Cornell University has compiled a list of university and industry resources and FFSP templates that can be found at www.producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu. After reviewing some of these resources, identify one that best fits your operation and modify the plan from there.

It is important to remember that your plan does not have to be complex, but it does need to accurately reflect and document your operation's produce safety practices. The plan should only include information on policies and practices that you actually use or are doing in your operation, not those that you wish or hope to use in the future.

The FFSP is meant to change as your operation implements and enhances good agricultural practices, policies and procedures over time. GAPs are best practices aimed at preventing microbial contamination of fresh produce items grown on a farm, or in a greenhouse, hoop house or indoor agricultural site. These best practices provide guidelines for establishing employee hygiene and health policies, storing and using soil amendments and manure, irrigation and postharvest water, animal intrusion and more.

WHAT'S IN A FFSP?

Let's take a look at a few key segments of a FFSP and the benefits they can provide your operation.

Each plan includes very basic information about your operation including a description of the land, facilities, and crops grown as well as identification of a food safety officer/contact within your business. This individual should have the ability and resources available to make decisions regarding food safety. They will become the person most knowledgeable on food safety policies and practices and be able to communicate those to employees, buyers and other interested parties.

Standard Operating Procedures. One key aspect of a FFSP is developing standard operating procedures (SOPs) for tasks and procedures. A SOP is a set of instructions similar to a recipe on how to complete a given task. Suppose you go on vacation for a week and a complete stranger takes over the operation while you are gone. If you hand them a copy of your FFSP complete with SOPs as you leave, could that person perform all the necessary tasks related to growing, harvesting, packing and shipping your product while you are away? Developing a SOP for all tasks including handwashing, mixing fertilizer or washing and sanitizing harvest containers ensures that every person completes the task exactly the same way each time.

Land Use Risk Assessment. Your plan will include a risk assessment of the land and/or structures used for producing edible crops. Each location will have unique characteristics to consider. Are there areas that serve as a reservoir for rodents or wildlife that may enter the facility? Does water from nearby fields empty into your irrigation pond?

Include a map or layout of the operation and surrounding land, a description of past and current uses of the land, and identify any potential risks or routes of contamination that might occur from neighboring lands, businesses or environmental features. An image of your operation can be obtained from Google maps. Go to www.maps.google.com and enter your address. You can zoom in or out to include as much surrounding area as needed.

Additional segments of the FFSP include employee health and training, sources and uses of water and soil amendments, managing wildlife, proper cleaning and sanitization for food contact surfaces, and details on your operation's traceability plan.

They include:

- Training all employees in basic health and hygiene practices significantly reduces the risk for produce contamination. Ensuring each employee receives training on proper hand washing procedures, toilet use, restroom cleaning, clothing, illness and injury reporting, and many others will reduce risk in the production and packing environment.
- Water used in production and after harvest can easily transfer pathogens to produce. Regular irrigation system inspections, water sampling for pathogens, and monitoring of wash water can significantly reduce risks associated with water use.
- Growers will want to clearly identify and document sources and handling and storage practices of soil amendments, especially those of biological origin such as manures and compost that could pose a risk of contamination.
- Each operation will need to detail how pests and animal activity (including rodents, birds, cats, and other animals of concern) is monitored and deterred during growing, harvesting and packing activities.
- Contamination issues from equipment, tools, buildings, or transportation vehicles can occur, and proper cleaning and sanitization SOPs and records for food contact surfaces are important.
- Your operation's ability to trace produce one step backward (when, where, how and by whom was it grown and harvested) and one step forward (how much product was taken and to where) will also be described and documented.

Each of the different components that make up a FFSP are designed to help your operation reduce produce safety risks. When combined, this information provides a framework to communicate your produce safety policies and practices to employees, buyers and consumers. Now is the time to get started! ♦

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