

Improving Produce Safety in Kansas

The Situation

Pathogens in produce cause a large number of food-borne illnesses every year. In fact, 46% of the estimated 48 million food-borne illnesses occurring annually in the US from 1998 through 2008 were connected to fresh produce. Accordingly, federal regulations and buyer requirements for produce growers have become stricter. Consumers and local buyers are increasingly interested in buying local produce, but this produce must meet regulatory and marketplace requirements, which can be overwhelming for growers. Therefore, it is critical that Kansas produce growers understand how to implement produce safety best practices, which should help them increase their produce sales and also reduce the burden of food-borne illness linked to produce.

What We Did

K-State Research and Extension Specialists, Associates, and agents carried out the following:

- Held 5 Introduction to Produce Safety workshops in 4 locations across Kansas (58 produce growers)
- Completed at least 23 on-farm produce safety assessments in Kansas
- Held Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Alliance (PSA) trainings throughout Kansas where we have trained at least 87 KS growers
- Developed a Food Safety Plan template, logbooks, and maps to assist Kansas produce growers in becoming Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certified (common marketplace requirement to sell produce)
- Implemented 8 GAP audit preparation workshops across Kansas (56 produce growers attended)
- Providing free microbial water testing to Kansas produce growers
- Continuing to develop numerous produce grower fact sheets and other information, including a traceability app and posting them to our produce safety website ksre.ksu.edu/producesafety

Outcomes

Of the KS farmers that have responded so far to a follow-up survey conducted approximately 1 year after farmers attended a FSMA PSA regulatory training, 100% said they have made some sort of change on their farm to improve food safety practices since attending the training.

On average, all the farms that participated in pre-workshop and post-workshop on-farm produce safety assessments showed a 12.7% improvement in their produce safety practices, which indicates that our produce safety outreach has been successful to help produce growers implement improved produce safety practices. After attending one of our GAPs workshops, two Kansas produce farms who had not previously been GAP certified were able to successfully earn GAP certification, which has enabled them to expand their market access.

Success Story

One newer Kansas produce farm who participated in the pre- and post- workshop on-farm produce safety assessments showed a 57% improvement in their score from their first to their second assessment, after attending an Introduction to Produce Safety workshop. The farmer described how the on-farm produce safety assessment has benefitted them: “Before this, I didn’t have a food safety plan at all. In the long term it will benefit us... it lowers our risk.” This farmer has subsequently attended other KSRE produce safety trainings and would be ready to pass a GAPs audit if requested by a produce buyer.

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Dan Brooks poses by tomato plants in his high tunnel.