



Safe food handling practices on the farm: Meeting the needs of foodservice operations

Abstract: Local food producers need to be aware and up-to-date on the ways to handle food safely. A pilot workshop was conducted and used as the basis for communicating food safety practices most efficiently.

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\$14,981 for year one

Q How can we improve salability of food products by local farmers to retail foodservice operations that have concerns about product safety?

A This project raised awareness among Iowa farmers selling food crops to retail foodservices about the importance of documentation of on-farm food safety practices – such as GAPS, water quality assurance, and employee health and hygiene.



Background

Retail food service operations and consumers are keenly aware of the need for safe food handling because of recent outbreaks of food-borne illnesses from fresh produce. Iowa State University Extension developed a one-day pilot workshop to help local food producers interested in selling products to foodservice operations better understand the needs and concerns of these potential buyers.

There were four project objectives:

1. Participating food producers will be able to identify best practices in product handling during harvest, post-harvest, transportation and delivery; explain the importance of operational policies related to employee hygiene and proper food handling; and understand the need to document safe handling practices.
2. Participating food producers will understand the steps necessary to avoid cross-contamination of food products, including proper cleaning and sanitizing procedures.
3. Participants will be able to communicate basic safe food handling messages to farm workers.
4. Participants will be able to address food safety and regulatory concerns of foodservice operations that purchase their products.

Approach and methods

A one-day workshop was developed and presented to producers in Jefferson County as a pilot project on April 7, 2007. The Buy Fresh Buy Local and the Pathfinders Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) helped publicize the workshop among producers. Jefferson County was chosen for the pilot because of the prevalence of local food producers in the county and number of foodservice operations interested in purchasing from local sources. Prior to the workshop, participants completed a knowledge and attitude assessment and answered questions about typical practices on their farms. Organic producers were targeted by the workshop designers.

Results and discussion

Workshop presenters provided an overview of microbiological risks and possible contamination of fresh produce, and ways that producers can mitigate these risks (such as documentation of water safety, and implementation of standard operating procedures for cleaning and sanitizing). A session about day-to-day activities in foodservice operations helped producers better appreciate the perspectives of foodservice operators regarding procurement and safety concerns. A health inspector with the Iowa Department of Inspection and Appeals took part in a session on purchasing regulations. This session helped producers understand the need to use correct packaging materials and ensure there was no time and temperature abuse of the product. All participants completed an evaluation of the workshop and gave it high ratings for usefulness and relevance.

A post-workshop assessment was mailed to participants two weeks after the event. Review indicated continued awareness of safe practices on the farm had resulted in improved safety procedures.

One large farm and one small farm currently selling to local foodservices allowed researchers to conduct a site visit of their operations. A third operation, which was transitioning to an agri-tourism site including an on-farm store, was visited by another researcher. Summary reports were prepared for each of the producers.

Conclusions

Purchasing regulations need to be explained simply and clearly, and communicated consistently to producers and foodservice establishments.

Consumers and foodservice operators know that microbial risks exist and in order to deal with these concerns, producers (sellers) need to:

- Establish procedures to minimize risks,
- Take preventative action steps,
- Document that steps have occurred
- Communicate these actions to buyers, and
- Understand foodservice establishment procurement regulations and constraints.

The challenge will be in helping producers understand the perspectives of various sectors of the foodservice market, and in encouraging better negotiating and record-keeping skills. Use of a profitability calculator (developed as part of an earlier Leopold Center project) to show production input costs helps producers negotiate more effectively.

Impact of results

Investigators estimated that 150 producers were reached through direct contact at workshops and other presentations. Indirect contact with producers through ISU Extension and associated publications is estimated at 300. Direct contact with food service industry representatives is around 300, with another 500 reached through

indirect contact at trade shows.

The materials developed for this project provided a database of information and presentations for use in other food handling training sessions. The web site, networking and collateral materials have led to conversations with other Iowa agencies about connecting local food producers with various sectors of the foodservice industry.

Education and outreach

Information transfer via a web site (www.iastatelocalfoods.org) took place following the event. Workshop presentations and the profitability calculator (http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/research/marketing_files/profitability_0108.pdf) received considerable attention. Selected handouts from the workshop also have been posted to the web site.

A workshop manual was prepared that included information for producers on establishing an on-site food safety plan and successfully approaching the foodservice market.

Project team members made presentations to the Iowa Network of Community Agriculture in 2007 and to the Iowa Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association in 2007 and 2008. Four modified workshops, based on the pilot, were presented to producers in Cedar Falls, Waukon, Ames, and Atlantic.

Three extension publications targeted to foodservice and producer markets were developed. One addressed procurement regulations that foodservice establishments in Iowa must follow when purchasing foods (PM 2047); another explained on-farm food safety practices that a producer should follow, along with information on how to work with foodservice establishments (PM2045); and the third directed information to the retail foodservice establishment buyer (PM 2046).

Leveraged funds

No additional resources were leveraged by this project.

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