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Tools to Help Pass the GAP Audit

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The safety of fruit and vegetables in the American diet has become increasingly important. Various sectors of the food industry have responded to concerns about food safety by becoming more vigilant in looking at possible sources of contamination and stepping up inspection measures. Some retailers have required that independent third-party inspections be conducted to assure that raw produce is handled in healthful ways. These inspections are being conducted through the entire food-production chain including the farm level.

Fortunately, potatoes are seldom consumed raw but are cooked or processed prior to consumption. Even though no potato products have been implicated in any contamination incidents, some segments of the industry have been proactive in declaring the need for safe handling practices. Several major potato processing companies have included language in producer contracts mandating producer farm inspections under provisions of the USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) Audit procedures. The objective of the audit is to assess a farm's effort to minimize the unintentional microbial or chemical contamination of potatoes prior to reaching the consumer.

At the time of this writing, the GAP audit is strictly a volunteer process administered by the Idaho State Department of Agriculture. Some processors and packers may require it of their suppliers, but the state of Idaho does not require GAP certification. This certification is good for one year.

University of Idaho GAP Manual

The University of Idaho (UI) has designed a Potato GAP Audit Organizational Manual to make it easier to assemble all the information needed for the Audit. The handbook is only a template and should be modified to fit each individual operation. It is

available to view and download at <http://www.kimberly.uidaho.edu/potatoes/gap.htm>. The web site and associated documents will be updated regularly to conform to the USDA GAP Audit Checklist.

This web site provides all the necessary components to make an individualized manual designed to fit into a three-ring binder with dividers separating sections. Information is given in both "Microsoft Word" and "pdf" formats. The "Word" format allows you to make changes applicable to your farming operation. The GAP Manual includes the following sections:

- **Introduction and references** – outline of manual and additional web sites of interest.
- **Audit checklist information** – form to specify designated GAP contact person and farm description.
- **Overall Farm Standard Operating Procedures (SOP)** – pre-written SOP cross-referenced with USDA GAP Audit checklist
- **SOP Appendix** – pre-written procedures that require documentation but provided in greater detail compared to the Overall SOP
- **Maps** – section to include all necessary farm and storage maps.
- **Documentation** – pre-formatted forms necessary for Audit documentation
- **Employee signed policy forms (in English and Spanish)** – form indicating employee has been trained and understands the farm's GAP policies and procedures.
- **Current USDA Audit Checklist** – the most recent version is dated May 11, 2007, but it is important to periodically check for updates. This can be found at U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA): Fresh Product Grading and Quality Certification: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5050869>.

- **Miscellaneous** – section to place additional materials that may be helpful for training and/or Audit certification.

The four USDA Audit sections (scopes) included in the UI handbook are: General Questions (G), Farm Review (1), Field Harvest and Field Packing Activities (2), and Storage and Transportation (4). Not every operation will require all these scopes, and some operations may require others not listed in this handbook. The farm/company (auditee) will determine which scopes of the checklist they would like covered. Not all questions in each audit will be applicable to every farm, and, therefore, some questions may be answered "not applicable." A passing score is 80 percent of the points for applicable questions.

The handbook is written so the Farm Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) is coordinated and referenced directly to the USDA GAP Audit Checklist and the required documentation. Each bullet point of the SOP is referenced to the Audit Checklist and also given a documentation number if necessary. For example, in the SOP:

Potable water is available to all workers. G3, D#1

G3 indicates that this question is found in the General Information section of the Audit and is question 3. D#1 indicates that the appropriate documentation is found in the Document section of the U I GAP Manual and is the 1st document. This document also has the reference to G3 on it to make it easier to find to what question it pertains.

Additional Points

Worker Health and Hygiene (USDA Audit Section G): Annual worker sanitation training and follow-up training are required. Auditors will review written documentation and interview employees for knowledge of this training. Employees need to be instructed to not wear loose-fitting clothes and

jewelry. Worker signs must be in the predominant language of the workers. Most purchased signs do not state that hand washing must be done before beginning work. Therefore, additional signs may need to be made. If no pesticide license is needed, it is necessary to document proper use training of employees.

Farm Review (USDA Audit Section 1): History of previous land use should be known and documented. Farming operations should evaluate adjacent surroundings, appropriate distance or barriers to minimize possible contamination of water sources and production areas. Farming operations will never be able to prohibit all animals from entering production areas, but the presence or non-presence of animals should be monitored and documented when scouting fields. If animal numbers become excessive, some type of deterrent should be applied.

Field Harvest and Field Packing (USDA Audit Section 2): If an operation has fewer than 11 employees, no field sanitation unit is needed as long as employees have easy access to facilities. Portable field sanitation units will be inspected and as

essed for location with respect to potential potato contamination, accessibility for servicing, and emergency clean-up. Auditors will look for documented procedure and schedules for cleaning equipment that contacts potatoes. There should also be a SOP or action plan in the case of glass or plastic breakage and/or other contamination in harvested potatoes (see SOP Appendix for an example).

Storage and Transportation (USDA Audit Section 4): Documentation is required that the storage facility and handling equipment are checked and maintained for cleanliness and condition. A proactive effort to exclude pests in and around the storage facility needs to be documented.

Concluding Remarks

The results of submitting and passing the GAP audit will be an increase in defining, training, recording, and reporting of approved handling practices for food quality and safety. Proper documenting and reporting of safe practices will demonstrate the good faith and concern of those involved in the process.

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Did You Know?

In the U.S., potatoes are the most consumed vegetable at approximately 126 pounds per person followed by tomatoes at just over 90 pounds per person.

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