Reducing Barriers Facing Maryland Farmers in Implementing GAPs through the MDA GAP Certification Program

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Background

Food safety audits and regulations have placed much of the responsibility for produce safety on farmers. Developing documentation and implementing Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) to address food safety risks can be costly and difficult. Most wholesale growers and certain retailers in Maryland are required to have a food safety certification. These third-party audits and regulations are a source of trepidation for growers, and are also a barrier to expanding their marketing potential.

The University of Maryland (UMD) has worked closely with the Maryland Department of Agriculture (MDA) to develop a state-wide audit program offered at no cost to the farmer. The MDA GAPs certification program serves as an educational and inspection tool to encourage farmers to implement GAPs and documentation to minimize the risk of contamination. By passing the inspection and receiving the GAPs certificate, farmers are more likely to expand their markets into wholesale venues and restaurants. Additionally, growers will be more prepared for upcoming food safety regulations and more advanced third-party audits, such as the USDA Harmonized GAPs audit.

Number of Maryland Farms with GAP certifications by Year

Methodology

Trainings: Full-day trainings are required for MDA GAP program participants, and topics are adapted for farming practices in each region. After a morning session of presentations covering the science behind food safety and GAPs, participants are provided with laptops and USB drives with electronic templates. The remainder of the training is spent writing risk assessments and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), which are then written into a personalized food safety plan. Participants leave with a large portion of the required documentation completed.

Assistance and Inspections: Additional support is given to growers who request a farm visit to assist in writing documentation, observing on-farm practices, and performing a mock audit. To complete the program, farmers can then request an MDA GAP inspection at no cost (performed annually). Any growers who do not pass initially can receive assistance from UMD to make corrective actions, and are then re-inspected.

Optional Participation: Growers are encouraged to participate in advanced food safety trainings and volunteer for applied research projects. For growers interested in the quality of their agricultural water sources, we take samples and interpret monthly water tests. These anonymous results are compiled into a microbial survey of water sources in Maryland, for use in extension trainings and research. Farmers interested in the microbial quality of their packing lines can participate in environmental sampling of their post-harvest practices. These results can be incorporated into risk assessments and food safety plans.

Results and Discussion

The first year of the MDA GAP program (2012) saw two farmers apply for and pass the MDA GAPs certification. In the second year, 16 farmers total, each with diverse farming operations and marketing practices, became GAPs certified. As of May 2014, 22 growers have the MDA GAP certification, with several more in the pipeline. The certified growers range in size from backyard herb operations to melon growers with hundreds of acres. After receiving MDA GAP certification, some of these farms have gone on to request and receive more advanced GAP audits, such as GlobalGap and the USDA Harmonized GAP audit.

The two-step approach of receiving the MDA GAPs certification the first year and a more advanced certification the second year has made complying with produce safety recommendations less daunting, and more feasible financially and in practice. Changes in growing and packing practices are spread out over two years, while still receiving certification in the first year (which may be used to demonstrate GAPs compliance to acquire wholesale buyers).

This approach of coupling an educational program with a no-cost audit has been very successful in increasing the number of farmers interested and willing to go through the program.

References


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