

## MEETING CONSUMER NEEDS IN FOOD SAFETY

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### **Abstract**

Consumers today are a very demanding group. They expect their food to be tasty, nutritious, to perform to their expectations every time, and be good value for money. They also expect it to be safe. The fresh product industry's response to the need for safe food was a national, on-farm food safety program known as Freshcare. The foundation of Freshcare is the Code of Practice. The Code describes the practices required on farm to provide assurance that fresh produce is safe to eat and has been prepared to customer specifications.

In respect to the use of fertilizers and soil improvers the Code requires that they "be managed to minimise the risk of chemical, microbial and physical contamination of produce".

Growers need to undertake a risk assessment of the fertilizers and soil additives they use on farm. They require assurance from their suppliers that the product that they are putting on their farms will not introduce a food safety hazard.

Heavy metals have been identified as a food safety hazard in inorganic fertilizers. With organic fertilizers microbial contamination is the major concern. However any food safety contamination from fertilizers is unacceptable and we need to work together to ensure the product that reaches the consumer is safe.

### **Consumers and Customers**

Consumers today are demanding. They expect their food to be tasty, nutritious, to perform to their expectations every time, and be good value for money. They also expect it to be safe.

The fruit and vegetable industry, like any industry in the food business, listens to its consumers and customers. Consumers are the people who purchase and consume the end product. Customers are the organisations within the supply chain that you work with to deliver your product to the consumer.

It is only in satisfying consumers and customers with the delivery of the product and service they expect that any industry can hope to grow and prosper.

Consumers are surveyed and monitored regarding their needs and requirements for fresh produce. These surveys show that food safety is a concern to consumers, and they expect businesses in the food industry to be making sure that this is so.

Large retail customers now put down their requirements regarding safe produce in product specifications and policy directives.

### **Drive for food safety**

The main drive from our key customers point of view, started with the Garibaldi meat disaster in 1994. The court cases and litigation following on from this food poisoning incident led our major distribution outlets, the supermarket chains Woolworths, Coles and Franklins to issue some new policy directives.

Contrary to their previous position, where supermarkets thought of themselves as only distribution outlets, the courts found that supermarkets, as well as the supplier or manufacturer, had a duty of care to ensure that the product on their shelves was safe to eat.

Legal advice to the supermarkets was to make sure that the product displayed on their shelves came from a supplier with a food safety program. Safe food was now a non-negotiable element in the supply chain.

There was a need to develop food safety programs.

As Ross Peters from Food Operations identified to this audience a year ago, the main tool the food industry used to develop a food safety program was HACCP. Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point.

This technique was evolved from the need during the NASA space program in the 1960's to ensure that astronauts did not get food poisoning in space. NASA in conjunction with the US Army labs and the Pillsbury Company developed systems to control raw materials, processes, the processing environment, personnel, the storage environment, and distribution channels in order to prevent food safety problems.

HACCP incorporated a systematic approach to food safety, relying upon the identification of hazards and changing the production process to prevent those hazards rather than rely on end-point inspection. It was preventative not reactive.

The food policy directives that issued from the major supermarket chains requested that a HACCP based approach be taken in the development of a supplier's food safety program. Woolworths developed their own standard known as the Woolworths Vendor Quality Management Standard.

Most direct suppliers to the chains, being wholesalers, large growers, packing or processing operations or marketing groups moved quickly to adopt WVQMS if they were invited, or the Western Australian Safe Quality Food 2000 Code or the International Standard ISO 9002 with HACCP.

What became unclear was what did the indirect suppliers, better known as the approved suppliers to the above business do to ensure that their product was safe. Most of these businesses did not have the capital or resources to adopt the systems noted above.

### **The beginning for Freshcare**

In 1998 a national team of industry food safety and quality specialists worked on a set of guidelines for the fresh produce industry. The guideline was called "Developing an Approved Supplier Program for Fresh Produce" and was launched nationally in February 1999.

The work that went into the guidelines showed that fertilizers and soil improvers could be food safety hazards and needed to be managed.

A training program for growers was established to ensure they understood their food safety risks and how to control them. The Murrumbidgee College of Agriculture nationally registered the course.

The launch of the guidelines was well received in the market. However the main question that came from the wholesalers was "How do we know that the guidelines are being followed?" An audit program was required.

A workshop of growers and wholesalers met in early March 1999 and agreed that an audit program needed to be:

- credible
- simple to manage
- consistent
- standard across all products
- equitable to all parties
- meaningful and accountable
- cost-effective
- national in approach

- self-regulatory, and
- able to meet the requirements of the new national food safety legislation.

Growers stated that they wanted only one audit not a multitude. Wholesalers said that they did not want to be involved in auditing themselves. They saw that an independent audit would let growers control their own destiny. Growers also wanted auditors who understood their business.

Using the guidelines as a base, a trail program was established with growers, and qualified auditors from AUS-QUAL undertook audits. A project team went into major negotiations with members of the supply chain to ensure that what was being developed matched their needs. A national steering committee also arranged funding for the first stages of the program from the Horticultural Research & Development Corporation.

The total program became known as Freshcare.

The Freshcare program under industry ownership and management was formally launched in July 2000. The core of the program being the Freshcare Code of Practice.

The Code sets out the actions necessary for growers to manage food safety risks. It also asks them to undertake some risk assessments – persistent chemicals in the soil, water, and on fertilizers and soil improvers.

Using decision trees, growers are guided into establishing whether these inputs into their systems could produce any food safety risks. If there is any concern about a food safety risk than these inputs require control.

For fertilizers and soil improvers the main focus has been on contamination by heavy metals, and the use of organic manures. However all inputs should be checked to see that they come from respectable sources, and that these suppliers in turn have a food safety program.

This is usually done by requesting the supplier to produce documentation demonstrating food safety compliance. An example of this is a company called Enviro-organics. They treat cattle manure from a feedlot then produce documentation to the growers demonstrating that it has been treated correctly, and then tested to ensure that the treatment controls the growth of pathogens.

The Freshcare Code of Practice also requests growers to keep a record of all fertilizers and soil additives used. This record has to contain:

- The name of the product
- Supplier of the product
- Date of the application
- Location of treated area
- Rate of application
- The name of the person applying the product.

These records form an important link in a food re-call situation, and form part of the product identification and traceability element required by the Freshcare Code of Practice.

Growers are also asked to check that fertilizers and soil additives are stored, applied and disposed of correctly so they do not pose a risk to either direct contamination of produce or indirect contamination, such as through the water supply.

## **Linkages to other programs**

### ***Domestic***

As members of the fertilizer industry you need to be aware that Freshcare is not the only on-farm food safety program that is requiring greater food safety assurances from their suppliers. Freshcare closely works with CATTLECARE, FLOCKCARE and Graincare.

The reason for this is obvious. Many growers and producers run multi-enterprise businesses. For these industry owned and managed programs, the owners have stated that they want only one audit per farm. This has meant that these four programs now link common elements, such as management and chemicals, and they can be audited simultaneously.

All of them have the requirement to check that there are no heavy metals such as cadmium in the soil. They also require that practices in the use of fertilizers do not contaminate soil, livestock or crops.

There is some nervousness in industry regarding the sources of some fertilizers, and producers certified to these food safety programs will be requiring greater assurance before purchase.

### ***International***

We have all seen recently the impacts of food safety issues in Europe following BSE, and the impacts on the supply chain when anything goes wrong.

Not only do customers within Australia require that suppliers have appropriate food safety programs, it is a requirement for supply to many overseas countries. The retailers of Europe have formed a new consortium called EUREP. Under this they are requiring that all fresh produce suppliers meet a specified set of Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs).

Under fertilizer usage their code requires that:

- Fertilizer application, using either mineral or organic fertilizers, must meet the needs of the crops as well as maintaining soil fertility.
- Growers or their advisers must be able to demonstrate competence and knowledge.
- All applications of soil and foliar fertilizers must be recorded in a crop diary or equivalent. Records must include: location, date of application, type and quantity of fertilizer applied, the method of application, and operator.
- Any application of fertilizers in excess of national or international limits must be avoided.
- It is the responsibility of growers or grower organisations to ensure that the usage of fertilizers does not result in nitrate or phosphate enrichment of groundwater in excess of national and international limits.
- Fertilizer application machinery must be suitable for use on the land in question and be kept in good condition, with annual calibration to ensure accurate delivery of the required quantity of fertilizer.
- Fertilizer must be stored appropriately.
- Fertilizers must be stored covered in a clean, dry location where there is no risk of contamination of water sources.
- Fertilizers must not be stored with nursery stock or fresh produce.
- The use of organic manure or compost is encouraged to improve soil fertility by increasing organic matter content, improve nutrient and water retention and reduce erosion.
- The use of raw untreated human sewage sludge is prohibited.

The above is quite a list of the requirements on growers for food safety. But the market requirements do not stop there.

As well as demonstrating their commitment to maintaining consumer confidence in food safety and quality, growers need to:

- Minimise detrimental impacts on the environment, whilst conserving nature and wildlife
- Reducing the use of agrochemicals
- Improving the efficiency of natural resource use, and

- Ensuring a responsible attitude towards worker health and safety.

Some people may think farming today is a lifestyle choice. It is no longer. It is a business that is under increasing pressure to perform and to be accountable, before products can be sold.

### **The Regulators**

Although slower in their response to consumers concerns about the safety of the food chain, Australian governments are starting to demonstrate what requirements will be required for ensuring that products are safe to eat.

Unfortunately it is not just one government approach that is being promulgated. State and territory governments are also introducing their own laws and new regulatory agencies.

The Australian & New Zealand Food Authority has been the authority developing changes to the Food Safety Standards. At this time three standards will apply to food businesses.

3.1.1. Interpretation and Application

3.2.2. Food Safety Practices and General Requirements

3.2.3. Food Premises and Equipment.

Under the current definition of a food business under these standards "primary food production" is exempt.

Some people have interpreted this to mean that growers will not have to demonstrate they are producing safe food. This is a mistaken belief. Growers will need to comply, as all their customers will be caught under the provisions.

All food businesses will need to "take all practicable measures to ensure it only accepts food that is protected from the likelihood of contamination".

There has also been the development of a Model Food Act. This act was intended to be a national act that would easily be adopted by all states to ensure a national approach to food safety.

Now however only some core provisions of the act are being adopted nationally, with states and territories able to interpret other provisions themselves.

As someone who is managing a national food safety program, trying to keep up to date with all these developments is an annoying and frustrating process. Growers in fresh produce production send their product all around the country. Bananas grown in Nth Qld can end up in markets in Melbourne or Adelaide. Strawberries from Victoria are served to diners in Darwin.

It is a national market and requires uniform food safety legislation, for the industry to be competitive in domestic and export markets.

At the AFFA Working Group on Safety and Quality Systems' Equivalence meeting held in Sydney last week, this point was highlighted. It is hoped that this issue, as well as many others, will be addressed under the new National Food Industry Strategy announced by Minister Truss in March this year.

There is a real need for industry to be working closer with government. Freshcare and other industry programs are looking for a more co-operative approach to food safety legislation interpretation and adoption.

### **Need to work together**

Before coming to this conference I was sent by Doug the latest FIFA annual report and had a look at the website. It is clear you have a consumer and customer focus to your work. And see that food safety is a major issue requiring your attention.

As a major input supplier to the fresh produce industry, we will be looking to you the fertilizer industry to give us assurance that any product that is sold will be safe to use. This will require individual business and the industry organisation to working together.

The biggest lesson we have learnt as an industry is to implement your own programs. So you as an industry are in control. However this should never be done in isolation and we strongly recommend to you to work with your customers in developing your programs.

Because as stated earlier it is only by satisfying the demands of consumers and customers that we all stay in business.

We wish you success in this endeavour.

Thank you.