

Using Good Agricultural Practices Certification for your Marketing

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What is GAP (Good Agricultural Practices)? It is an assurance to our customers that thought and actions have been exercised to minimize the potential for fresh produce contamination by pathogens.

GAP encompasses 5 main areas of food safety concerns on the farm. They include worker hygiene; water quality; sanitation of equipment, supplies, and containers; manure and compost; and domestic animals and wildlife.

Reasons that this issue has escalated to the forefront of concern include the 2006 spinach issue in California which still has not been resolved, Serrano peppers from Mexico...it really wasn't tomatoes, and a myriad of other earlier issues, some of which are not even related to fresh produce.

Certification of growers in New England is in its infancy. One packing plant is certified in MA, a group of growers in northern Maine are certified because of processing and international concerns, RI has had a similar program that has certified growers participating in the farm to school program, and there have been other growers recently certified in 2009. This recent list of growers is responding to requests by Hannaford and Price Chopper markets to require certification of their growers by 2010.

In addition to the 2 supermarket chains mentioned above, there is increasing speculation that Congress may mandate GAP, school programs may mandate it on their own, and other buyers may require it of their suppliers.

A more recent issue is that large growers in the western U.S. have petitioned USDA to create voluntary national food safety marketing agreements to mirror those that they created following the 2006 spinach situation. These marketing agreements use GAP as a core but require many additional protocols and audits in addition. The downside of these agreements will be less local food on the shelves and a move from "know your farmer" to "I have no idea who my farmer is".

Our biggest fears as New England farmers is that we do not have the issues of the "big guys" that co-mingle produce from many growers but we are lumped together anyway. We have concerns about time and dollars to comply. Animal issues, water issues, and the details of traceability also are of concern.

If you really think about all the possible issues regarding food safety you might ask, "How are we all still alive"?

The bottom line is that individual growers will need to decide if they will become certified based on their customer's needs, the desire of the farmer to keep that customer, and potential peer pressure