

Visitor Food Safety Policies for a Successful Pick-Your-Own Season

Elisabeth Hodgdon, CCE-ENYCHP

With pick-your-own (PYO) apple season upon us, customers are eager to get outdoors and enjoy the fall season and orchard scenery. Welcoming visitors to the orchard requires many advanced preparations to ensure a positive experience for both customers and employees. Food safety considerations should be included in these preparations as well. In this article, I review visitor requirements for farms covered by the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule, as well as best management practices to reduce microbial contamination in PYO orchards.

Visitor policies

Does your farm have a visitor policy? FSMA considers PYO customers and school groups entering the farm property to be visitors. Farms covered by FSMA must make sure that visitors are aware of their policies. To do this, you could post your policy at the entrance of the orchard or check-in station for PYO. It's also a good idea to post your policies and expectations for customers online. This helps make sure that customers aren't surprised when they arrive. For example, a visitor should know not to bring their dog along to the orchard when your policy prohibits pets in production areas.

What should be included in the food safety policy, and what are the objectives you are trying to achieve? Following your policy should ensure that customers have a safe experience while minimizing food safety risk. Basic food safety items in the policy should include:

- 1) An advisory for customers to stay home if they are feeling ill
- 2) Wash hands prior to picking
- 3) Use provided restroom facilities, and wash hands afterward
- 4) Pets are not allowed in the orchard

Ill customers

Signage reminding customers to stay home while ill can help prevent both foodborne illness and COVID transmission. Customers experiencing stomach pain, diarrhea, fever, cough, sore throat, and/or vomiting should not visit the farm.

Restroom and handwashing facilities

Toilets and handwashing facilities must be accessible to PYO customers if you are subject to FSMA. Consider the flow of traffic and set up portable toilets and handwashing stations at the entrance to the orchard. Avoid requiring customers to take long walks to find toilets. Post signs in the orchard directing customers toward the restrooms and prohibiting use of the nearby woods/fields as an alternative spot to "go to the bathroom." A restroom facility inside a farm store may suffice for small operations as long as it is immediately accessible from the orchard. If your farm has a petting zoo, provide handwashing stations at the zoo exit and encourage customers to visit the zoo after (not before) picking their apples.

Check regularly and restock supplies such as soap and toilet paper as needed, especially on weekends when the orchard is busy. Provide trash cans next to toilets and handwashing stations for paper towels and other garbage, and dump it regularly. Assign these tasks to specific employees and provide a standard operating procedure and checklist to help ensure that the job is completed consistently. Be sure that the handwashing stations are refilled with potable water, and check with your portable toilet provider to be sure they are following your expectations for service. Keep your portable toilet provider's phone number handy if immediate service is needed (e.g. the toilet tips over or something breaks). Install pictorial signage near sinks to remind customers to wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Laminated bilingual signs are available for purchase from the National Good Agricultural Practices website (see "sources" below).

Keep in mind that handwashing stations do not need to be expensive. Simple, do-it-yourself handwashing station designs are available using readily available materials. See "sources" below for more details.

Pets in the orchard

Pets pose safety risks on farms for multiple reasons. They can contaminate produce with pathogens. Pets can frighten livestock, petting zoo animals, and other customers. As a farm owner, you are not obliged to let customers bring their pets (non-service animals) onto the farm. A "no pets" policy should be posted predominantly at the farm and online. As a compromise, some farms have opted to create a dog park or designated area for pets away from production areas.

If a customer brings a service animal onto the farm, you may legally ask only two questions:

- 1) Is the service animal required because of a disability?
- 2) What work or task has the service animal been trained to perform?

The rights of individuals with disabilities and their service animals (dogs and ponies) are covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), while comfort and emotional support animals are not. Legally, you may not ask the individual to disclose their disability or show you documentation proving the service animal's status. If a customer with a service animal comes to the farm, be sure to advise them on specific policies regarding service animals, including where they may be allowed on the farm.

Ensuring policy success

At the start of the season, all employees should be trained and familiarized with the policy and your expectations for facility maintenance. A visitor policy should be revisited annually, preferably at the end of the season when issues are still fresh in the mind. The policy should be revised as needed and updated in the farm's food safety plan. Each farm is unique, and your policy should be personalized to reflect your own operation's food safety risks and other considerations.

Sources and Additional Reading:

“No Pets Allowed” and Other Rules for a Berry Safe Pick Your Own Experience, by Connie Fisk, former Produce Safety Alliance Regional Extension Associate.

<https://conniefiskfoodadventures.wordpress.com/2019/03/01/no-pets-allowed/>

Improving Handwashing Stations, by Chris Callahan and Andy Chamberlin, UVM Extension.

<https://blog.uvm.edu/cwcallah/2020/06/09/improving-handwashing-stations/>

National Good Agricultural Practices Program Educational Materials, including links to purchase laminated handwashing and toilet use signs. <https://gaps.cornell.edu/educational-materials/>

Are You Required to Let the Public Bring Their Animals Onto Your Retail Farm?, by Wes Kline and Meredith Melendez, Rutgers University. <https://plant-pest-advisory.rutgers.edu/are-you-required-to-let-the-public-bring-their-animals-onto-your-retail-farm/>



Pick-your-own check in station with handwashing stations and visitor policies prominently displayed

