

Start the Season off on the Right Foot with Food Safety Training for Farm Workers

By Elisabeth Hodgdon, ENYCHP

The beginning of the growing season is one of the most hectic times of the year. It's a race between weather events to get fields prepared and crops in the ground. New employees are settling into their positions. Before things get too busy, it's important to provide food safety training to workers so that good habits are formed early in the season. For farms covered by the federal Food Safety Modernization Act's (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule, there are specific requirements for worker training.

Who needs to be trained?

- At least one supervisor from the farm must complete the Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training Course.
- All workers who work with and handle covered produce (produce commonly consumed raw) and/or food contact surfaces must be trained prior to working with produce. These include paid employees, volunteers, and family members who work in production fields, harvest crops, and wash and pack produce.
- Returning workers need to be trained again each year.

Which training topics are required by FSMA?

FSMA states that training must include:

- 1) Principles of food hygiene and food safety;
- 2) Personal health and hygiene practices, and how they can impact produce safety; and
- 3) Any other required practices by FSMA that are relevant to the worker's job.

Incorporate the following information into your training to meet these requirements:

- The "whys" of food safety practices: Pathogens such as *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, and *Listeria* can contaminate produce through improper handwashing, wildlife, livestock, standing water, and other sources. These pathogens can make us very sick. It's important that workers understand why food safety practices are important, for public health, the farm's reputation and sales, federal requirements, and voluntary audits.
- Workers must use designated restroom facilities. They must be trained to wash their hands before working with produce and after using the restroom, eating, drinking, smoking, working with animals, or whenever they may be contaminated. Show workers where restrooms and hand washing facilities are located around the farm. Keep them well stocked with supplies to facilitate these practices.
- Workers should wear clean clothes to work, and change or clean clothes as appropriate when moving from livestock-related tasks to working with produce.
- Workers must know how to recognize symptoms of communicable illnesses that can impact produce safety, and that they should not to work with produce or food contact surfaces when they are ill. If a worker is ill with diarrhea, vomiting, fever, jaundice, or other symptoms, they should inform their supervisor. They should stay home, or be assigned tasks that do not require them to be in contact with other workers, produce, or food contact surfaces.
- Workers must be trained to recognize and not harvest dropped produce and produce that is visibly contaminated. Produce contaminated with feces, chew marks, or other damage should not be harvested.

- Training must include recognizing and correcting problems with harvest containers and equipment, or to let supervisors know when these problems occur. Depending on the worker's specific job on the farm, there may be other practices that are part of the Produce Safety Rule that should be included in the training. For example, workers in packing areas may require glove and jewelry policy training, and harvest workers will need to know that they cannot eat or drink while harvesting in the field.

What are the requirements for visitors?

Visitors on the farm include consultants, school or tour groups, pick-your-own customers, friends and family, and anyone else who enters the farm fields, packing area, or other areas of operation. The Produce Safety Rule requires that you make visitors aware of your farm food safety policies. This is most simply achieved through signage at the entrance of the farm, or the information can be relayed verbally. Visitors must be provided with restroom and handwashing facilities. It's also a good idea to have a visitor log-in sheet, although this is not required.



Figure 1: Let workers know that they should wash their hands after using the restroom, eating, drinking, smoking, working with animals, applying sunscreen, touch their cell phone, or any other time they may become contaminated. Simple field hand washing stations such as this one can be constructed cheaply from wood, plastic water jugs, and other materials.

Are records required to document worker training?

Yes. The Produce Safety Rule indicates that records must be kept of worker training. The record must include the trainees' names, date of training, and topics covered. As with other records required by FSMA, the record should also include the farm name and address, and should be signed off and dated by a supervisor.

Are resources available to assist farms with worker training?

Many worker training resources are available to farms, including videos, guides for farm supervisors, signage, record templates, and more. Keep in mind that the most effective training programs incorporate multiple delivery methods and include farm-specific information from you. All farms operate differently, and reliance on a video only goes so far to ensure that workers know what is expected of them on your farm. Workers must receive training in a language that they understand. The Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training Course is available in Spanish, and additional worker training resources are available in Spanish, Hmong, Creole, Arabic, and other languages.



Taking the time to develop and deliver an effective worker training program is an investment in safe, high quality produce. Workers are on the front lines of food safety on the farm. Using a combination of videos, crew meetings, hands-on training, carefully placed signage, and leading by example all help workers develop consistent food safety habits.

Figure 2: Postharvest workers should be trained to operate wash equipment, be familiar with cleaning and sanitizing procedures for food contact surfaces, understand jewelry and glove policies, and other requirements for washing and packing produce.

Contact Elisabeth Hodgdon (eh528@cornell.edu) if you would like assistance finding a specific worker training resource.

Recommended resources:

- Essentials of Food Safety for Farm Workers: Video series developed by the Cornell Vegetable Program to train farm supervisors and workers, including key information for FSMA and GAPs compliance. https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLMxaHBxUI9qb58ZrNMMyf5Lg_ZqD-ajJRf
- Fruits, Vegetables, and Food Safety: Health and Hygiene on the Farm: Video by the National GAPs Program and Cornell University. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-HeYZ9IEUwU> (Also available in Spanish, Creole, and Hmong for purchase at <https://nysaes-bookstore.myshopify.com/collections/gaps/products/fruits-vegetables-and-food-safety-health-and-hygiene-on-the-farm>)
- Basics of Worker Training: Video from Michigan State University Extension explaining to farm supervisors the minimum worker training requirements for FSMA. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkPKPmSGgDs>
- Starting a Produce Safety Worker Training Program on Your Farm. An outline of FSMA requirements from the University of Maine Cooperative Extension. <https://extension.umaine.edu/publications/4283e/>
- Records Required by the FSMA Produce Safety Rule. A fact sheet with record templates by the Produce Safety Alliance. <https://producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu/sites/producesafetyalliance.cornell.edu/files/shared/documents/Records-Required-by-the-FSMA-PSR.pdf>