

## **GAPs on Your Farm**

**By Phil Tocco**

As food systems become more globalized, the need for traceability becomes even more important. With country of origin labeling requirements, the recent foodborne pathogen outbreaks and a continuing demand on the part of the consumer to know who specifically grew their food, retailers are quickly adopting standards to ensure a safe and traceable food supply. The goal of traceability is to be able to quickly find from what country, what farm, even which field, a particular piece of produce originated.

A fact that is often lost in the discussion regarding these standards is who actually is requiring them. These are *not* regulations forced on growers by the government. These are standards placed on growers by buyers and meeting them is a prerequisite to selling produce to companies. There is no governmental oversight of this program, but oversight through several very large international trade associations. Irrespective of government action, growers will need to adopt these standards. If you sell produce through retail channels, you will be affected by these standards.

Currently, much is being done with large scale growers to develop methods to trace back produce to farm fields. Growers are writing Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) manuals for their farms and having them certified by a third party. Manuals contain detailed accountings of how procedures are carried out to maintain safe food from the field until the produce is shipped from the farm. The goal is to document many of the common sense things farmers do to ensure a safe food supply.

In order for smaller growers to remain selling wholesale to retailers, they may wish to emulate these practices on a smaller scale. A good first step is to write a GAP manual. In most cases, smaller growers are already performing much of what would be required by distributors. The difference often is documentation of performance. One helpful tool for smaller growers to write a GAP manual on their own can be found at <http://intranet.primuslabs.com/igap/> (Link verified XX) . This website walks small growers through the process of writing a GAP manual. It is free and can get you started.

Those growers wishing to be officially GAP certified would still need to complete a GAP manual, but their farm and manual would need to be audited by an auditor corresponding to the type of GAP certification they are looking for.

There are several different “brands” of GAP certification each with their own special requirements and certification agency. Primus GAP is one example of a brand of GAP certification. A particular retailer or processor may not accept your product unless you are Primus GAP certified. USDA GAP is another brand of certification. If you sell produce to the USDA, you need to be USDA GAP certified. The type of GAP certification required is wholly the choice of the produce buying company. In some cases, a grower may need two or more certifications to sell to several different buyers. ***It is best to ask your produce buyer what certification they want first before even starting a GAP manual.***

All certifications cost time and money. You need to gather the information ahead of time and maybe adjust handling practices. You need to keep more records of your management. You need to pay to have the auditor spend a day with you on farm at the busiest time of your year, harvest. The total process may cost as much as \$2000 in actual money and more than that in devoting time to the process. If you sell to a retailer or

processor, good communication is the key to effectively meeting the certification needs of your buyer. Ask them what brand of GAP certification they want. In many cases, there are only marginal differences between GAP certifications, but they are different and not interchangeable. ***Ask your produce buyer what certification they want first before beginning work on certification.***

Up until now, resources for small growers who have questions about meeting GAP requirements have been few. In an effort to help small growers through the process, Michigan State University Extension is training a number of Extension Educators throughout the state to help walk individuals through the process. The hope is that these educators can answer questions and help small growers inexpensively to reduce certification costs from several thousand dollars to several hundred dollars.

One of the biggest points of confusion thus far has been whether or not there is a single GAP Certifier endorsed by the federal government that is good for every producer in every situation. Sadly there is none. A recent retailer's summit sponsored by Michigan State University and Michigan Department of Agriculture brought to light this and other difficulties farmers are having with how the current system is set up. The summit was eye opening to the retailers who began to understand some barriers to full implementation, including cost to growers and the lack of qualified auditors.

Federal and State laws around this important issue are very fluid. As of this writing, it is unclear whether the Federal government's proposed rules will be more stringent than a retail industry imposed third party auditing. In addition, as retailers work through implementing these standards they may migrate to a more uniform standard. To find out more about this emerging topic, feel free to contact MSU Extension and these specially trained educators for the latest information.

Stay tuned for upcoming workshops to help in putting together GAP manuals. Despite the uncertainty, documenting good agricultural practices and keeping accurate records are not just proactive, they are good business.