ONE-PAGE BRIEF: Competitive Grant Report M2010-14

LEOPOLD CENTER FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Impact of GAPs and post-harvest handling practices certificate trainings on producers’ on-farm food safety behaviors and perceptions of customers’ assurance

Abstract: Food producers received training in on-farm food safety and proper agricultural practices. The intended result was to alleviate consumer concerns about food safety and assure wholesale buyers of food purity.

Findings from the project indicated the growing need for food safety checklists, verification of safety protocols implemented, and third-party audit information. Results also suggest that requirements by wholesale buyers will continue to drive the need for food safety and auditing information in the marketplace. Despite national media attention about fresh produce safety, little concern was displayed among Iowa farmers’ market shoppers.

What was done and why?

This project sought to determine whether evidence of producer training in on-farm food safety and good agricultural practices (GAPs) resulted in buyers receiving food safety assurances for their products from local growers. Fruit and vegetable producers were surveyed to determine their concerns about food safety and interest in training to lower their risk and improve market access. A multidisciplinary team of faculty and staff experts in food safety and production from Iowa State University units was formed to address these questions.

The project addressed four objectives:

1. Review fresh produce GAPs/on-farm food safety training and assurance procedures used in other states.
2. Develop and conduct GAPs and Post-harvest Best Practice workshops for farmers who sell directly to consumers and wholesale to retail foodservices, farmers who want to enter these marketing streams, and aspiring fruit and vegetable farmers.
3. Assess whether training results in knowledge, attitude and behavior changes with regards to GAPs/on-farm food safety practices.
4. Identify whether documentation of GAPs/on-farm food safety training results in increased acceptance and sales to consumers and retail foodservices.

What did we learn?

Vegetable and fruit farmers need to continue improving their understanding of farm food safety issues and risks and how to minimize the potential for food safety problems in their businesses. Training sessions, workshops and self-guided learning tools to help growers implement practices to minimize food-safety risk are needed. For example, electronically available curricula and tools, including the On-farm Food Safety Project on-line planning tool, released in 2011, (FamilyFarmed.org) should be evaluated for use and applicability for Iowa growers. In addition, growers need to improve their post-harvest handling practices, both to maintain produce quality and to reduce food safety risk. Formalized practices are needed in the form of on-farm food safety plans, as markets increasingly are requiring documentation of knowledge and implementation of good agricultural practices. Because it is difficult to attract growers to day-long workshops, shorter sessions and/or multi-segment trainings should be offered.