Introduction

Across the United States, fruit and vegetable (i.e., produce) farms are navigating food safety regulations and audit programs that set standards to reduce foodborne illness and minimize the risk of contaminated produce entering the marketplace. Specifically, the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule (PSR), a U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulation, sets national standards for the safe growing, harvesting, packing, and holding of fruits and vegetables. In response, state agencies/departments have implemented produce safety programs that are both educational and regulatory in nature to support the implementation and oversight of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule in their respective states. Simultaneously, some buyers are requiring fresh fruit and vegetable suppliers to participate in third-party produce safety audit programs, such as the national USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and regional Community Accreditation for Produce Safety (CAPS) program. While these audit programs' primary constituents are produce farms, states have the opportunity to engage with buyers of fresh fruits and vegetables to:

- Help ensure buyers and growers have the same general knowledge of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule to reduce confusion and/or uncertainty in the marketplace.
- Explain the role of state produce programs in implementing the Produce Safety Rule.
- Help ensure buyers and growers have the same general knowledge of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule to reduce confusion and/or uncertainty in the marketplace.
- Express buyer requirements to better support produce farms in the marketplace.
- Increase the number of outlets for state produce safety program information sharing to create additional opportunities for produce farms to recognize the resources available.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFM) believes that developing relationships and increasing collaboration with buyers of produce will more holistically support produce farms and aid in the implementation of the Produce Safety Rule.

Vermont Produce Buyer Outreach Initiative

In August 2019, the VAAFM Produce Program launched a Buyer Outreach Initiative to begin communicating with buyers of fresh Vermont produce about on-farm produce safety. VAAFM approached this outreach effort both seeking to raise awareness among buyers about the Produce Safety Rule and regional produce safety accreditation programs and to learn from buyers about their produce safety requirements in order to inform market development and market access work with Vermont farms.

During this first phase of the initiative, VAAFM focused outreach efforts toward buyers who are most likely to directly interface with Vermont produce growers. In this regard, VAAFM prioritized reaching produce distributors, aggregators (e.g., food hubs), local retailers (e.g., food cooperatives), and food service management companies. Within these organizations, VAAFM sought out conversations with individuals who were involved with produce procurement and food safety requirements.

The relationships that VAAFM builds with buyers will support the Vermont Produce Program's efforts to help grow produce safety on Vermont farms through increased awareness of produce safety improvement efforts along the supply chain.
Determine project scope.

- How many buyers does your team hope to engage with? How does your team want to prioritize outreach? Estimate staff capacity for outreach and set boundaries for the scope of work.

2. Build a buyer contact list.

- The contact list should contain business contact information and any additional information the program plans to capture. When possible, utilize existing business listings and contact sheets, such as the Secretary of State business registry or any contact lists held by agriculture market development staff in your state. Figure 1.0 (below) provides examples of information to capture.

Establish standard outreach questions. Questions will be used to facilitate buyer meetings and should align with the information that will be collected and tracked in the contact list.

Develop a buyer factsheet.

A high-level overview of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule, state implementation, and other topics deemed appropriate.

Develop an initial outreach email. The first email you send to established contacts should introduce your produce safety program, the outreach purpose, and any action items.

VAAFM is committed to supporting growers to reduce on-farm food safety risks and understands that cost is a major barrier for growers. Specifically, in the 2019 Local Food Safety Collaborative Needs Assessment Survey Report, local food producers ranked the top three barriers to implementing food safety practices as 1) Financial Resources, 2) Time and 3) Farm/Facility Infrastructure. In light of these findings, VAAFM informed buyers of the Community Accreditation for Produce Safety (CAPS) program, a regional produce safety accreditation program that offers a third-party audit comparable to the USDA-GAP program often at a lower cost to Vermont and regional growers.

Contact Information
- Business name/address
- Category (e.g., retailer, distributor, aggregator)
- Primary food safety contact name/role
- Website URL

Call Scheduling
- Information shared/date shared
- Call scheduled
- Call completed
- Number of communications sent/received

Additional Information
- Prior knowledge of the Produce Safety Rule
- Produce safety requirements for suppliers
- Produce safety audit reimbursement (Y/N)

Figure 1.0

Resources Developed for Initial Outreach

- Note: URLs provided below are case sensitive.
- Standard outreach questions
  Example: go.usa.gov/adcLq
- FSMA Produce Safety Rule Buyer Factsheet
  Example: go.usa.gov/adcQz
- Initial outreach letter
  Example: go.usa.gov/adcQh

Suggested Follow-up Resources & Information

- Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training Course
- On-Farm Readiness Review information
- Technical assistance resources and contacts for produce growers (e.g., University Extension staff)
- State/regional produce safety certification/ accreditation program information

Outgoing calls

34 Total businesses contacted 20 Total buyer meetings completed 18 Buyers requested information about the regional food safety accreditation program, CAPS 10 Hours in buyer meetings over the course of 2 months 157 Outgoing calls and emails sent

3. Send outreach letter and factsheet to contacts.

In some cases, VAAFM reached out to businesses multiple times to obtain contact information and schedule a meeting.

4. Staff conference calls.

VAAFM recommends at least two produce program staff join the conference call in order to adequately facilitate and take notes.

Follow-up after the meeting.

Program staff can offer suggestions for additional resources and information based on the types of questions the buyer asks. These can be included in a follow-up email to the business contacts.

Vermont Produce Buyer Outreach Outcomes

This section describes notable outcomes from this project. The Vermont Produce Program is available to discuss information in further detail and provide additional project findings.

There was a general lack of understanding among buyers regarding FSMA Produce Safety Rule implementation and oversight. Examples of questions that buyers asked during meetings include:

- How does the FSMA Produce Safety Rule apply to my operation?
- Can buyers obtain a farm’s inspection form?
- Can a farm continue to operate if they receive an observation during an inspection?
- What is the difference between a food safety audit and a Produce Safety Rule inspection? Can any produce farm request an inspection?
- Is there anything we need to do, or can do, to support this effort?
- How much of the State’s efforts with the FSMA Produce Safety Rule are educationally focused?

The majority of buyers expressed appreciation to VAAFM for initiating outreach and showed willingness to share information, resources and state program contact information with their fruit and vegetable suppliers.

VAAFM was surprised by some of the standards accepted by businesses; specifically, one business stated that they accept organic certification in lieu of a third-party food safety audit. Alternatively, some businesses who do not require any third-party audits will:

- Conduct site visits to supplying produce farms to verify and assess produce safety practices; and/or,
- Include a food safety component on their new vendor form to allow farms to self-identify food safety practices.

Food safety practices reviewed during site visits and on vendor forms are often re-verified on an annual basis, dependent on business capacity.

**NOTE:**

*8 retailers; 5 distributors; 4 aggregators; 2 food service management companies; 1 foodbank.*