The Value of Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) Training and Implementation

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The roots of Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) trace themselves back to the 1998 FDA *Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables*. Though this was voluntary guidance offered to fruit and vegetable growers, many buyers demanded the implementation of GAPs as a purchase requirement. In 2011, the passage of the Food Safety Modernization Act’s Produce Rule proposed the first ever regulations pertaining to fresh produce production. As requirements and pressure to adapt GAPs have evolved so too has the research and technology that advance our knowledge and ability to reduce microbial risks on the farm. Because of the ever changing nature of GAPs, a key part to GAPs understanding and implementation is training.

New York has had an active GAPs training program for produce farmers since 1999, but as with research and technology, our training evolved to meet growers’ needs for having a farm food safety plan. Developing a written farm food safety plan is valuable because it helps guide the implementation of GAPs and is required if the farm needs to have a third party audit to meet buyer demands. In December of 2009, personnel from the National GAPs Program at Cornell University in collaboration with Cornell Cooperative Extension Regional Fruit and Vegetable Teams and the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets began a new multi-day GAPs training program for produce growers in New York. To date, 689 individuals representing over 350 farms, fruit and vegetable processors, marketers, crop consultants, and extension educators from New York as well as other states, have attended the trainings.

Given the time, effort, and expense of both conducting and attending the trainings, it was critically important to evaluate the trainings to make sure they were productive and valuable. Every training was evaluated after each day of instruction to determine if growers found the information valuable and made some progress towards understanding GAPs and developing a written farm food safety plan. A long term evaluation was completed by surveying training participants at least 6 months after they finished the multi-day course to determine what progress they had made, costs they had incurred, market access impacts, and assess other indicators to determine the long term impact of attending the training.

In the spring of 2014, 80 past participants, each representing a different farm, were asked to complete a 20 question survey administered by Cornell Cooperative Extension personnel. Though a formal research paper will be written, this summary is intended to share some preliminary findings from both the training evaluations and the long-term survey with growers since there will be additional GAPs training opportunities this winter throughout New York and the information may be valuable to growers attempting to decide if attending a GAPs training would benefit them and their farms.

For more information on GAPs, visit www.gaps.cornell.edu.
A frequent question asked by many growers is “How much will implementing GAPs cost?”. This is a good but very complex question because it includes the time to develop the farm food safety plan, establish record keeping practices, train workers, and in some cases, hire more people or invest in infrastructure and equipment. This complexity means that no two farms will have the same costs, but it is a very important question so a large focus of the long-term survey was to try to estimate what types of costs growers have incurred as a result of implementing GAPs. We also thought it was important to ask growers what they thought GAPs would cost BEFORE they implemented any practices since the fear of what it might cost often impacts a grower’s progress towards implementation. The initial analysis of the data shows that there is a positive gain for investing in GAPs, regardless of farm size, meaning that money spent implementing GAPs results in larger returns despite the initial and on-going costs. This benefit seems to be mostly due to increased market access. Unfortunately, we are still analyzing the data at this point, but we will report more specifically on the economic impact when it is finished.

Based on the evaluations, both short and long-term, the multi-day GAPs training programs are helping growers increase their understanding of produce safety issues, develop a written farm food safety plan, and implement practices to reduce microbial risks. In New York State, there are many multi-day GAPs trainings scheduled for this winter if you would like to participate. Please visit www.gaps.cornell.edu to find the dates, locations, and registration information. If you have any questions about the evaluation or surveys, please contact Elizabeth Newbold, ejn22@cornell.edu or 315-536-5123.