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NEWS RELEASE

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FOOD SAFETY AND GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES OUTLINED AT WORKSHOP: Making It Work on a Real Farm

by Connie Pantle

Lawrence, Kans.—"Food safety is not just a legal responsibility—it is a moral and ethical obligation," said Chris Blanchard, the keynote speaker at a recent workshop in Lawrence. The workshop, "Post-Harvest Handling, Food Safety & GAPs: Making It Work on a Real Farm", was hosted by the Kansas Rural Center and K-State Research and Extension in Douglas County.

Mercedes Taylor-Puckett, the Kansas Rural Center's Local Foods and Farmers Market Project Coordinator, said implementing Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) on fruit and vegetable farms helps reduce the risk of microbial contamination in the food supply, no matter the size of the farm. "Simply put, we all play a role in food safety. Contamination can occur all along the food system," she said.

Taylor-Puckett said KRC experienced a significant up-tick in requests for food safety workshops and resources due to the recent passage of the national Food Safety Modernization Act.

"We're also seeing strong interest in local purchasing by restaurants, grocers, schools and other institutions. These businesses want to feel confident that the food they're buying from our region's farms is as safe as possible," she said.

According to the United States Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service website, the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) Audit Verification Program includes three major sections: GAPs which examines farm practices; GHPs which concentrate on packing facilities, storage facilities and wholesale distribution centers, and lastly, food defense protocols.

USDA offers a voluntary, audit -based program that verifies fruit and vegetable growers are following the recommendations made in the Food and Drug Administration's "Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables".

The audit includes an inspection from a USDA official who completes a step-by-step, points-based checklist based on the grower's operation. The checklist includes questions related to food safety with weighted answers. Also included is the method to verify completion of each step—typically through documentation, record keeping, or a policy or standard.

Blanchard, who grows 20 acres of certified organic vegetables on Rock Spring Farm in Northeast Iowa, recently completed the audit through USDA and knows first hand what it takes to work through the process.

He said when he decided to pursue certification through the GAPs/GHPs audit, his first step was to develop a food safety plan for the farm. Blanchard said he started writing the plan early in the process so that he could use it as a working document—making notes along the way to improve the food safety plan. The plan includes everything from field maps to traceability procedures to response plans for various hazards.

Most notably, Blanchard said it is important to record what you do and how you do it. "Certification comes down to paperwork. If you don't write it down, it doesn't matter. You need to document everything you do related to food safety," he said.

Blanchard said he didn't change much of what he was already doing to satisfy the audit— probably less than 5 percent. "We were already doing these things, we just had to put the system in place to verify we were doing it," he said.

One of those systems is an accountability system—he said his employees sign off on every step of the harvesting and packing process. Using his forms as an example, Blanchard explained that he combines plans and logs onto one sheet for ease in record keeping. "Records are kept in line with the work flow," he said.

Blanchard also follows through with a traceability procedure. Each product can be traced back to the field it was harvested from and forward to the wholesale outlet using a lot code. The unique lot code includes a date code, a step code and a batch code allowing Blanchard to trace it through every step.

Before an emergency would occur, Blanchard tests his system by conducting and recording a mock recall. He calls the buyer and asks them to identify the product. He asks how much inventory remains and how much was sold. This allows him to verify he can trace his product one step forward and one step back. "Does it work? If not, how can I make it work?"

Blanchard explained that food safety is important to him as a producer. "We need to take enough steps to reduce contamination," he said.

He said food safety should be a concern for all producers as well as consumers. "The infectious dose for common pathogens is much lower than we ever thought," he said. He said this is especially concerning when you consider the immune system of 20 to 33 percent of the population is compromised.

Most of the procedures on Rock Spring Farm are written to avoid or reduce the risk from potential sources of microbial contamination and satisfy the GAPs and GHPs requirements. "We can not avoid bacteria, but we can attempt to keep bacteria separate," Blanchard said.

According to Blanchard, a pre-harvest assessment is conducted in each field and any signs of wild animals are noted on harvest logs. If feces are found, vegetables are not harvested in the vicinity of the scat. "What can I control? I can't control birds flying over, but I can control harvesting lettuce with bird poop on it," he said.

Other simple steps he takes to avoid contamination include using potable water to irrigate and wash vegetables as well as adding an antimicrobial additive to reduce pathogens in the wash water. Blanchard said they also clean and sanitize wash- tubs daily.

Managing manure is another important step in avoiding contamination. Blanchard uses only composted manure as a soil amendment. He said he purchases manure only from producers meeting National Organic Program standards.

Blanchard also added that perception is very important to the consumer. Five years following the E. coli outbreak, spinach sales are still down. He said the USDA GAPs and GHPs audit is a way of conveying to the customer that you are doing what you can to reduce their risk.

The workshop, hosted by KRC and K-State Research and Extension-Douglas County, was sponsored by: the Kansas Department of Commerce Rural Development; USDA Risk Management Agency; Kansas Department of Agriculture; Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops/Kansas-SARE; LiveWell Lawrence; The Merc; Earth Flowers; Growing For Market, Lawrence Farmers Market; Pachamama's; Free State Brewing Company; Local Burger; Hy-Vee, and the Douglas County Food Policy Council.

Sidebar:

Chris Blanchard's 10 Steps to Safer Produce

1. Wash your hands
2. Sick people don't work.
3. Shut out animals (including pets, rodents, birds and insects)
4. Clean/Sanitize
5. Test your water
6. Wear the right clothes
7. Manage your manure
8. Separate clean vegetables from dirty vegetables
9. Implement recall Systems
10. Wash your hands again