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What you need to know about Leafy Greens food safety

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As the fall season is upon us, the leafy greens farming community would like to share some updates on the California LGMA Food Safety Program. The LGMA brings farmers together to make lettuce and leafy greens safer and in 2021 much has already been accomplished by the organization and its members who produce over 30 billion servings of lettuce and leafy greens a year.

The LGMA food safety standards were designed to be updated with new science and information and this year; several significant changes were made. The majority of these changes were a result of information gleaned from FDA foodborne illness investigations. Additional changes came as a part of a systematic review process. The food safety standards update process in 2021 had had the broadest stakeholder participation to date including buyers, regulators, and scientists.

The most notable change for 2021 is a first ever requirement for pathogen testing. LGMA members are now required to conduct pre-harvest testing of product grown in fields with elevated risk factors such as proximity to animals. The new testing and sampling protocol calls for collecting 60 samples totaling a minimum of 1,500 grams per acre. The testing must be done four to seven days before harvest.

Another new requirement for LGMA members is an enhanced risk assessment. When planting leafy greens, LGMA members must now conduct an additional environmental assessment that is focused on risks of adjacent and nearby lands. A new tool is almost complete that will help LGMA members to standardize this risk assessment and calculation.

Food safety investigations are now required and standardized. If LGMA members encounter any kind of food safety incident — a positive pathogen test for example — they must conduct a food safety investigation also called a root cause analysis. The purpose of this investigation is to quickly work to find out what caused the food safety issue, so that it can be corrected and eliminated in the future. LGMA members have been provided with resources that show how and why to conduct these investigations.

A new approach to soil amendments and crop inputs

LGMA's new requirements for practices involving things like compost and fertilizers were developed with tremendous input from growers, industry experts, scientists, regulators and companies who sell these products. The list of products was updated to reflect new materials being used and then they were re-categorized into five distinct and risk-based categories.

If you aren't a food safety expert or scientist what does all of this mean? It means that LGMA members are growing their leafy greens to a standard that exceeds the FDA Produce Safety Rule and that is using the latest science and technology to make lettuce even safer. LGMA certified members also undergo government audits multiple times a year to verify compliance with these standards. And every certified member must correct any issues identified in an audit — that means 100-percent compliance. You can find a list of certified LGMA members at www.lgma.ca.gov/certified-members

