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New Jersey Department of Agriculture has safety on its mind

By

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The New Jersey Department of Agriculture offers voluntary inspection and grading activities related to fresh fruits, vegetables, seafood, poultry and poultry products. These programs are administered under cooperative agreements with the United States Department of Agriculture and the United States Department of Commerce to enhance the marketability of these commodities for producers and the food industry while assuring consumers who purchase these inspected commodities that they meet established standards.



“Food safety is obviously of the utmost importance and those who purchase Jersey Fresh can be assured that every step has been taken to keep their food safe,” said Joe Atchison III, NJDA’s director of marketing and development division. “A recent CDC report had noted that in 2020, foodborne illnesses decreased by nearly 25 percent from the three-year average.”

The Jersey Fresh Quality Grading Program operates in cooperation with the Jersey Fresh marketing program. This voluntary program, established in 1985, enhances regional and national marketability of more than 80 New Jersey commodities and assures consumers and wholesale buyers that the products meet or exceed U.S. No. 1 standards.

“One of our big initiatives was our Farm Produce Safety website, which provides information and frequently asked questions concerning the Food Safety Modernization Act, the Produce Safety Rule and Compliance and Enforcement, Grower Training and Third-Party Audit Training, and includes a Produce Safety Rule survey,” Atchison said.

Along with the FDA compliance timelines and other information about FSMA and the Produce Safety Rule, the website also features links for what to expect during a regulatory inspection, records required by the FSMA Produce Safety Rule, an inspection checklist, grower and third-party audit training courses, and an on-farm readiness review. There is also a link to a survey for those who grow, harvest, store and pack produce.

“The greatest challenge is to identify all potential sources of contamination and to adapt farm practices to prevent the spread of pathogens of human health significance,” Atchison said. “The sources can include humans, animals, biological soil amendments, agricultural water, tools, equipment and buildings. Growers need to develop and follow a comprehensive food-safety plan based on the unique challenges of their farm operation and commodities grown.”

The NJDA provides resources and educational opportunities through a cooperative agreement with the FDA for the FSMA Produce Safety Rule Program.

“A great place to start is by taking the PSA Grower Training, which helps growers to identify the sources and routes of contamination,” Atchison said. “Growers may also participate in interactive and confidential On-Farm Readiness Review consultations coordinated with Rutgers Cooperative Extension. The NJDA Produce Safety website is a great source for information on farm food safety.”

The concern for food safety has also impacted the packaging choices New Jersey growers utilize.

“There are many scenarios based on the type of produce being packed,” Atchison said. “Some growers are field packing into single-use cardboard and wooden crates. Others may harvest into baskets or lugs so the produce can be washed and/or sorted before being packed. These intermediary containers, which are food contact surfaces, must be cleaned and sanitized to prevent the transfer of microorganisms to the produce. The main concern is to be sure the harvest and packing materials are not contributing to the contamination of produce.”

The most important concept, according to the NJDA, is to be proactive and prevent contamination in the first place. By developing and following a food-safety plan, the grower can identify and mitigate potential contamination. A traceability plan is also important to keep potentially contaminated produce out of commerce.

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