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**Safety a priority of the New Jersey Department of Agriculture**

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By

Keith Loria

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New Jersey continues to be one of the leading states in produce safety. In fact, the [New Jersey Department of Agriculture](#) carries out approximately 100 produce safety inspections, educational on farm readiness reviews, and 175 USDA third-party audits annually.

“It is our priority to visit as many produce farms as possible and provide educational, technical, and regulatory support to help ensure a safe quality product,” said Joe Atchison III, NJDA’s marketing and development division director.

The NJDA provides oversight and guidance in all areas of agricultural production, with an emphasis on grading standards and food safety. The department provides inspection and grading activities related to fresh fruits and vegetables.

“These programs are administered under cooperative agreements with the Food & Drug Administration, 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 and assure consumers who purchase these inspected commodities that they meet established standards,” Atchison said.

One of the NJDA’S most notable initiatives is its On-Farm Produce Safety website, which provides information regarding the Food Safety Modernization Act, the Produce Safety Rule, required food safety training for growers, third-party audit trainings, and FSMA compliance and enforcement. The website also features FDA Compliance timelines, what to expect during a regulatory inspection, records required by the FSMA Produce Safety Rule and On-Farm Readiness Reviews.

“The greatest challenge is education and outreach to provide hands-on evaluation of food safety programs for all growers, regardless of if a farm is exempt from the FSMA Produce Safety Rule,” Atchison said. “NJDA representatives partner with Rutgers Cooperative Extension and travel to New Jersey farms to help the growers identify potential sources of contamination to produce, and to develop a comprehensive food safety plan to maintain the integrity of their produce.”

The NJDA Bureau of Inspection and Grading has continued to provide the highest quality service to constituents throughout the pandemic. The Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program performed inspections of both imported and domestic produce ensuring compliance with USDA Grade Standards. Produce Safety Inspections, USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), Good Handling Practices (GHP) and Harmonized Audits were conducted at farms, cold storages, distributors and brokerage firms throughout the state.

Chris Kleinguenther, the NJDA bureau chief of inspection and enforcement, oversees all the food safety programs for the state of New Jersey.

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“Chris is the principal investigator for the FSMA Produce Safety Rule food safety program,” Atchison said. “Other programs he oversees include the GAP, GHP and Harmonized Audits and Country of Origin Labeling inspections. NJDA has cross-trained its auditors and inspectors to operate in many of these programs. Chris also communicates and cooperates with the appropriate authorities when and if the need should arise.”

The main challenge with food safety protocols is that most farms are not enclosed and standardized, such as a manufacturing facility would be.

“Workers are mainly seasonal and must be trained in food safety, health and hygiene annually,” Atchison said. “Harvests are usually of a large volume in a short period of time, and produce may need to be washed, graded, and stored in coolers, necessitating proper cleaning, and sanitizing of equipment. Growers must remain vigilant to coordinate their workers, harvesting multiple crops and maintenance of the tools and equipment used for each crop.”

The FDA promotes voluntary compliance for food safety issues. Most of the time growers can make corrective actions to address minor food safety problems. Occasionally, timelines will be set, and inspectors will revisit the site to confirm that the issues have been resolved.

“The NJDA conducts its inspection activities in an interactive and educational manner and is supportive of our growers in the state,” Atchison said.

*Photo: Chris Kleinguenther, NJDA bureau chief of inspection and enforcement, at a New Jersey Farm.*

[Keith Loria](#)

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## About Keith Loria |

A graduate of the University of Miami, Keith Loria is a D.C.-based award-winning journalist who has been writing for major publications for close to 20 years on topics as diverse as real estate, food and sports. He started his career with the Associated Press and has held high editorial positions at magazines aimed at healthcare, sports and technology. When not busy writing, he can be found enjoying time with his wife, Patricia, and two daughters, Jordan and Cassidy.

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