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NJDA's efforts are key to safety of New Jersey produce

By

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The New Jersey Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Inspection and Grading performs thousands of inspections annually of imported and domestic produce at warehouses, cold storages and distribution centers to ensure that the produce is meeting USDA produce quality standards. What's more, NJDA's Fruit and Vegetable Inspection Program provides a consistent supply of high quality produce for distribution to consumers.

NJDA auditors perform USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) and Harmonized (GAP+) audits at farms, cold storages, packers and brokerage firms to evaluate their food safety practices.

"These audits can be for the field activities, the packing and storage facilities and often for both," said Elizabeth Stiles, agricultural products agent 2 for the NJDA. "Audits that are in compliance with these grading standards receive certificates that their buyers require, and this contributes to the marketability of their produce."

The NJDA also maintains a team of trained produce safety rule inspectors that evaluate farm food safety as required by the FDA Food Safety Modernization Act. These inspectors operate under FDA jurisdiction to inspect covered farms and evaluate implementation of the farm's food safety policy, with an emphasis on preventive measures for pathogens of human health significance, such as E. coli, Salmonella and Listeria.

The NJDA also employs a risk-based inspection program for routine mandatory produce safety rule inspections on farms growing covered produce.

"Covered produce is normally eaten raw, so it must be produced and handled carefully to prevent contamination," Stiles said. "If an inspection results in any inconsistencies from the standards, then a reinspection may follow to make sure the issues have been corrected. If there is a serious food safety issue, the FDA will step in and initiate a for-cause investigation and may take samples to identify the source(s) of contamination. There are no fines or penalties from the NJDA, and the FDA handles elevated compliance."

The NJDA promotes farm food safety and good agricultural practices through implementation of focused education and outreach programs. These programs are funded through the FDA's Produce Safety Cooperative Agreement with the NJDA.

"Our agricultural products agents coordinate with Rutgers University Cooperative Extension to provide food safety training and On-Farm Readiness Reviews (OFRR) for growers," Stiles said.

The OFRR is designed to help growers understand how food safety can be implemented on their farm. Representatives from the NJDA and Rutgers visit the farm together and discuss the types of crops grown, worker training in food safety, the use of biological soil amendments, domesticated and wild animals, coolers, buildings and equipment, cleaning and sanitation, growing, packing and harvesting activities, agricultural water application and testing.

"OFRRs are a free and confidential farm food safety assessment," Stiles said. "The casual nature of the visit promotes open dialog with the growers and educators as well as the regulators. The regulators provide interpretation of the rules, and the educators provide more specific recommendations."

Rutgers also delivers produce safety alliance grower training, which is required by the FSMA Produce Safety Rule.

"NJDA inspectors attend trainings to answer questions that growers have regarding implementation of the rule," Stiles said. "Rutgers agents provide specific technical information, such as the choice of a sanitizer. We are offering three trainings this year in New Jersey, with one of the trainings being delivered on-line for remote access. Farms are only required to have one person from each farm take the course, but the growers can take the class as many times as they want."

Stiles noted Jersey Fresh is part of the quality grading and promotion program. To qualify for the Jersey Fresh Program, produce is inspected and must meet USDA No. 1 standards. Passing the inspection gives the farm access to the Jersey Fresh logo and other promotional materials.

"This program is popular with many of our wholesale growers as well as retail growers selling their produce at farmers markets," she said. "All participants undergo produce quality inspections, and the Jersey Fresh logo ensures that the produce meets the high standards that consumers have come to expect. Jersey Fresh has held many promotions featuring locally grown produce and distributing fresh produce and items with the Jersey Fresh logo."

The FDA's Produce Safety Cooperative Agreement provides funding to New Jersey and other participating states to promote the safety of produce through outreach, education and technical assistance.

"Food safety is important on farms of all sizes, not just the large operations," Stiles said. "Small farms growing covered produce are encouraged to participate in the OFRR to become familiar with food safety standards, good agricultural practices, and to follow up with Rutgers

for technical assistance.”

To keep everyone on top of things, the NJDA has compiled a list of the major produce brokers and distribution facilities in the state and have developed a recall team list for industry partners which includes contact information for NJDA, NJ Department of Health, FDA District Office, FDA Emergency call center, FDA Produce Safety Network, Rutgers Cooperative Extension and the NJ Farm Bureau.

“We will continue to develop programs and resources on traceability to inform our produce industry stakeholders, keep our regulatory framework current and maintain high standards for produce safety,” Stiles said.

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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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