

Growers look to industry groups over FDA for GAPs information

Growers and buyers agree that industry associations, commodity boards, university research and others guide good agricultural practice standards instead of the Food and Drug Administration.

Those were some of the findings of an FDA-commissioned study designed to determine growers' awareness, knowledge and adoption of GAPs and the agency's GAPs guide.



The study also found that even trainers and auditors look to universities and other groups instead of FDA to set science and risk-based regulations.

Jim Gorny, senior adviser for produce safety in the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition's Office of Food Safety, said the study was not a survey but a series of in-depth interviews.

He said the study helped the agency document many things its people have been hearing around the country about where the industry is in implementing GAPs.

"A lot of people will potentially pooh-pooh this study and say we only talked with 22 people," Gorny said. "In finding out what growers' primary source for information on GAPs is, that pointed out that we really need to redouble our efforts in working with extension agents, university experts and private auditors in getting our message out about GAPs."

Though growers were generally aware of the federal government through the FDA or the USDA were actively promoting GAPs, they believed large produce buyers, state governments and industry associations, which tend to have their own GAP standards, were the key drivers of GAPs, the study found.

While buyers generally understood the FDA's GAP guide, the study found they believed that FDA's guidance needs more specificity and relevance to farming operations and broad industry acceptance to make GAP adoption more consistent with their own food safety needs.

Through its 1998 Guide to Minimizing Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables, the FDA has provided a foundation that has been modified for commodity-specific guidance, said Bob Whitaker, chief science and technology officer at the Washington, D.C.-based Produce Marketing Association.

"It is unreasonable to expect that the FDA would be knowledgeable about leafy greens over here, citrus over there, tomatoes in Florida over there, and how we raise cilantro in North Carolina over there," he said. "The California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement is successful not because of what's on the paper and not because of the metrics themselves. It's the fact that growers and handlers feel an ownership with it. It's their program. They follow it because they feel like they own it."

Linda Verrill, an FDA consumer science specialist, said the study focused on qualitative vs. quantitative research and that the telephone interviewers talked with growers who have far-reaching authority over large farming operations.

"The growers want to be comfortable and know the FDA is on the job and on the ball," she said. "They don't know that. They don't have a personal relationship with the FDA or have a vague idea of what the FDA does on GAPs."