

Lessons Learned

Set realistic expectations. In total, VAAFM reached out to 34 businesses and sent multiple emails and calls to each business, totaling 157 outgoing calls and emails in order to schedule and execute 20 meetings. Buyers appreciated persistence and reminders, but at the end of the day, these meetings are voluntary, educational opportunities for buyers, and if after several attempts we were not able to connect with a buyer, we moved on.

Consider asking multiple representatives from one business to join the conference call. VAAFM found it valuable to have at least one representative from produce procurement/supply management involved, in addition to a food safety professional, in order to provide context regarding supplier relations and how food safety requirements are implemented and verified.

Assure buyers that outreach is for educational purposes, not regulatory. For example, VAAFM was not trying to encourage buyers to adopt any particular food safety standard or requirements. However, there was a sense of anxiety from buyers who did not have any food safety requirements in place and several turned to VAAFM for advice about what produce safety assurances buyers should be requiring from producers.

Understand state/federal sharing restrictions and be prepared to receive questions pertaining to data and information sharing. As noted under project outcomes, VAAFM received numerous questions from buyers that were related to information sharing. Ensure staff understand what can and cannot be shared.

Conclusion and Next Steps

As a result of this outreach, the Vermont Produce Program has a greater understanding of current produce buyer procurement processes and produce safety requirements for suppliers. Relationships established will aid the Program in education and outreach efforts about the Produce Safety Rule and audit programs, and staff is better equipped to address questions from farms pertaining to market access and associated produce safety standards required by buyers.

This outreach has helped increase industry knowledge surrounding the Produce Safety Rule and the distinctions between food safety regulations and voluntary audit programs. Program staff addressed questions and assumptions that otherwise might have been left unanswered which might contribute to confusion in the marketplace and among farmers. The Vermont Produce Program will continue educational efforts within the produce buyer community to increase collaboration and support for farms; future activities include:

- **Continue to build contact list.** VAAFM continues to add new business contacts as they are identified and intends to conduct annual outreach to maintain an active list of business contacts.
- **Continue to host meetings with buyers from target outreach categories.**
- **Conduct outreach to additional buyer categories.** This includes independent grocers, supermarket chains, restaurants, food processors/manufacturers and schools/institutions.
- **Collaborate with buyers to communicate produce safety information and resources to growers.** Most local co-ops and some food hubs host annual grower meetings. Businesses welcomed VAAFM staff at future meetings to engage with producers and provide information and resources to Vermont produce farms.
- **Attend regional trade shows and buyer-focused events to share resources and answer questions.**
- **Partner with buyers to host Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training Courses.**

Contact:

Gina Clithero
(802) 585-6225 | gina.clithero@vermont.gov

Dominique Giroux
(802) 522-3132 | dominique.giroux@vermont.gov



¹ The Local Food Safety Collaborative Needs Assessment Survey Report defines local as “food producers selling all or most of their products within 275 miles of their food operation.” This survey received responses from over 1,000 food producers from across the U.S., of which 599 met the definition of local food producers. Elizabeth A. Bihn, Lindsay Springer, and Laura Pineda-Bermúdez, Local Food Safety Collaborative Needs Assessment Survey Report, Cornell University, Department of Food Science, 2 (May 2019).

² As of January 2019, VAAFM no longer conducts USDA GAP audits which may increase the cost for some Vermont farms to obtain an audit.

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Produce Buyer Outreach Initiative

This publication is a resource for state agencies/departments of agriculture seeking to increase produce buyer awareness and engagement surrounding the FSMA Produce Safety Rule and state produce safety programs.

Introduction

Across the United States, fruit and vegetable (i.e. produce) farms are navigating food safety regulations and audit programs that set standards to reduce foodborne illness and minimize the risk of contaminated produce entering the marketplace. Specifically, the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule (PSR), a U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulation, sets national standards for the safe growing, harvesting, packing, and holding of fruits and vegetables. In response, state agencies/departments have implemented produce safety programs that are both educational and regulatory in nature to support the implementation and oversight of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule in their respective states. Simultaneously, some buyers are requiring fresh fruit and vegetable suppliers to participate in third-party produce safety audit programs, such as the national USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and regional Community Accreditation for Produce Safety (CAPS) program. While the state produce safety program’s primary constituents are produce farms, **states have the opportunity to engage with buyers of fresh fruits and vegetables to:**

- Help ensure buyers and growers have the same general knowledge of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule to reduce confusion and/or uncertainty in the marketplace.
- Explain the role of state produce programs in implementing the Produce Safety Rule.
- Understand buyer requirements to better support produce farms in the marketplace.
- Increase the number of outlets for state produce safety program information sharing to create additional opportunities for produce farms to recognize the resources available.

The Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food & Markets (VAAFM) believes that developing relationships and increasing collaboration with buyers of produce will more holistically support produce farms and aid in the implementation of the Produce Safety Rule.

Vermont Produce Buyer Outreach Initiative

In August 2019, the VAAFM Produce Program launched a Buyer Outreach Initiative to begin communicating with buyers of fresh Vermont produce about on-farm produce safety. VAAFM approached this outreach effort both seeking to raise awareness among buyers about the Produce Safety Rule and regional produce safety accreditation programs and to learn from buyers about their produce safety requirements in order to inform market development and market access work with Vermont farms.

During this first phase of the initiative, VAAFM focused outreach efforts toward buyers who are most likely to directly interface with Vermont produce growers. In this regard, VAAFM prioritized reaching produce distributors, aggregators (e.g. food hubs), local retailers (e.g. food cooperatives), and food service management companies. Within these organizations, VAAFM sought out conversations with individuals who were involved with produce procurement and food safety requirements.

The relationships that VAAFM builds with buyers will support the Vermont Produce Program’s efforts to help grow produce safety on Vermont farms through increased awareness of produce safety improvement efforts along the supply chain.

The mission of the Vermont Produce Program is to help grow Vermont’s produce industry by aiding produce farms of all sizes and stages of development to meet food safety requirements, access markets, and promote public health as sustainable agricultural businesses. The Program also collaborates with partners, distributors, and retailers and other industry stakeholders to clarify expectations around produce safety requirements.

Project Goals

The Vermont Produce Buyer Outreach Initiative has consisted of outreach to produce buyers, distributors, aggregators, and retailers [herein referred to as “buyers”] to:

1. Establish and build relationships with buyers of Vermont fruits and vegetables.
2. Support buyers in understanding the FSMA Produce Safety Rule.
2. Understand what produce safety standards are required of Vermont produce suppliers.
4. Build increased awareness of CAPS, a regional food safety accreditation program, and relay the costs associated with third-party audit programs.

VAAFM is committed to supporting growers to reduce on-farm food safety risks and understands that cost is a major barrier for growers. Specifically, in the 2019 Local Food Safety Collaborative Needs Assessment Survey Report, local food producers ranked the top three barriers to implementing food safety practices as 1) Financial Resources, 2) Time, and 3) Farm Facility Infrastructure.¹ In light of these findings, VAAFM informed buyers of the Community Accreditation for Produce Safety (CAPS) program, a regional produce safety accreditation program that offers a third-party audit comparable to the USDA GAP program often at a lower cost to Vermont and regional growers.²

Project Planning and Preparations

1 Determine project scope.

How many buyers does your team hope to engage with? How does your team want to prioritize outreach? Estimate staff capacity for outreach and set boundaries for the scope of work.

2 Build a buyer contact list.

The contact list should contain business contact information and any additional information the program plans to capture. When possible, utilize existing business listings and contact sheets, such as the Secretary of State business registry or any contact lists held by agriculture market development staff in your state. Figure 1.0 (below) provides examples of information to capture.

3 Establish standard outreach questions.

Questions will be used to facilitate buyer meetings and should align with the information that will be collected and tracked in the contact list.

4 Develop a buyer factsheet.

A high-level overview of the FSMA Produce Safety Rule, state implementation, and other topics deemed appropriate.

5 Develop an initial outreach email.

The first email you send to established contacts should introduce your produce safety program, the outreach purpose, and any action items.

Contact Information

- Business name/address
- Category (e.g. retailer, distributor, aggregator)
- Primary food safety contact name/role
- Website URL

Call Scheduling

- Information shared/date shared
- Call scheduled
- Call completed
- Number of communications sent/received

Additional Information

- Prior knowledge of the Produce Safety Rule
- Produce safety requirements for suppliers
- Produce safety audit reimbursement (Y/N)

Figure 1.0

Resources Developed for Initial Outreach

Note: URLs provided below are case sensitive.

- Standard outreach questions
Example: go.usa.gov/xdcUq
- FSMA Produce Safety Rule Buyer Factsheet
Example: go.usa.gov/xdcQz
- Initial outreach letter
Example: go.usa.gov/xdcQh

Suggested Follow-up Resources & Information

- Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training Course
- On-Farm Readiness Review information
- Technical assistance resources and contacts for produce growers (e.g. University Extension staff)
- State/regional produce safety certification/accreditation program information

Scheduling and Execution

1 Send outreach letter and factsheet to contacts.

In some cases, VAAFM reached out to businesses multiple times to obtain contact information and schedule a meeting.

2 Schedule meetings in 30-minute increments.

VAAFM found 30-minutes was sufficient to provide a brief overview of the state produce safety program, address standard questions and answer any additional questions the business may have.

3 Staff conference calls.

VAAFM recommends at least two produce program staff join the conference call in order to adequately facilitate and take notes.

4 Follow-up after the meeting.

Program staff can offer suggestions for additional resources and information based on the types of questions the buyer asks. These can be included in a follow-up email to the business contacts.

Vermont Produce Buyer Outreach Outcomes

This section describes notable outcomes from this project. The Vermont Produce Program is available to discuss information in further detail and provide additional project findings.

There was a general lack of understanding among buyers regarding FSMA Produce Safety Rule implementation and oversight. Examples of questions that buyers asked during meetings include:

- How does the FSMA Produce Safety Rule apply to my operation?
- Can buyers obtain a farm’s inspection form?
- If there were red flags during an inspection, will the state share results with buyers?
- Can a farm continue to operate if they receive an observation during an inspection?
- What is the difference between a food safety audit and a Produce Safety Rule inspection? Can any produce farm request an inspection?
- Is there anything we need to do, or can do, to support this effort?
- How much of the State’s efforts with the FSMA Produce Safety Rule are educationally focused?



The majority of buyers expressed appreciation to VAAFM for initiating outreach and showed willingness to share information, resources and state program contact information with their fruit and vegetable suppliers.

VAAFM was surprised by some of the standards accepted by businesses; specifically, one business stated that they accept organic certification in lieu of a third-party food safety audit. Alternatively, some businesses who do not require any third-party audits will:

- Conduct site visits to supplying produce farms to verify and assess produce safety practices; and/or,
- Include a food safety component on their new vendor form to allow farms to self identify food safety practices.

Food safety practices reviewed during site visits and on vendor forms are often re-verified on an annual basis, dependent on business capacity.

34	20	18	10	157
Total businesses contacted	Total buyer meetings completed*	Buyers requested information about the regional food safety accreditation program, CAPS	Hours in buyer meetings over the course of 2 months	Outgoing calls and emails sent

*8 retailers; 5 distributors; 4 aggregators; 2 food service management companies; 1 foodbank.