

On-Farm Food Safety Information for Food Service Personnel

Farm to Fork is growing rapidly across Minnesota. For example, many schools are interested in purchasing directly from nearby farmers. **The goal of this document is to provide a list of questions about *on-farm* food safety practices that food service personnel can use when talking with farmers from whom they are considering purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables.**

These questions do not pertain to food safety in your food service kitchen facility. Rather, they relate to *on-farm* food safety. This means the steps that the farmer took to minimize the risk of contamination as the food was grown, harvested and transported to your kitchen door.

The questions are meant to be a guide so that you can have an informed discussion with a farmer about the food safety practices that they use on their farm. Food is grown in the soil, and under the sky, and there will always be some risk of contamination. The goal is not to have farmers eliminate this risk, but rather to minimize it through best practices to ensure the safety of consumers.

Most farmers are very committed to on-farm food safety, and farmers should not be offended if you ask about their food safety practices. If done in a conversational manner, most farmers will be happy to talk about their practices. You need to be comfortable with their answers, and if not, explore if they are willing to make some changes or consider not purchasing from the farmer at that time.



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Visiting the farm is another great way to get to know the farmer and their operation. By visiting the farm, you can get a good idea of the farmer's operation and their food safety practices.

You can also observe the farmer and the delivery vehicle. Look at their truck. Is it clean? Use your own observation tools. Employees who are in charge of taking in produce should also be told to observe the delivery truck and to share any concerns about cleanliness. What else is in the truck? Is there evidence of a dog in the truck? Is the truck free of trash and debris unrelated to the vegetables? Are there any odors?

For more information, please see the following resources:

UMN website with food safety record-keeping templates for farmers and links and schedules of GAPs workshops for farmers: <http://safety.cfans.umn.edu/>

Minnesota Department of Health Farm to School Program features step-by-step guidance for setting up your program: <http://www.health.state.mn.us/fts>

The Public Health Law Center offers resources addressing legal issues of Farm to School: <http://publichealthlawcenter.org>

National GAPs program at Cornell University: <http://www.gaps.cornell.edu>

For more information or with questions, please contact:

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Interview Tool

Getting started talking with farmers about food safety:

- Open with: “Can you tell me a little about your food safety practices?” or, “How do you address food safety on your farm?”

As you listen to their response, listen for these words or concepts:

- I have a written food safety plan
- I test my well water annually
- We train all of our staff on our food safety protocols including hygiene, illness and injury reporting
- We don't use raw manure; or, we apply raw manure in the fall; or, we buy composted manure
- I am certified organic or am certified by the Food Alliance. While the Organic and Food Alliance standards are not food safety standards, certified growers often have many key food safety practices already in place on their farm to meet organic and Food Alliance certification standards.
- I've passed a GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) audit, or intend to schedule an on-farm food safety audit. (GAP is similar to a HACCP plan for farmers, but very few farmers in Minnesota are GAP audited, so do not expect the farm to have an audit certificate.)
- I haven't gone through a GAP audit but I've adopted the *on-farm* food safety practices that are relevant for my farm.

Here are some probe questions you may use to ask about the farmer's food safety practices:

Farm and production practices

- “Do you have a written food safety plan or standard operating procedures related to food safety? If not, how do you document and ensure food safety on your farm?”
—*If they say no to these questions or do not seem to have thought about food safety, you may consider making a farm visit.*
- “Will the produce be rinsed or washed?”
—*If they rinse or wash their produce, it needs to be done with potable water.*
- “How often do you have the well water tested for contaminants and how do you treat and manage your wash water?”
- “What do you do to keep livestock and other animals (including dogs) out of vegetable fields?”
- “How is the produce kept cool and covered before and during delivery?”

Worker health and hygiene

- “Do you have health and hygiene training for employees? What does it cover?”
—*Listen for training on hand washing procedures, illness and injury reporting.*
- “Are restrooms with hand washing facilities including single-use towels, soap and clean running water available to all workers?”
—*Note: sanitizing gels are not a substitute for hand washing.*
- “Are workers excluded from handling food products if they are ill or have a fever or diarrhea?”

Packaging and tool cleanliness

- “How will product be packaged? Have boxes been used previously, and if so for what?”
—*Boxes should appear clean and intact, like new, when the produce arrives. Boxes that have held meat or poultry should not be used to transport produce.*
- “How often do you clean your harvest tools and containers?”
—*There is no one right answer. The tools should be cleaned at the end of the day. The containers should appear clean.*
- “Where do you pack your produce?”
—*They may field pack or have a packinghouse. Produce should be kept off the ground. Packinghouse surface should be regularly cleaned and sanitized.*