

Prepared Statement

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Public Hearing on Safety of Fresh Produce

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My name is Charles Hall and I am the Executive Director of the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association. Our association represents more than 400 fruit and vegetable growers and industry suppliers in Georgia and the southeastern United States. Fruit and vegetable production in Georgia provides an economic value to the state of more than \$950 million at the farm gate.

In light of the recent food borne illness outbreaks, food safety is at the forefront of our industry as we work to insure confidence in America's food supply, particularly fresh fruit and vegetables. Historically the U.S. produce industry has a very good safety record considering we provide over a billion serving of fresh produce every day. However, our goal must remain constant as we strive for zero incidents of food borne illness.

Food safety and Good Agricultural Practices education has always maintained an important position in our association's program of work. In 2007 it is one of our top priorities. As growers, packers and shippers of fresh produce our members are committed to provide consumers with a safe and nutritional product.

Our association's focus on food safety began in January 2002 when the Georgia Commissioner of Agriculture, Tommy Irvin, awarded the Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association (GFVGA) a special grant to develop an "audit inspection procedure." This procedure would become an integral part of a food safety certification program for Georgia produce growers and packers.

The Georgia Good Agricultural Practices Food Safety Program (Georgia GAPP) provides hands-on training and consultation on how to design and implement GAPs and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for an on-farm operation. This training and consultation is followed with an inspection by a certified third party auditor. Georgia GAPP focuses on eight areas in the growing and handling of produce where contamination might occur.

The program recommends Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for growers, packers and suppliers to minimize potential risks in their operations. SOPs are written references that give step-by-step instructions on how to carry out each step of a particular procedure on the farm operation in a way that minimizes microbial contamination. This program was developed using the Food and Drug Administration's Guide to Minimize Microbial Food and Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables published October 1998.

The Georgia GAPP manual was developed by third party auditors with the Georgia Crop Improvement Association, the University of Georgia Food Science and Horticulture departments, the Georgia Department of Agriculture and GFVGA. This manual is a blueprint that details the identifying, monitoring and documenting of potential hazards in a fresh produce operation and is the basis for establishing a successful farm food safety program.

When the applicant has successfully completed a third party inspection/audit a Georgia GAPP "CERTIFICATE" is issued. Upon receipt of the certification a producer may use the GAPP seal on shipping containers, invoices, letterhead, promotional items and advertising. The GAP seal may only be used on products grown under the Georgia GAPP food safety program regulations. For the GAP seal to be used on produce, both the field production and the packing facility must be certified.

Although this is a voluntary program for Georgia growers, our goal is to reduce farm risks and assure consumer confidence in Georgia produce. The 2005 U.S. Dietary Guidelines has recommended Americans double our consumption of fruits and vegetables. However, if the American consumer has a fear of fresh fruit and vegetables we will not be able to address the obesity crisis confronting our country today. As an industry, working with government oversight and assistance, we must be able to assure the public the benefits of fruit and vegetable consumption far outweighs the low level of risk.

United Fresh Produce Association and other produce industry associations have embraced several key principles which are critical to insure our nation has a secure and safe food supply. The Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association believes these principles provide a basis from which the produce industry and the U.S. government can develop a food safety policy framework to assure consumers a safe food supply.

The key principles include:

1. Food safety standards must be consistent for produce grown anywhere in the United States or imported into this country. Consumers must have the confidence that produce grown in New York is just as safe as produce grown in Georgia. They must be assured the same safety standards are to be met no matter where the commodity is grown or processed, domestically or imported. While we are extremely proud of Georgia GAPP and the growers certified under this program, the same strong scientific standards that are in place for our program must also be applied across the industry if we are to be successful in restoring consumer confidence.

2. To achieve consistent produce safety standards across the industry will require federal government oversight in order to be credible to consumers and equitable to producers. The GFVGA firmly believes food safety standards must be based on sound science. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is the public health agency charged by law with ensuring the safety of the nation's food supply including fruit and vegetables. It is this agency's responsibility to develop and determine those safety standards necessary in an open and transparent process, with input from the scientific community, researchers, consumers and industry.
3. Produce safety standards must allow for commodity-specific food safety practices based on the best available science. In an industry with hundreds of products and varieties one regulation and/or practice will not fit everyone. The exposure to risks of tree fruit is very different than that of leafy greens or melons. The food safety regulations must have scientific flexibility to address the needs of different commodities. A 'one size fits all' approach will not address the specific needs of individual commodities with different production and handling practices.

Our association believes these three principles provide the basis for a food safety regulatory policy that is critical to enhancing product safety and restoring public trust in our products.

While a science based, commodity-specific food safety regulatory policy is our most immediate need, we must not overlook the need for additional research to address many of the issues we face today. As an industry we need a better understanding of ways to reduce E coli in cattle; better ways to prevent contamination at the field level; and more effective microbial reduction techniques after harvest.

The Georgia Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association strongly supports and will work with our congressional delegation to seek increased funding for food safety research. In addition we support and will work diligently to seek increase research funding for specialty crops, including industry food safety needs, as the 2007 Farm Bill debate continues.

In closing, I thank you for the opportunity to present our growers views on this very important topic. It is our association's goal that we as an industry and government work together to insure the American consumers have no fear of illness as they enjoy nutritious, healthy and safe fruit and vegetables.

Thank you.