

STATE OF MICHIGAN



JOHN ENGLER, Governor

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

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Commission of Agriculture

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December 18, 1997

**Dockets Management Branch (HFA-305)
Food and Drug Administration
12420 Parklawn Drive, Room 1-23
Rockville, MD 20857**

RE: Docket 97N-0451**Dear Sir or Madam:**

Thank you for providing the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) the opportunity to comment on the draft document entitled Produce Food Safety Guidance. We appreciate the cooperative working relationship that our two agencies share. The MDA strongly supports the development of voluntary guidelines which the produce industry can use to minimize risks of bacterial contamination. We look forward to working with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and our other partners to develop guidelines which can be actively supported by regulators, industry groups, and consumers.

Ensuring the safety of fresh fruits and vegetables is vitally important to Michigan which ranked fourth among the states in fruit exports and sixth in vegetables (1996 USDA data). Our 2,500 fruit and 2,100 vegetable growers produce over 50 fresh fruit and vegetable crops.

The majority of our growers plant a diversity of crops on a small number of acres each year. For example, in 1995-96 over half of Michigan's vegetable growers planted 25 or fewer acres. The unique food safety educational needs of small volume producers have been widely recognized. We feel that it is critically important that federal and state agencies work together to develop a cooperative educational process which effectively communicates and meets the needs of these individuals.

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My staff has reviewed the Produce Food Safety Guidance document and their specific comments are attached. However, some key issues were raised by the comments:

- 1) The stated purpose of the document is to assist growers and operators to improve the safety of produce. However, several sections of the document read as if the target audience is the scientific community. We suggest that the terminology and sentence structure be simplified in order to more effectively communicate with producers.
- 2) Given the importance of providing scientifically sound guidance, and the short time being allowed for the development of this document, the MDA strongly suggests that recommendations which do not reflect consensus opinions be eliminated from the document.
- 3) MDA suggests FDA adopt a structured risk management strategy (risk assessment, mitigation, and communication) to guide this process. The principles of risk management have been used extensively in the fruit and vegetable industry to manage chemical residue risks. We feel that appropriate use of risk management principles will give producers a better sense of the relative significance of the various sources of potential contamination, of what is known, what remains unknown, and will highlight areas where further research is needed.
- 4) Broaden the guidance to address both chemical and microbiological food safety.

MDA has found that the methods used to communicate risk reduction messages to fruit and vegetable growers are extremely important. To meet past educational and training needs of our fresh fruit and vegetable industries, Michigan has forged effective partnerships between our state's universities, state agencies, local governments and food industry associations. Together, we have assisted our state's agricultural producers to meet increasingly stringent standards for environmental stewardship, chemical residue avoidance, and microbiological safety. I have attached, for your information, copies of some of the educational materials which effectively communicates risk reduction information to agricultural producers. The material includes:

- 1) Several "Generally Accepted Agricultural and Management Practices" which have been developed under Michigan's Right to Farm Act. Attached is a copy of the "Generally Accepted Agricultural and Management Practices for Nutrient Utilization" which outlines manure management practices designed to protect surface waters and groundwater supplies.
- 2) Michigan's Farmstead Assessment System (Farm*A*Syst) which is a cooperative effort between the MDA, Michigan State University Extension, and local soil conservation districts. This voluntary program uses two educational tools to communicate with producers: informative fact sheets which convey key concepts

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and information, and self assessment tools which producers use to apply background information to their operations. More than 6,500 Michigan farms have been reached by this program in that last three years. We have found this to be a very effective way of motivating producers to identify potential risks and then take risk reducing actions. An example of the program's effectiveness in the groundwater protection area is the proper sealing of approximately 2,600 abandoned wells over the past three years.

MDA appreciates FDA's desire to obtain input from state governments during the development of this document. Food safety continues to be a top priority for us. We feel confident that the guidance will prove to be valuable to Michigan's fruit and vegetable growers if we insure the practicality and effectiveness of each recommendation being made. Michigan has an extensive network of professionals with years of experience working with the fruit and vegetable industry. We encourage FDA to utilize this network as we continue to work together to providing the American consumer with a safe, wholesome, high quality, affordable supply of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Sincerely,



Dan Wyant
Director

Attachments

**Michigan Department of Agriculture Comments to Guide to Minimize Microbial
Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables
Working Draft; November 25, 1997**

1. Technical Terminology: Examples of terminology which may not communicate effectively with many agricultural producers include: "vegetative cells" (p. 8 x. Sanitize), "vehicle for spreading localized contamination" (p. 8 II. Water), "fecal-oral" (p. 21 IV. Sanitation and Hygiene), "jaundice" (p.23 2.1 Personal Health, second to last bullet), "mitigating procedures" (p.27 2.0 Control of Potential Hazards). Extensive citations of foodborne bacterial species (example: p.22, 2.1 Personal Health) may not be particularly informative to agricultural producers. We have found that straight forward, easy to understand language is most readily accepted by growers.

2. Broad Generalizations Warranting Clarification

A. p.23, 2.1 Personal Health, second to last bullet. "The supervisor, or the person in charge, should consider ways to monitor the health of their employees and take steps to reduce the chance of food borne illness. For example, disposable rubber or similar gloves, leak-proof band aids, or other corrective measures for minor cuts should be provided for use as necessary by personnel who may have contact with produce." We concur that fruit and vegetable producers should minimize the potential for employees to contaminate fresh produce with foodborne pathogens. This guidance does not clearly state how this goal will be achieved.

In Michigan, the vast majority of tree fruits are harvested and/or processed by part-time, short-term, or migrant laborers. This is also often true in the processing and packaging of row crops which are mechanically harvested (e.g., celery and carrots). The MDA feels that there is insufficient time to consider the educational, linguistic, economic, and cultural factors which must be addressed in order to provide meaningful guidance in the areas of health monitoring and the use of disposable gloves. We suggest that this issue should be more appropriately addressed in commodity-specific guidance.

B. p.23, 2.2 Training, first bullet. "Smoking or eating in areas where fresh produce is present can contaminate the produce because of the potential that the hands and food-contact surfaces may become contaminated. Insanitary, personal practices such as scratching the head, placing the fingers in or about the mouth or nose, and indiscriminate and uncovered sneezing or coughing may contaminate fresh produce or any handling equipment". This broad recommendation has its origin in the food service and food processing industries. Producers will question its applicability to field harvesting operations. If the recommendation is made, it is important to provide some indication as to the relative importance of head touching while harvesting versus improper handwashing after going to the bathroom.

- C. **p.27, 1.0 Microbial Hazard.** "Anything that comes in contact with the food has the potential for being a source of pathogenic microorganisms... Pathogenic microorganisms may be found on the floors, walls, ceilings, and drains in the packinghouse and on the surfaces of processing equipment." We question how growers can control bacteria that are everywhere. We recommend establishing sanitation priorities that assist growers in minimizing risk. Our Apple Cider Pilot Project partnership with Michigan State University and FDA has proved very valuable in providing cider producers guidance regarding sanitation priorities.
- D. **p.26, 2.5 Animal Control, first paragraph and p.21,3.0 Animal Feces, last bullet.** "Growers should assess the prevalence and likelihood of uncontrolled animal access to fields in order to reduce the potential for contamination of crops by fecal material." The growing population of free ranging white-tailed deer in Michigan is an example of an identified wildlife problem for which farmers have limited control options. The guidance should acknowledge the practical and legal limitations which producers.
3. **Suggested additional wording (In bold):** Page 19, Bullet #3 "scheduling manure applications on adjacent fields or to sites where produce may come into contact with manure to maximize the time between application to those fields and harvest of fresh market produce."

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Fax

To: Jenny Butler
FDA Documents Management

Pages: 6, including this cover sheet.

Date: December 18, 1997

The original letter with attachments is being forwarded by mail. If you do not receive the complete transmission, please call me at 517/373-1060.

From the desk...

Deb Miller
Food & Dairy Division
Lansing, MI 48909

