

# Florida Citrus Mutual

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EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT  
AND  
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June 24, 1998

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

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RE: Docket # 97N-0451

Dear Sirs:

Florida Citrus Mutual, a voluntary cooperative association whose active membership consists of 11,639 Florida citrus growers respectfully submits the following comments relative to the proposed guidance document referenced as Docket #97N-0451. The stated intent of the proposal is for guidance purposes only; however, Florida Citrus Mutual has grave concerns that these recommendations may be incorporated in future proposed regulations; and whereas, these recommendations do not appear to supercede other applicable Federal, State and local laws and regulations, they may be viewed as providing directions which could alter the focus of state and local initiatives.

These guidelines are aimed at concerns raised regarding the safety of fruits and vegetables that are not processed to reduce or eliminate pathogens. While there may be some small local markets (i.e. the typical farmer's market) which handle fruits and vegetables that have not traveled the normal routes of picking, handling, transportation, washing, sorting, packaging and inspection, virtually all fruits and vegetables intended for interstate commerce are handled by larger facilities regulated by state agencies. These agencies have developed a highly refined and successful approach to the monitoring, testing and certification of facilities that has resulted in the safest source of product in the world. While fresh citrus originating in Florida undergoes rigorous inspection and testing procedures, several aspects of the marketing of foreign fresh fruits and vegetables remain unchecked. Efforts to reduce the incidents of food borne contamination from fruits and vegetables that are not processed to reduce or eliminate pathogens should be primarily focused on the channels of interstate commerce that handle the distribution of imported fresh fruits and vegetables. It is precisely because as the FDA emphasizes, "It is important to note that there are a number of missing pieces of information in the scientific basis for reducing or eliminating pathogens in an agricultural setting." Florida Citrus Mutual advances its concern for the stated intent, "to build on earlier efforts and to develop national guidelines to enhance the consistency and scientific basis for food safety initiatives throughout the country."

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Florida Citrus Mutual applauds the recognition by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) of the limit to which the best available current technologies can reduce the risk of all potential food safety risks associated with fresh produce. The strong leadership roles taken by agricultural concerns in cooperation with the assistance of the universities, State and local government agencies, and countries exporting produce to the United States have substantially reduced the risks associated with food borne pathogens. However, these efforts might be overshadowed by the occasional incident of contamination resulting from inconsistent handling practices among restaurant owners, wholesalers and small retail vendors.

Under the statement addressing the Basic Principles, a grave oversight must be illustrated. The best management practices available to agricultural producers do not ensure that independent shippers or handlers, beyond their control, will exercise sound judgement.

In the state of Florida, state law dictates that agricultural producers utilize the lowest quality of water available. Principle 4 emphasizes the very point that Florida Citrus Mutual has argued before the state water management districts. "Wherever water comes in contact with produce, its source and quality dictate the potential for contamination." State regulations have attempted to require the use of reclaimed water without dictating that tertiary treatment be required of the treatment facilities to minimize the potential for microbial contamination.

Principle 7 fails to draw a distinction between the various applicable regulations. In Florida, regulations vary statewide with the nature of the soil type, watertable, proximity to lakes, streams and wetlands. Presumably the intent is that all applicable local, State and Federal regulations be followed. Principle 8 suggests that a system for accountability be established by the agricultural operation to help track produce back through distribution channels to the producer. It is a well recognized fact however that counterfeit labeling is a problem with point of origin tracking. Because some types of fruits bring premium prices when identified as from certain countries or regions of the country, at some point in the distribution process, substitute fraudulent labels of origin have found their way onto produce intended for preferred markets. This serious loophole easily defeats best efforts of honest growers and packers to ensure quality control. Regulations in place to require each piece of fruit to be labeled with a point of origin have not addressed this problem adequately.

The section of this proposal that addresses recommendations for non-irrigation water uses mirrors the common practice among fresh citrus packing houses. The discharge water quality from facilities in Florida is carefully monitored and records maintained by the state Department of Environmental Protection. Fresh citrus is carefully inspected by the Florida Department of Agriculture,

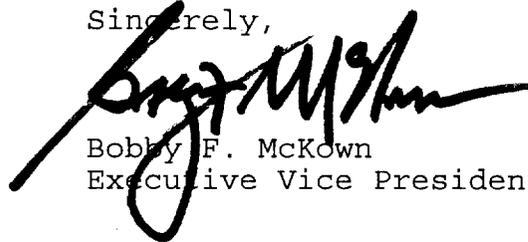
Division of Fruit & Vegetable Inspection, screened, sorted, washed, waxed, labeled and packed for cool storage before shipment. The Florida citrus industry has and continues to have continuous state inspections of all fruit moving into fresh or processed channels of trade.

The spreading of sewage sludge is not common among citrus growers although it has been done. It is not likely that citrus growers would spread untreated manure in groves as a part of our better fruit quality production program.

Generally speaking, the recommendations for the handling of manure, sanitation and hygiene are common sense practices and precautions understood and accepted industry wide. Final packaging of fresh citrus never occurs in the field. All citrus fruit is hauled to facilities for inspection, sorting, washing, waxing, final sorting and careful packing in new containers that are not reused by the same facility.

In conclusion, with the exception of the narrow issues outlined above, Florida Citrus Mutual believes the proposed recommended guidance document encapsulates the essence of existing practices which affects citrus in the flow of interstate commerce and domestic exports.

Sincerely,



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Executive Vice President/CEO

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