

GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES AND THIRD PARTY AUDITS

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Introduction

There are specific sections of the audit on which your farm or operations will be assessed. The audit can be certified in any one or in all five areas however, the general review section must be completed. The sections include "General Questions" as well as these specific areas:

- 1) Farm Review
- 2) Field Harvest and Field Packing Activities
- 3) House Packing Facility
- 4) Storage and Transportation
- 5) Traceback

During a Good Agricultural Practices/Good Handling Practices audit, you will be asked to explain and demonstrate how your farm complies with each of these areas. Documentation will be required in some instances, as indicated by the letter "D" in the same section of the audit questions.

Getting Started

First, develop a mission or vision statement. This statement should be brief, but explain your company's commitment to food safety, food quality, food sanitation and worker hygiene.

Second, create a table of contents that corresponds to the specific sections of the audit and for each section in the table of contents, explain how your farm complies with that section.

General Questions

Implementation of a Food Safety Program

This section consists of a review of the food safety program and manual that has been designed for your operation. Management must indicate who has been designated to implement and oversee the program and also who is named as the backup in case this person is not available.

Worker Health & Hygiene

This section requires management to describe how workers are trained and instructed to practice proper hygiene.

Part I — Farm Review

Water Usage

This section describes the source of irrigation water and how it is applied. The method of application and the type of crop could have an effect on the potential for microbial contamination. List all the methods used in the operation.

Sewage Treatment

Indicate what type of sewage system the farm uses. If a septic tank is used, identify the location of the tank or drain field and whether there is a sewage treatment facility adjacent to the farm.

Animals/Wildlife/Livestock

Indicate whether the crops are located near dairy or poultry operations with lagoons that could leak or overflow and cause runoff into the fields. Measures should be taken to assure that livestock or wildlife do not have access to ponds used for irrigation or production areas.

Manure and Municipal Biosolids

Indicate whether the operation uses manure or municipal biosolids. If manure is used, a plan must document that it is properly treated and composted to lower the level of pathogens that may be present. If composted manure or treated biosolids are used, documentation of analysis reports must be maintained.

Soils

Include a narrative of the history of the farm or farms and describe what the land was used for previously. If the land history indicates a possibility of contaminants, the soil should be tested. The results must be available for review and any corrective action to prevent product contamination must be documented.

Part 2 — Field Harvest and Field Packing Activities

This part relates to harvesting commodities and packing them in the field. The emphasis in this part is on worker sanitation and harvesting activities. Harvesting and packing equipment should be cleaned regularly.

Worker Sanitation and Hygiene

Under this part, management must ensure that employees take the necessary precautions to avoid microbial contamination of the produce. Portable toilets should be supplied and maintained on a regular schedule and documentation is required. Include a written procedure about how to contain spills should one occur. All field sanitation facilities must include hand-wash water, soap and single-use paper towels. Signs should be posted in the appropriate language for employees informing them to wash their hands after use of the toilet.

Field Harvesting and Transportation

This section relates to the use of harvest baskets, totes or other harvesting containers used during the process of harvesting. Totes used during field packing should be cleaned and sanitized appropriately, in a timely manner and documented. Packing containers that are damaged or soiled and no longer repairable or possible to clean should be discarded. Field equipment should be cleaned as needed. Water that is used to clean harvested product must be potable. Workers should not carry personal food items or other non-produce items in their harvesting containers.

Wagons or trailers used to transport produce from the field must be inspected for cleanliness, odors, dirt or debris before beginning the loading process, produce should be loaded in a manner to minimize damage to the product

Part 3 — House Packing Facility

Receiving

Products transported from the field to the storage or packing shed can be contaminated by other vehicles on the road, overpasses, birds, etc. Tarping a load or using enclosed trailers are

examples of good practices. Operations that unload under mesh type covers or awnings over the unloading area are not considered covered.

Harvested product should be properly stored after delivery to the packing shed. Product should not be stored in the shade under trees as this is a primary source for contamination from roosting birds. Product that will be packed several hours or days later should be properly stored under refrigeration or other controlled storage appropriate to the commodity. This prolongs shelf life and protects from contamination.

Washing/Packing Line

Water used in the processing of fresh fruits and vegetables must be potable at first use. The operation should test its well water to indicate whether the water is potable. The results should be available for review by the auditors.

Re-using processing and wash water may result in the build-up of microbial loads, including undesirable pathogens from the crop. Consider practices that will ensure and maintain water quality. Perform periodic water sampling and microbial testing or change water as necessary to maintain sanitary conditions.

Clean and sanitize water contact surfaces such as dump tanks, flumes, wash tanks and hydro coolers to ensure the safety of the produce. Install backflow devices and legal air gaps, to prevent contamination of clean water with potentially contaminated water.

At the end of each day, packing areas should be cleaned. Also, the washing, grading, sorting and packing lines should be cleaned and sanitized to reduce the potential for microbial contamination. Documentation of a schedule for cleaning and water treatment strength levels is required in this section.

Areas of possible contamination could also include open mesh steel cat-walks, motors without shields, overhead dripping, leaking pipes and box conveyors to second floor storages. Product in flow zones running under these mentioned areas could be subject to contamination from dirty shoes, dripping lubricants, cobwebs or dust hanging from ceilings or light fixtures.

Ice

Water used to produce ice or used during hydro-cooling should be potable in order to reduce the risk of food contamination.

Worker Health and Personal Hygiene

Facilities used by employees to take breaks, prepare for work and/or eat lunches must be clean and separate from the packing areas. This area may be within the building away from the packing area or be an outside designated area. All places must be kept clean to the extent that the nature of the work allows. Documentation is required in this section addressing the use and requirement of hair nets, beard nets and any restrictions relating to jewelry. Personal hair follicles and jewelry such as watches, earrings and rings can harbor microorganisms.

Packinghouse General Housekeeping

Food-grade approved lubricants should be used in areas where lubricating agents may come into contact with the produce. Lubricants such as WD-40, Liquid Wrench, etc. used in other parts of the packing area are not acceptable in areas that come in contact with the product.

Food-grade and non-food-grade lubricants/chemicals should be stored separately either in separate rooms or segregated within the same room. The intent is that the two are sufficiently separated and prominently marked in order to prevent cross contamination or mistaken use of non-food-grade for food-grade.

Grounds surrounding the packinghouse should be kept clear of waste and litter to discourage breeding of pests and rodents. Garbage receptacles/dumpsters need to be maintained regularly. This includes emptying on a regular schedule and closing the lids when not in use.

The packinghouse interior must be clean and maintained. During packing operations some evidence of dirt and debris will be visible, but there should be no evidence that it has accumulated over time and been ignored. Drains for wash water must be clear to prevent water from running onto the packinghouse floor. Inside the packinghouse, an established pest control program must be maintained and documented with service reports available for review by the auditors.

Part 4 — Storage and Transportation

Container and Pallets

This section describes how containers that are not being used are stored and protected from contamination by pests, bird droppings, dirt and water.

Pest Control

Establish proactive procedures to exclude pests and animals. A pest control log should be maintained indicating dates of inspections, inspection reports and steps taken to eliminate any problems. Include a map indicating bait station location. All bait traps containing poison must be located outside the packinghouse or storage area.

Dogs and cats should not be allowed to roam the packinghouse.

Storage/Temperature Control

The cold storage facility should be cleaned on a regular schedule or as needed to minimize free-floating dust and other airborne contaminants. All visible debris and unnecessary items should be removed in a timely manner. Service logs should be available for review. Thermometers should be checked on a regular schedule for accuracy and those checks should be documented.

Transportation/Loading

Employees should make every effort to ensure that conveyances are clean, free of objectionable odors and generally are in good condition. Refrigeration units should be calibrated on a regular schedule, and produce items should be shipped only with produce items. Canvas sheets on refrigeration units should be in good shape with no rips or holes and securely fastened to the unit and trailer. Product temperature requirements during shipment should be recorded on the bill of lading. If a temperature recorder is used record it on the bill of lading.

Part 5 - Traceback

Include a written procedure about your ability to track a product back to its source. Maintain records including the harvesting dates, specific field and product locate within the field or orchard, number of packages within a lot, packing and shipping date, and harvesting crew. Each container must contain some type of identification to maintain its integrity throughout the harvesting and marketing process.