



ON FARM FOOD SAFETY - REDUCING THE RISK

The Basics of Employee Hygiene

Food safety starts on the farm, and the everyday activities and actions of you and your employees can greatly affect the safety of your product. Whether you have a large-scale farm operation supplying larger retail stores, or run a smaller scale mixed commodity farm supplying a local farmer's market or Community Supported Agriculture group, one of the most crucial aspects of on-farm food safety is good employee hygiene and food handling practices.

As a farm employer, you need to set the standard by educating your staff, enforcing the standards that you have set and, most of all, leading by example. "Seeing is believing"...so if they see, they will believe and thus will follow.



So where do you begin? We have outlined some basic employee and visitor hygiene and food handling requirements and guidelines that you may be able to implement at your operation in order to facilitate a strong foundation for your food safety program. These guidelines are broken down into the four areas:

1. Personal Hygiene Facilities
2. Employee Training
3. Visitor Policy/U-Pick and Biosecurity
4. Record Keeping

PERSONAL HYGIENE FACILITIES

Microbes can be found everywhere – in the soil, water, air, and even on hands, hair, clothing and shoes. Humans can be one of the many sources of biological contamination of your product, especially if they do not properly wash their hands. Therefore, it is imperative to provide adequate personal hygiene facilities for your employees and to keep these facilities well maintained.

Personal hygiene facilities may include:

- Washrooms (portable or non-portable)
- Effectively located hand wash stations
- Lunch or break areas or rooms
- First aid areas
- Designated smoking area
- Dedicated storage area for personal effects, separated from washrooms, product handling areas and packaging
- Dedicated storage area for working effects, separate from smoking areas and surfaces where food is prepared or eaten

These facilities do not have to be state-of-the-art. They can be as simple as a portable “Port-a Potty” or designated washroom located in the farm owner’s residence, the farm house kitchen designated for lunch and breaks, etc. However, adequate provisions must be made to accommodate good personal hygiene practices.

Personal hygiene facilities provided for employees in production sites, packinghouse, or product storage areas should:

- Have adequate number of toilets per number of employees
- Be located so as not be a source of contamination to water sources or product
- Be fully equipped with garbage container, toilet paper and a properly stocked hand wash station(see below)
- Have a hook for hanging work effects prior to entering washroom.

Ensure hand wash stations are properly stocked with:

- Hot and/or cold running potable water (with receptacle to collect wastewater)
Soap
Disposable paper towels
Garbage container
- OR**
- Hands wipes or water to remove soil from hands (with receptacle to collect wastewater)
Hand sanitizer
Garbage container
- AND**
- Hand washing signs with understandable instructions (e.g. appropriate language for employees, pictograms)

Ensure first aid areas are stocked with:

- Adequate first aid supplies
- Waterproof coverings for bandaged wounds on hands (e.g. rubber gloves)

Ensure lunch or break areas have:

- Garbage container
- Properly stocked hand wash station
- Adequate provisions for storage of lunches and personal effects

Ensure smoking areas have:

- Adequate receptacle for disposal of cigarette waste

EMPLOYEE TRAINING

Proper and effective training on such topics as ‘*Good Personal Hygiene*’, ‘*Safe Food Handling*’, ‘*Biosecurity*’ and job specific duties, reduces the risk of biological, chemical and physical contamination of your product. Training increases employee awareness of potential hazards and the responsibilities they have to minimize contamination risks. Their training should ensure they understand and are competent in procedures which they are designated to perform.

Employee training should be provided to:

- All employees at the beginning of each season
- New employees
- Reinforce good practices (e.g. as a result of non-conformances or mid-way through the season)
- Provide feedback from an audit, or information on new techniques, new science or other technical findings

Training materials should be in a language and at a comprehension level applicable to employees. Examples of such training materials can be obtained on the CHC website www.canadagap.ca.

Development and enforcement of an ***Employee Hygiene Policy*** is suggested to provide employees with some basic hygiene procedures when working around or handling product and packaging. Such hygiene procedures may include, but are not limited to:

- Arriving to work in a clean manner, wearing clean clothing and clean footwear
- Proper storage of personal items and clothing in designated areas away from product and packaging
- Proper hand washing at the beginning of work, after washroom breaks, after eating and taking breaks, after smoking, after coughing/sneezing or touching face/hair, after touching contaminated items such as garbage, tools and about to handle product/packaging again
- Remove work protective clothing prior to entering washrooms and before breaks, smoking areas (e.g. gloves, aprons)
- Refrain from eating, drinking, smoking, chewing gum, cough drops, spitting, etc. when working with or near product or packing

- Jewellery may not be worn when working with product and packaging
- If you have to cough or sneeze, direct face into nook of elbow or shoulder in order to protect product and packaging
- Use designated smoking area only
- Report to supervisor if cut around product, packaging and equipment
- Follow proper hand wash procedures as provided in an attached demonstration sign.
- Proper methods / directions of movement from one area of the farm to another to prevent contamination of “clean” areas from “dirty” areas

In addition to the above hygiene procedures, employers must be aware and know how to manage the risks associated with illnesses transferrable to food. All employees must be informed of their role in the potential transfer of illness to food and in turn to the customer. Therefore, it is highly recommended that a section in the hygiene policy is included to address the following:

- As an employer, you must abide by appropriate legislation (e.g. human rights, privacy, employment standards) as well as your operation’s own policies (written and verbal)
- Be alert to signs of illness and inform all employees that they must inform their supervisor if they are ill and should see a doctor to seek medical attention as soon as possible especially if they are showing signs of illness (e.g. nausea, diarrhea, etc.)
- Employees must be aware there are illnesses that are transferrable to food (e.g. Hepatitis A, Salmonella, E. coli 0157:H7) and all employees are responsible to see a doctor
- Advise an employee with an illness transferable to food (e.g. Hepatitis A, Salmonella, E. coli 0157:H7) to seek advice, guidance and collaboration with their local public health authority
- An employee who normally handles raw products to be eaten should be reassigned for a short time or leave work based on their symptoms. The individual’s health care provider should report the diagnosis, as should the employer given the possibility of an outbreak.

Provide job-related training for employees performing tasks that could lead to biological, chemical or physical contamination of the product. Such training tasks could include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Calibration of production site equipment such as chemical sprayers, medicators, scales
- Calibration of building equipment (e.g. cooler thermometers)
- Use of cleaning and maintenance materials (including water treatment chemicals)
- Production site and packing house equipment cleaning and maintenance procedures (e.g. clippers, knives)
- Building equipment cleaning and maintenance procedures
- Record keeping procedures (e.g. forms applicable to job)
- Application of agronomic inputs
- Harvesting procedures
- Sorting, grading and packing procedures

VISITOR AND BIOSECURITY CONSIDERATIONS

If you have an operation in which visitors may come and go freely, you may want to evaluate the level of access they have to your operations. Visitors can include anyone not normally employed at your operation on a day-to-day basis, including:

- Veterinarians
- Delivery services personnel
- Supplier sales representatives (equipment, chemical, etc.)
- Neighbours
- U-pick customers
- Direct farm sales customers
- General visitors if you offer agri-tourism attractions

Restricting visitors from areas where product or market-ready packaging materials are handled or stored helps to prevent contamination. Controlling visitor access to other areas, such as agricultural chemical storages, is for their own safety as well as the prevention of chemical contamination of product (e.g. carrying chemicals on their feet into storages.) This can be done using signage, fencing, locking doors, installing walls, etc.

Visitors must adhere to protocols when on the premises so as to not be a source of contamination. They are to be informed of and understand the visitor policy and use a Visitor Sign-In Log to indicate possible sources of contamination that could be carried onto your premises.

U-PICK CONSIDERATIONS

U-pick customers must not be a source of product/packaging contamination and therefore must have access to fully-equipped and properly stocked personal hygiene facilities.

It is beneficial, prior to harvesting, to provide U-pick customers with instruction (verbal, written or visual):

- To use personal hygiene facilities while in the production site
- To wash or sanitize hands before picking
- To harvest into clean containers
- To pick fruit only from the tree or vine, not the ground
- To remain in the designated harvesting area
- To touch only the product they plan to purchase
- That pets are not allowed in the U-pick area
- To dispose of garbage in dedicated containers.

RECORD KEEPING

Although you may have many or all of the procedures in place on your premises, you need to consider having some kind of record of these policies, training and activities. By keeping records of your procedures and policies, it helps protect you from food safety allegations and helps prove you are doing due diligence towards employee training and food safety.

Things to start keeping records of may include:

- List of employees and brief description of their duties and responsibilities
- Document your employee hygiene practices policy, visitors policy, U-pick policy, etc.
- Keep records of what procedures and policies each employee has been trained in
- Records of employee attendance to training sessions
- Observe compliance of your employees to hygiene practices policy and record findings
- Keep a log to track visitors to your premises that indicates name/company/previous area visited/ reason for visit/time arrived/time left
- Keep all employee records confidential, including copies of correspondence, doctor's notes, etc. in a secure location that is not accessible to unauthorized people.

By following some or even all of the above components of basic employee hygiene, employers will be helping to ensure only safe food enters the food chain. Start now, stay basic and track positive changes on-farm as a testament to what basic employee hygiene can do for your farming operation.