

FOOD SAFETY/FOOD SECURITY: WILL IT BE IMPORTANT?

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Since the late 1980s, the tree fruit industry of the United States has been directly impacted by a number of high profile food safety issues. Obviously, the 1989 situation involving the growth regulator Alar was a defining moment, not only for our industry but also for the U.S. food system in general. In the 1990s, we went beyond unfair concerns generated mostly by public interest advocacy groups to more actual health concerns such as the *E. coli* incidents with unpasteurized apple juice. Our industry and others have worked over the past decade with federal agencies at USDA, EPA and the Food & Drug Administration to correct problems and calm public concerns.

Lately, we have had a string of events that, working together, have brought food safety and security into the forefront of national and world attention.

- Biotechnology has emerged as a technology with great promise to improve crops but of great concern to many citizens, especially in Europe. Frankenfoods—as they have been colorfully labeled by opponents of biotechnology, such as the Sierra Club and Earth Save.
- Mad cow disease struck Great Britain causing vast sums of money in terms of lost livestock and consumer confidence in the meat supply. According to England's *The Observer*, the human form of this disease has killed 105 people as of January 2002.
- On September 11, terrorists proved they would do anything to attack the United States. While crop dusters were one initial concern, more long-term fear was generated over the safety of the nation's food supply. If anthrax could be spread through the mail, could it not be equally a threat in the grocery store?

How will this all impact a fruit warehouse in Yakima or an orchard in the Okanogan?

I believe there will be increased pressures from both government and retail buyers for greater record keeping and testing for food safety concerns. Some of the programs that are intended to address these concerns, such as HACCP, or Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point, and SPQ, or Safe Quality Food, have been around for a while and will be discussed in greater detail later during this morning's program.

On the food security front, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration provided notice on January 9 of its latest Food Security Guidance document. This guidance, while not mandatory, will need to be taken into account by our growers and shippers. Two items that are being closely looked at by the FDA have special interest to our industry. They are whether tamper evident packaging might be practical for "the broad spectrum of foods presently in commerce" and the issue of what procedures and/or records might be required to enable shipments of foods to be traced, both backward and forward in the food chain. Comments on the later two ideas were due yesterday, March 11.

Traceability is an idea that runs through both food security and food safety discussions. Such discussions as the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization's Global Forum of Food Safety Regulators held in Marrakesh in late January. And the Codex Alimentarius Commission's Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems held from February 25 to March 1 in Brisbane, Australia. Traceability has a myriad of issues, including the form it should take and how far up and down the food chain you actually try to go. Does it end at a retail grocery or at the local fast food joint? Does it start at the warehouse or go back as far to the specific orchard?

Governments are not the only ones looking at traceability and model food safety plans. For example, a Global Food Safety Initiative was launched in April 2000 by a group of international retailers. Centered in Europe, the task force is looking to combine food safety management systems, good practices for agriculture, manufacturing and distribution, using HACCP in the process.

National and international retail chain stores continue to struggle with how to coordinate public and private requirements for documentation from suppliers of fresh fruits and vegetables. There is recognition of the problem of conflicting demands by various chain stores and the need for some uniformity. However, the task is extremely hard. It places growers and shippers in a very difficult situation in terms of compliance with potentially quite intrusive and costly demands in terms of new procedures, record keeping and third party audits. A retailer said at a meeting I attended last November in Philadelphia that "issue free food" was the goal. Good luck!

I might mention here that retailers are becoming more and more of a factor due to the increasing concentration of chain grocery stores and, as a result, buying power, e.g., the power to impose conditions of sale on a seller of fresh apple and pears. The 2002 survey of *Supermarket News*, for example, indicates that of the total U.S. estimated sales in grocery stores of \$682.3 billion; just under 50% were from the top 10 chain stores. Ranging from number one, Wal-Mart Supermarkets of Bentonville, Arkansas, to number 10, Delhize America located in Salisbury, North Carolina. Delhize America is an example of another accelerating trend, which is the ownership by foreign companies of U.S. stores. Delhize American, a division of the Brussels-based Delhize Group, encompasses 1,207 Food Line Stores, 139 Kash 'n Karry units and 150 of Hannaford Brothers stores. These stores had combined sales of over \$15 billion last year.

European retailers are leading efforts, such as EuroGAP, as a result of rising consumer concerns, global sourcing and a very weak E.U. regulatory system. To sell into Europe, shippers will need to pay attention to new requirements that will go beyond straight food safety into such social areas as worker welfare and environmental standards.

Time does not allow going into the details of the many and varied proposals currently being advanced related to food security. Suffice it to say that such acts as the Bioterrorism Preparedness Act of 2001, which is currently in a conference committee between the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, will devote millions more to FDA for new inspectors and other food safety issues. The FDA's powers to register those in the food distribution chain will be greatly increased to include even our fruit warehouses. And President Bush's FY 2003 budget released last month envisions a doubling of food inspections by FDA.

At the Northwest Horticultural Council we will be trying to influence these issues as they go forward. With Dr. Mike Willett and our new Technical Issues Manager Jon DeVaney, we will

devote quite a bit of staff resources to food safety and security. Our web site at www.nwhort.org provides links to useful information in this policy area. It will be our means of getting advice on this and other important issues out to you and other members of our industry.

In summation, as a result of ongoing public concerns surrounding biotechnology, food health professionals' concerns about microbiologicals and the Department of Homeland Security's new worries over terrorism, we can expect a more intensive regulatory climate in the years ahead. Our traditional warehouses, which basically have grown from ancient beginnings as roadside stand outlets and mostly still continue to be run as family businesses or small cooperatives, will more and more be treated like the major food processing facilities owned by multinational corporations. There likely will be more intensive employee training and supervision; augmented physical security such as locks and fences; increased food safety testing; and more detailed record keeping with rules on their retention. Our industry will have to be vigilant to ensure that whatever rules and regulations are imposed—by government or retail buying chains—are as practical and cost efficient as possible, given the current uncertain times. And, we will need to make sure all suppliers from other countries to the U.S. market of competitive fresh fruit face the same costs and other headaches associated with food safety and security as imposed on our own growers and shippers.

The title given my speech is “Food Safety/Food Security: Will it be Important?” The answer is “Yes!”