

# Project helps farmers document their commitment to food safety

*Continually evolving  
as markets change*



**Canada**



When it comes to food safety, Grant Compton goes by the books – two thick binders stuffed with reports, checklists and guidelines that overflow onto the desk and walls of his office.

The paperwork is part of CanadaGAP (Good Agricultural Practices), a food assurance program developed by the Canadian Horticultural Council and now operated by CanAgPlus.

The program is voluntary but increasingly demanded by retail buyers of Canadian fruits and vegetables.

CanadaGAP is recognized by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and complies with the *Safe Food for Canadians Act*. Buyers particularly like it because members are audited by a third-party certified food safety auditor on an on-going basis.

Compton is president of Compton Bros. Inc., a Morell-based company that grows and packs potatoes for six other sellers. It has belonged to CanadaGAP for 10 years.

“I’m an accountant by training and record-keeping is my thing but this is a lot,” Compton admits, flipping through the pages.

He points to figures on equipment calibrations, wind speeds, application rates for pesticides, dates for planting, spraying, and harvesting, as well as reports on water tests, field and building inspections and cleaning.

There are visitor logs, names of truck drivers who come to the farm, requirements for shatterproof light bulbs and where garbage cans are placed, protocols for footwear, gloves, and employee hygiene.

“My staff wash their hands up to a dozen times a day,” Compton says.

Once a year, the company is visited by an auditor who tours the facility, talks to the employees, and goes through the paperwork. A less than perfect score requires immediate action.

Compton says consumers don’t realize how much record-keeping is now part of a farmer’s job.

“It adds another layer to the things farmers need to do when they already have a lot to do,” he says.

That’s why he has nothing but praise for PEI Horticultural Association Manager Joanne Driscoll, who is leading a project to make it easier to prepare for food safety audits.

With federal and provincial funding from the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, Driscoll and her team have been holding COVID-era Zoom meetings and visiting farms to walk farmers and packers through their food safety procedures to see if they are missing anything.

That’s because the requirements of the assurance program are continually evolving as markets change.

The sessions are designed to not only help CanadaGAP members with audits but also non-members who are being audited under the *Safe Food for Canadians Act*.

The project has included food safety training sessions with farm staff and the production of food safety videos.

Driscoll says part of the project is not only explaining why certain day-to-day activities need to be documented but also to provide some ready-made checklists and standard operating procedures to make that process easier.

With major retail chains now asking growers and packers for even more food safety checklists called addendums, Driscoll understands that the paper burden is growing.



“Growers understand and support food safety initiatives, that’s not in question,” she says. “It’s the time and money that is required to go that extra step to document the things they are already doing that can be the challenge.”

Driscoll says she has heard from packing houses that spend as much as \$20,000 on staff time, training and record keeping to track their food safety activities.

About 150 Island fruit and vegetable growers pay an annual fee to belong to CanadaGAP. They also pay for their audits, which can each be \$2,500.

As part of the project, Driscoll took the auditor training herself, giving her a better perspective on what auditors look for when determining whether a farm is meeting its food safety obligations.

Compton says the project is helping.

“I can ask her what I am doing wrong in my records, what I can do better and why something is being asked for in a particular section of CanadaGAP,” he says.

He adds that Driscoll’s involvement on national committees overseeing on-going changes in CanadaGAP means that she can explain those changes at the local level.

That’s the kind of response Driscoll likes to hear.

“Our goal is to prepare everyone for an audit, even if they are only just at the point where they are thinking about expanding into markets that require them,” she says. “We want to make sure everyone in the industry knows how to do it and why we are doing it.”

Compton, who keeps a daily diary to help him keep track of his reporting requirements, says anything that can help him navigate the paperwork and pass his audit is welcomed.

“A medium-sized, middle-of-the-road operation like us is not big enough to assign a staff member to do it,” he says. “I spend a lot of time filling out forms and maintaining the records for three years.

“Joanne is the best resource. We’ve had her out here a few times.”

Driscoll says general reaction to the project has been good.

“I’m welcomed on the farms and the project seems to have had a positive impact,” she says. “They keep calling me back.”