



MISSISSIPPI

Implementing GAP and GHP Programs for Producing High Quality and Safer Produce in Mississippi

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Project Introduction

Expended Amount: \$32,256

Fresh fruits and vegetables most often are grown in an open environment where there are multiple opportunities for exposure to microbiological and chemical hazards. Recalls and foodborne illness outbreaks linked to fresh fruits and vegetables have increased. Most of these outbreaks were associated with microbial contamination. Preventing and controlling the contamination of fresh produce at the farm is the key to producing wholesome, healthy products. More companies that distribute fresh produce are becoming aware of the importance of the safety issues/programs (such as GAP/GHP) and are thus requiring mandatory third party independent audits of fresh produce producers as a prerequisite to purchasing. As a response to this purchasing requirement, a course designed to assist producers in implementing Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) was developed and delivered to Mississippi produce growers and handlers. The purpose is to teach growers and handlers how to reduce microbial risks during production, postharvest, handling and distribution and to educate producers on how to develop and implement farm food safety plans which prepare them for GAP/GHP certification.

Project Participants

Almost all of the participants were farmers/producers who are involved with the fruit and vegetable industry in Mississippi. Most of the participants are blueberry producers. Some are melon, tomato and other traditional crop producers. A few of them are organic producers. A few of the participants indicated that they had attended GAP/GHP workshops before, but the majority

had not attended this workshop before. The participants showed their appreciation to our team for providing GAP/GHP workshops by participating in evaluations.

Project Area

The project was conducted in Mississippi. Four (one-day) workshops were delivered at four different locations: Biloxi, Hattiesburg, Jackson and Starkville.

Project Outcomes

Approximately 60 growers/producers/handlers attended these workshops. Post-workshop survey data indicated that the participants' food safety knowledge increased by 18% after attending the workshops. Furthermore, our workshops helped producers develop their own food safety plans. The workshops also trained the producers to be prepared for the USDA GAP and GHP audit. Several producers, with assistance from our program, are ready for the audit, and one producer has already become USDA-GAP certified.

Quotes

“We have been in compliance with GAP-GHP for six years through our previous association with Michigan Blueberry Growers. We appreciate your workshops that gave us an opportunity to keep up with any new changes to the food safety requirements. So far we are ahead of the FSMA proposed regulations. The instructors have all been very qualified and informative. Every year I have been able to share new information with our 40 or so co-op members when they would not have the time to attend your workshops.”

Thomas Hesselgrave, Grower and Director of Food Safety
Miss-Lou Blueberry Growers Co-op Association

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Quotes (cont.)

“Attended Dr. Mahmoud’s GAP/GHP and HACCP classes. Both classes are very beneficial to my position as Producer and Quality Control Manager.”

Michael Eviszor

“The GAP/GHP workshop did improve our knowledge on food safety and we would like to be USDA certified.”

Mary Tuggle, Grower, Columbus, MS

“GAP/GHP workshop has increased my knowledge about food safety and I am interested in becoming USDA GAP certified.”

Eldridge Hoy, Farmer

“We here at SHROOMDOM INC., POPLARVILLE MS, would like safe handling programs put in place only as long as when you’re told what to do you are given the resources and contact information to do so. As a grower every time we are told to do this or that time is taken away from our farm, the cost of complying and going to workshops can also be a burden. We are happy to see that our state people are putting together a proposal to work with the farmers.”

Leilani A. Steward, Owner Operator of SHROOMDOM INC. Rosenbaum Dr., Poplarville, MS

“I have been at two of your classes. The one at Bost Hall and the one at Verona. Of all the classes I have attended yours have been the best. Both were well planned and informative. Your passion for your work is admirable. Not many people enjoy their work as much as you seem to.”

James Keller, Producer

Project Success Story

Dear Barakat,

I’m writing to express my sincere appreciation for the work that you and your team are doing with the Food Safety Training programs that you’re conducting around the state. Having personally participated in three of those programs, I can attest to the significant value of those programs in first of all, helping farmers to fully understand the importance of food safety for their operations, as well as instructing them as to the proper methods and regulations associated with the Food Safety process for their specific farm operation. Having first engaged in your programs prior to obtaining the GAP certification for my farm and packing/processing facility, I quickly learned the value that I derived from your instruction and training to better equip me for the GAP Audit. However, when I later decided to move up to the GAP/GHP Harmonized Certification, which is now required by many major retailers, I realized that I would simply have been unable to pass the certification requirements for GAP/GHP Harmonized had I not participated in your program prior to my certification audit. However, after your intensive and thorough training program on GAP/GHP Harmonized Certification, and a ton of work completed after your training and prior to my audit (the components of which I would simply not have been aware without your training), I passed the certification audit on the initial visit by the USDA inspector.

Barakat, your programs are invaluable to farmers in obtaining the necessary and required training and certification mandated by the new USDA Food Safety regulations, and I wholeheartedly endorse what you are doing. Please let me know how I can provide any support for you in encouraging other farmers to participate.

Thomas F. Giles, Denham Blues, Waynesboro, MS

***Sandra Martini, H. L. Goodwin** and **Ronald L. Rainey**, Grant Coordinator and Co-Directors, respectively, of the Southern Risk Management Education Center, serve as editors of this report series. To learn more about risk management education programs and resources, visit the Southern Center website (<http://srmeec.uark.edu>) or the Extension Risk Management Education Program link (www.extensionrme.org).

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