



Food Safety and Food Quality

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New workshop makes HACCP a kinder, gentler process

Food production and processing is a complex business, and many small-to-medium sized businesses feel overwhelmed at the work required to make sure food is safe and of a high quality. But help is at hand.

As part of the Canadian Food Safety and Quality Program - Food Safety Initiative, the BC Centre for Disease Control and regional health authorities are offering small-scale food processors hands-on support to develop their HACCP-based (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) food safety program.

HACCP is the internationally recognized system for proactively improving food safety from the beginning of the food chain to the end. It focuses on preventing and controlling hazards, such as food-borne illness, at all stages of the production line.

“HACCP is becoming standard practice around the world, something everyone in the food production and processing industry is expected to have,” said Sion Shyng, Food Safety Specialist with the BC Centre for Disease Control. “It’s not just about the big operations anymore. Small scale producers should be developing their own HACCP-based systems to

meet consumer and regulatory expectations.” The good news for small scale processors is that the BC Centre for Disease Control and the regional health authorities have spent the past year developing a new HACCP workshop and training manual – one that is simpler, clearer and easier to use. The manual walks processors through every step required to assess their operation, identify any gaps in their food safety program, and develop new systems to improve the safety of the end product.

“We’ve made it easier for producers to understand exactly what they need to do to improve plant operations”, Shyng said. “We’re also providing significant support for plant owners who recognize the need to start a HACCP plan. Regional health authorities are offering free, one-day workshops for eligible businesses that are interested in finding out more, and many of those will be eligible for a one-on-one, on-site consultation.”

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The Agricultural Policy Framework (APF) is a five-year federal-provincial-territorial agreement on agriculture that was implemented in 2003. It aims to position Canada as a world leader in food safety, innovation and environmentally responsible agricultural production.

The APF is made up of five complementary program elements: Business Risk Management, Food Safety and Quality, Science and Innovation, Environment, and Renewal.

The APF expires in March 2008. Growing Forward will build on the best of the current APF and form the basis of an action plan for the future policy and programs for Canada’s agriculture, agri-food and agri-based products industry.

For more information about the APF in British Columbia, please visit: www.al.gov.bc.ca/apf

For more information about Growing Forward, please visit: www.agr.gc.ca/growingforward

1500 Environmental Farm Plans completed in British Columbia



Rhonda Driediger celebrates the completion and implementation of her Environmental Farm Plan, one of 1,500 in British Columbia, with federal Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food, Chuck Strahl (left), and BC Minister of Agriculture and Lands, Pat Bell.

“We always want to reduce overhead watering because water splashing on the ground can send spores and bacteria bouncing up over the berry plants. So we’ve managed to reduce a food safety risk, too.”

- Rhonda Driediger, co owner, Driediger Farms

Farmers are stewards of the land. They depend on the long-term health of their farms and good relationships with their neighbours to manage the business.

Producers’ commitment to a cleaner, healthier environment for all Canadians, and safe healthy food for consumers, is what the Agricultural Policy Framework counted on when it introduced the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP) program. Funded by both federal and provincial governments, the EFP program helps farmers and ranchers identify environmental risks in their operations and develop and implement a plan to reduce those risks over the long term.

The program offers workshops and one-on-one meetings to give farmers technical assistance and guidance to perform an environmental assessment of their farm operation to outline their risks and benefits. Farmers can then develop an action plan to set priorities to mitigate agri-environmental risks. Once the plan is complete, farmers can apply for financial assistance through the National Farm Stewardship Program to implement the improvements.

Applications to the National Farm Stewardship Program can only be made once producers have successfully completed an EFP.

Since 2003, thousands of farmers in British Columbia have inquired about the program, and in April 2007, the completion of 1,500 EFPs was celebrated at Driediger Farms in the Fraser Valley.

Water conservation was a priority for the operation, and the program meant it could irrigate some 50 acres of the 160 acre berry farm.

“With our new drip system, we use 40 per cent less water to irrigate our plants,” said co-owner Rhonda Driediger. “There are lots of benefits to doing this. We save a lot of water, which is a direct benefit to the environment. Our use of overhead sprinklers is dramatically reduced and now, we’re delivering water directly to the root system of the plant instead of broadcasting it all over the grass – and the weeds!”

Driediger is an avid supporter of the EFP program, saying the benefits go much further than simply protecting the environment. “We always want to reduce overhead watering because water splashing on the ground can send spores and bacteria bouncing up over the berry plants. So we’ve managed to reduce a food safety risk, too.

“And finally, this system is much easier to run and control,” she said. “Before, someone with a licence to drive a tractor would have to move the enormous water guns around to different parts of the farm in order to water. With this drip irrigation system, everything is set up in zones, and we can easily program what areas get water, and when. We have more technology, but we don’t need to have technical skills to operate it. It’s much simpler.”

The Environmental Farm Plan and National Farm Stewardship Program in British Columbia received \$18 million, over five years, in federal funding for on-farm beneficial management practices. The program runs until March 31, 2008. The BC Agriculture Council delivers the EFP for the federal and provincial governments. These days, the Council is concentrating on helping farmers who have already expressed an interest in the program complete their EFP and implement improvements to their farms.

“The BC Agriculture Council takes environmental farm planning seriously and we recommend all farmers and ranchers take advantage of this program,” said BCAC Chair Dick Klein Geltink. “We see this program as vital to a prosperous, sustainable future and the ongoing confidence of our consumers.”

For more information on AAFC’s stewardship programs, visit: www.agr.gc.ca/env/efp-pfa/index_e.php or for more information on Environmental Farm Plans in British Columbia, please visit www.bcac.bc.ca/EFP_pages/about_us/



With the consumer market for fresh-cut fruit taking off, Tony DiMaria (above) and his business partner, Russell Husch, found the way to add value to their apple harvest. Russ and Tony's Fresh Sliced Apples is now a rapidly expanding business.



Adding Value: Two Okanagan Orchards reap the rewards

As anybody who operates an orchard will tell you, selling fresh fruit as a commodity can be a challenge. Just ask Tony DiMaria and Russell Husch of the Okanagan municipality of Lake Country, B.C. They are business partners, and three years ago they were looking for ways to get more value from their apples.

They found the answer at a conference, where they heard a grocery-chain official predict that the consumer market for fresh-cut fruit was about to take off. The partners' subsequent research confirmed not only that the takeoff was happening, but also that the market was expanding by 20 to 30 percent annually. On that evidence, establishing a fresh-sliced fruit operation seemed the perfect way to add value to their commodity. But they needed financing to set it up, which meant they had to develop a convincing business plan that they could show to potential lenders.

At this point, fortunately, Husch and DiMaria found out about the PAVE program, part of the Agricultural Policy Framework. PAVE, which stands for "Planning and Assessment for Value-Added Enterprises," will fund up to half the cost of hiring a business professional to help with specialized planning for a value-added farm project. "We heard about PAVE through the BC Fruit Growers' Association," says DiMaria. "They told us it would help finance our business study and our business plan, which sounded like a pretty reasonable deal. And it was, because PAVE saved us half the total cost of the consulting services we received."

DiMaria says that neither he nor Husch had ever gone through such a rigorous planning process. "It was quite an eye-opener. We worked with our consultant to put together a mission statement, a market study and a business plan, among other things. You sometimes wonder, while you're going through all this, how useful it actually is.

But as things move along, you realize you need to answer all these questions in advance. It helped a lot to be working with somebody who knew what questions to ask and how to lay out the map we needed to follow. The result was that we ended up with an excellent business plan, which was what we needed to take to the bank."

It all worked out, and the new company, Russ and Tony's Fresh Sliced Apples, was in business. With their financing approved, the partners could now lease a building, buy their equipment and cover their start-up costs. "We're now in our second year of operation," says DiMaria, "and business is expanding. We've already outgrown our first location and we're moving into a second building we purchased in July. The overall experience we had with PAVE was very good, and I'd definitely recommend the service to any horticulturalists looking for ways to diversify."

Is PAVE for you?

You may be eligible for Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's PAVE Service if you have an established farm operation with at least \$10,000 in annual gross sales, or if you're a beginning farmer with an expected \$10,000 in annual gross sales. You could receive funding to cover up to 50% of your eligible costs, to a maximum of \$10,000, when you hire a business professional to help you prepare a business plan or feasibility study for a value-added farm project. Groups can apply, too, with potential funding of up to \$25,000 for three or more participants.

To find out more about PAVE, please visit Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada's Renewal website at www.agr.gc.ca/renewal or call 1-866-452-5558.

Keeping the Family Farm: CASS Makes All the Difference



Brian Kingman has the best of both worlds: he owns the family farm in Abbotsford, and just qualified for his license as a machinery operator. Now, he can augment his income as a farmer.

Most farmers would rather farm than work at anything else, and they would also prefer to do it full time. But all too often, their farm income alone isn't enough to support their families, and off-farm work has become a necessary part of their lives.

That was the situation facing Brian Kingman of Abbotsford, B.C. "Our family operated a dairy farm till 1993," he says. "My grandfather owned it, and when he retired, he cashed in the quota. My family and I took over the land and we started breeding beef cattle, although in a small way. My grandfather passed on in 2000 and we decided to expand the beef operation. That's how I first got into machinery operation—digging a manure pit, excavating for our watercourses and so on."

Things looked reasonably good for the farm, but then BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) hit. "To keep going," recalls Kingman, "we were selling the young stock and holding on to the mothers. But we needed something else, and I thought maybe the government would have grants to help me get my ticket as a machinery operator. I looked around and found an operator training school, and at that point I found out about CASS."

CASS is the Canadian Agricultural Skills Service, provided through the Agricultural Policy Framework. It is intended to help farmers gain new skills and knowledge that they can use to develop their farms or to prepare for off-farm work.

The service will fund tuition, books, course materials and other expenses such as travel costs for eligible applicants. Kingman applied to CASS and was approved for the course he wanted, including travel costs.

"It was a two-month course," he says, "and I learned to operate an excavator. I now have my Class C license and my union ticket, and I hope that next year I'll be able to get my Class A license. With all the construction going on in B.C. for the 2010 Olympics, they need a lot of machinery operators, and with a Class A license I'll be able to work less and make more. That means I can put more time and energy into the farm."

For Kingman, the farm is what it's all about. He and his family are building a new herd and now have 80 head of cattle on their own 80 acres, plus another 20 rented acres. CASS, in his opinion, has made it possible for him to have a future in farming, even if it's only part time for now, and it's also given him a valuable skill he can use in the workforce whenever he needs it.

"For me and my family," Kingman says, "CASS made all the difference. If it wasn't for CASS, we'd have lost the farm. So I'd recommend it, for sure."

For more information about CASS, please call Service Canada toll free at 1-800-662-6232, or visit www.agr.gc.ca/cass

Growing Forward: Building on the best of the APF

When Agriculture Ministers from across Canada met in Whistler in June, the agenda was about one thing: Growing Forward. This is a bold new market-driven vision for the agriculture, agri-food and agri-based products industry that builds on the best of the APF, and draws heavily on ideas put forward by producers and other stakeholders in the sector during extensive cross-country consultations this past winter.

Growing Forward will support a business environment that promotes innovation, encourages the agriculture and agri-food or agri-based products sector to increase competitiveness and helps manage business risks effectively. It will include measures to help producers and others in the industry capitalize on new and evolving markets at home and abroad and continue to contribute to the environment and the health and wellness of Canadians.

The Ministers also announced a new suite of programs that respond to producers' demands for more responsive, predictable and bankable programming to replace the Canadian Agricultural Income Stabilization program. With the exception of AgriRecovery, which remains to be determined, programs will be cost-shared on the basis of traditional arrangements.

The new programs include:

- AgriInvest – savings accounts for producers that provide flexible coverage for small income declines and support investments that help mitigate risks or improve market income.
- AgriStability – a margin-based program that provides income support when a producer experiences larger income losses.
- AgriInsurance – includes existing production insurance and other insurance products, and will expand to include other commodities.

Details of these and other programs and activities within Growing Forward will be negotiated by federal, provincial and territorial governments over the coming months, in close consultation with producers and stakeholders. An action plan will identify initiatives and programs to be introduced, retained, modified, or ended, and will focus on orderly transition plans from the APF to Growing Forward.

For more information about Growing Forward and to stay up-to-date on any new developments, please visit: www.agr.gc.ca/growingforward/

Meanwhile, APF will remain current and active until March, 2008.

For more information about APF programs in B.C., visit the APF website at www.al.gov.bc.ca/apf.



Growing Forward is being developed in close consultation with stakeholders in the agricultural and processing industry. The federal, provincial and territorial governments are currently working on a detailed action plan.



Nancy Clements and Kier Cordner lead food producers on Vancouver Island through the HACCP steps at a recent workshop in Victoria. The workshops, part of the Canadian Food Safety and Quality Program – Food Safety Initiative, are available through health authorities across British Columbia.

Rita Cheng, President of Superior Tofu in Vancouver, is happy to hear that. She’s a strong advocate of the value of HACCP compliance, and says her company has reaped the benefits of being certified.

“One of our customers wanted to come and inspect our plant, and that got us involved in looking at this whole process,” Cheng explained. “We were also looking at exporting our product, and the marketing side of the business asked if we were certified. We realized that if we wanted to expand, we needed to achieve a certain standard.”

“Having a HACCP certification tells potential customers that we have a high-quality plant,” said Cheng. “Many potential customers haven’t heard of us, but knowing that we have been certified and that we practice HACCP, they have confidence to do business with us.”

Not only has Superior Tofu improved the quality and safety of the product and tracing systems, there have been unexpected benefits as well.

“Our staff training is much simpler now,” Cheng said. “As a result of going through the HACCP process, we now have very detailed job descriptions. We had to analyse the production flow, identify what each person does, what their work procedures are, and we established operating procedures for every single job. “We have hundreds of job descriptions. It was very daunting, but now, when we have to train new staff, we can go to a binder and pull out all these standard operating procedures. This prevents new staff from making mistakes on the floor, and it saves us time in training them.”

Cheng believes that more support and a simpler HACCP process will encourage other food processors to come on board.

“There was a lot of ‘Oh my gosh, this is horrendous!’ when we first looked at the HACCP documents,” she said. “I think that’s the first reaction of anyone who looks at them. It was really off-putting, especially for small businesses. But even though it was tough, it was worth it. Making it even easier for other businesses is a great idea.”

Your food processing business is eligible if:

- You are not federally registered
- Food is processed on site (fish and shellfish excluded)
- You sell your product off-site

If you’re eligible, you can:

- Attend a free one-day food safety workshop to review Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs) and the application of HACCP to the processes you use in your plant.

The workshop includes:

- basic food safety theory
- hands-on activities, and
- tools and templates to take away and implement at your food processing plant.
- Receive free one-on-one on-site consultation with a Food Safety Initiative Consultant, or Environmental Health Officer, who can assist in developing your own GMPs and HACCP plans.

Find a workshop in your community:

- Food Protection Services, BC Centre for Disease Control 604-660-0260 fsi@bccdc.ca
www.bccdc.org/content.php?item=334
- Fraser Health Authority (FHA) 604-507-5478 fsi@fraserhealth.ca
www.fraserhealth.ca/HealthInfo/PublicHealth/Food+Safety+Initiative.htm
- Interior Health Authority (IHA) 250-980-5080 fsi@interiorhealth.ca
www.interiorhealth.ca/Health+and+Safety/FoodSafety/BCHACCP/
- Northern Health Authority (NHA) 250-638-2222 fsi@northernhealth.ca
www.northernhealth.ca
- Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) 250-334-5457 fsi@viha.ca
www.viha.ca/mho/food/Food+Safety+Initiative.htm
- Vancouver Coastal Health Authority (VCHA) 604-675-6912 fsi@vch.ca
www.vch.ca/environmental/food/safety.htm