

Good Agricultural Practices (GAP): New Developments That Will Affect Your Business

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Many people are familiar with Gap, an American clothing and accessories retailer founded in 1969 and based in San Francisco, with approximately 150,000 employees and 3,000 stores worldwide. While my daughter may still buy her jeans at a Gap store, Gap will take on new meaning for potato producers, processors, and packers.

Good Agricultural Practices, more commonly known by the initials GAP, are not new guidelines. The New Jersey Department of Agriculture initially requested development of a GAP & GHP Audit Verification Program after New Jersey growers and packers were asked by retailers to demonstrate their adherence with GAPs & GHPs. USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) responded favorably to this request and to a similar request from the Association of Fruit and Vegetable Inspection and Standardization Agencies (AFVISA), a group of state program managers who represent the interests of inspection programs at the state level.

More recently, on May 31, 2006 David Tuckwiller, chief of the USDA Fruit and Vegetable Programs' Commodity Procurement Branch, issued a memo stating that verification adherence to FDA GAP guidelines will be required for all fresh products supplied to their program.

As of July 1, 2007, passing a GAP certification audit with an 80 percent or higher score will be required for potatoes and other fresh products purchased under USDA feeding and nutrition programs. Some grocery chains are also proposing requirement of this certification. McCain Foods is proposing this requirement in the upcoming contract negotiations. Lacking this certification could have a major impact on your potato business.

Audits are performed by Federal-State Inspection Service (FSIS) staff. Auditors are licensed fresh fruit and vegetable inspectors, and are trained in the technical specifications of the GAP/GHP Audit Verification Program.

Passing a GAP audit does not guarantee safe food. GAP certification is verification that practices are conducted on the farm to minimize microbial contamination in the production of harvested produce. GAP certification verifies the farm's adherence to the Food and Drug Administration's "*Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables.*" (Copies are available at <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/prodguid.html>).

The USDA GAP audit is voluntary and consists of verifying compliance with the *General Questions* and some or all of parts 1 through 7. Most potato growers will be involved with the *General Questions*, *Farm Review* (part 1), *Field Harvest and Field Packing* (part 2), and *Storage and Transportation* (part 4). Many of the audit questions involve practices already being done, but lacking documentation. For most potato growers, passing the audit should not involve a lot of changes, only increased documentation.

The FDA guidance document identifies the following areas that participants should demonstrate control of in their operations to minimize microbial hazards in fresh fruits and vegetables: water, manure and municipal bio-solids, worker health and hygiene, sanitary facilities, field sanitation, and transportation, among others.

The *General Questions* confirm the implementation of a basic food safety program. The *Farm Review* questions confirm mitigation of hazards associated with land use and water. The *Field Harvest and Field Packing* questions verify the implementation of precautions and practices that mitigate microbial contamination during harvest and field packing. The audit for part 4, *Storage and Transportation*, needs to be conducted during harvest when harvest crews are operating.

Operations with passing results are acknowledged with an official USDA certificate verifying that the operation has passed the applicable elements of the audit. The certification is valid for one year. With the participant's permission, passing audit results are posted on USDA's Web site and are accessible to growers as well as customers. A list of potato operations currently GAP-certified can be viewed at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/fsis/Potatoes.pdf>.

A list of all Maine operations currently GAP certified can be viewed at:
<http://www.ams.usda.gov/fv/fsis/Maine.pdf>.

Expect that dealing with GAP will be a forever thing. Again, most of what is required is already being done. What is not being done is documenting what is being done. Granted, there will have to be some changes made. Some of these will be very minor; some might be a little more involved. With proper documentation, I don't expect that potato growers will have a problem passing the audit.

University of Maine Cooperative Extension is developing training materials and programs to help potato growers fulfill this USDA requirement. These will be available in PDF format for downloading at the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Potato Program Web site, under *GAP self audits and documentation files and Related Publications*, at <http://www.umaine.edu/umext/potatoprogram/>.