

Farm Worker Training Issues

By Phil Tocco

There are certain things that every farm worker needs to know. Whether it is the proper way to wash their hands or where the first aid kit is, you usually orient your workers at the beginning of the season with this kind of information. Where a GAP manual is concerned, this orientation must be formalized with each specific point to be covered addressed in the manual. In an effort to help growers frame these specific points in their training, it might be helpful to review them.

Take a moment to think through where farmworkers can be directed to eat and drink. Is it confined to a designated break area? Is it sufficient for them to eat, drink and take breaks just outside the harvest area? Is there adequate room for them to have breaks and lunch just outside the harvest area? In the policy written in the GAP manual, indicate EXACTLY where harvest workers must engage in these activities. Make sure farm workers are told this during the worker training. Encourage this behavior by conveniently placing restrooms and hand washing stations in this area as well.

Farm workers need to know what illness symptoms can be hazards to food safety.

These symptoms include diarrhea, fever, vomiting, jaundice, sore throat with a fever, or a lesion full of pus on any exposed skin. When they have these symptoms, they need to tell their supervisor. Growers may want to keep a number of non-food related jobs these farm workers can be involved with so they are more willing to report when they feel ill, as it will not be a loss in a day's pay.

As part of the training, growers will want to point out where the first aid kits are and outline policies on injuries as well as blood and bodily fluids in the field. Growers need to point out that all injuries must be recorded and direct them to report injuries to the staff member responsible for the record. Fully explain the farm's policy on any bodily fluid contamination of produce and in-field contamination as well as what to do with the produce or affected soil. The enumeration of procedures in your GAP manual might not sound necessary, but it ensures that every farm worker starts out with the exact same information and nothing is forgotten.

In an effort to help growers through the process of implementing Good Agricultural Practices, Michigan State University Extension has trained a number of Extension Educators throughout the state to help walk individuals through the process. The hope is that these educators can answer questions and help growers inexpensively to reduce certification costs from several thousand dollars to several hundred dollars. Find e-mail links to Agrifood Safety Educators at www.gaps.msue.msu.edu/contact.htm.

A number of training aids are available to help you in educating your farm workers. An effective worker training video is available from the National GAPs program at Cornell. It covers all the points you need to cover to be GAP Compliant. Extension Offices in Michigan with an Agrifood Safety Educator are equipped with a limited supply of this worker training video. They can be borrowed from these offices. If you would like to buy your own copy, a link to the National GAPs Program Website can be found on the "GAP Resources for Growers" page of the Agrifood Safety

Workgroup website.

Growers have also had difficulty crafting GAP language and finding resources to guide them through the process. In an effort to help them, MSU Extension offers the Agrifood Safety Minute, a weekly web program that will discuss an aspect of GAPs in depth and offer guidance on how to get it implemented on the farm. You can find these episodes at www.gaps.msu.edu/afsm.htm.

Federal and State laws around this important issue are very fluid. As of this writing, it is unclear whether the Federal government's proposed rules will be more stringent than a retail industry imposed third party standard. In addition, as retailers work through implementing these standards they will migrate to a more uniform standard. To find out more about this emerging topic, feel free to contact MSU Extension and these specially trained educators for the latest information at gaps@msu.edu or join our discussion on Facebook.