

## **Harmonization of Produce Food Safety Standards Steering Committee Meeting Summary**

September 22, 2009  
Doubletree Atlanta Airport

The first meeting of the Steering Committee of the Harmonization of Produce Food Safety Standards Initiative was held September 22, 2009 at the Doubletree Hotel Atlanta Airport. A number of industry leaders had participated in a conference call preliminary discussion on August 18, and subsequently agreed to serve on a Steering Committee to help provide guidance to this overall effort.

Brian Kocher, president, Chiquita Brands North America, serves as chairman of the Steering Committee and led the meeting. Dr. David Gombas, United Fresh senior vice president for food safety and technology, reviewed with the committee that a Food Safety & Technology Council working group on Standards Harmonization, chaired by Suresh DeCosta of McDonald's Corporation, had helped develop the Global Conference on Produce Food Safety Standards held in conjunction with the association's convention in April 2009. That conference brought together all standard owners and auditors to review the multitude of standards used in the industry, resulting in a recognition that as much as 90 percent of current GAP audits are similar, despite being used in the industry as unique and separate audit standards. Recognizing this similarity, industry leaders from retail, foodservice, wholesale, processors and grower-shippers agreed to launch an effort to drive toward harmonization of GAP standards.

With that background, the committee then discussed a number of issues related to the vision for this effort and scope of work. Committee members agreed that the effort must ensure the highest level of food safety protection for consumers based upon science-based GAP standards that address the most critical prevention steps necessary. The committee agreed to limit its focus at present to pre-farm gate operations subject to FDA's interpretation of Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) vs. Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs).

With that commitment, the committee agreed upon a vision to develop a harmonized food safety standard and checklist for GAP audits that build efficiencies into the audit process, allow for rigorous independent validation, and result in one audit by any credible third party that can be acceptable to all buyers.

The committee also agreed on parameters defining the scope of work and requirements of a single harmonized GAP standard and checklist acceptable to all:

- Clearly defined requirements that minimize opportunity for misunderstanding, misinterpretation and "standards creep" by operations and auditors;
- Standard that is globally recognized, but specifically applicable to North America operations;
- Requirements are risk-based, science-based, attainable, auditable and verifiable;
- Consider all microbiological, chemical and physical hazards reasonably likely to occur, consistent with potential hazards addressed in FDA regulatory guidances;
- Scalable to all size fresh produce operations;
- Recognize and take into account regional- and commodity-specific food safety needs;
- Sufficiently non-prescriptive to accept equivalent food safety practices;
- Acceptable to a critical mass of customers requiring general produce food safety audits;
- Freely accessible for non-proprietary use by any producer, buyer or auditor;
- Flexible enough to adapt as science reveals better practices and limits.

The committee discussed next steps, and agreed to move forward in establishing a Technical Working Group (TWG) comprised of food safety, QA and technical experts from each stage in the produce supply chain. This group will begin the detailed work of comparing elements all of the various GAP audits in use currently, and working toward harmonization of these provisions into one standard and checklist. The TWG will be chaired by Suresh DeCosta, McDonald's Corporation, and Dr. Gombas. The Steering Committee provided the following direction in forming and working with a new Technical Working Group:

- Be open to all participants across the industry who are willing to join in the effort to develop harmonized GAP standards.
- Be a broadly inclusive group of experts across the industry, ensuring representation of all points of view in its deliberations.
- Begin its efforts examining similarities and differences in all existing GAP standards in use, with a goal toward identifying specific areas of current alignment, and those areas requiring further work to get to harmonized approach.
- Develop a consensus-based harmonized GAP standard for proposal back to the Steering Committee for review.
- Third-party auditors and standard owners should be encouraged to participate on the TWG, to provide both their expertise and to ensure that all valid views are considered. While encouraging standard owners and auditors to present their unique and differing opinions, the Committee agreed that their participation should be based on support of the overall harmonization initiative, not opposed to the fundamental goal.
- Deliver a completed consensus GAP standard and checklist to the Steering Committee by October 1, 2010.

The Steering Committee agreed that a single GAP standard and checklist would not, by itself, eliminate redundancy of audits. The ultimate goal - one audit by any credible third party, acceptable to all buyers – would require tools to ensure auditor reliability. The Committee agreed that for the ultimate outcome to be successful, the harmonized GAP standard must be globally recognized through a credible third-party benchmarking process.

The Steering Committee agreed that next steps would include forming the Technical Working Group and beginning its work, agreeing on a public/media communication approach to describe the initiative, and reviewing interim progress through update reports, conference calls, and a potential face-to-face meeting near the project's midpoint.