



Op-Ed Article for The Packer January 29, 2007 Issue

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None of us can deny that our fresh produce industry faces a different business world today than we did six months ago. Each time any fruit or vegetable is implicated in a foodborne illness outbreak, we all suffer from lost consumer confidence in our industry as a whole. In the long run, this is simply not sustainable and certainly not acceptable.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our Board of Directors' vision on a set of principles for our nation's food safety regulatory system that we believe will provide the greatest assurance of food safety possible, combined with strong consumer confidence to sustain our industry for the future.

First, we believe produce safety standards must be consistent and applicable to all produce grown anywhere in the United States, or imported into this country. We strongly applaud Western Growers, the Grower Shipper Association of Central California, and those industry members working so hard today on standards for lettuce and leafy greens grown in California. In fact, Dr. Jim Gorny and Dr. David Gombas of our staff are working daily on the recommended standards and metrics for these efforts. This effort is critical in addressing near-term confidence in these specific commodities. But to earn the long term trust of retailers, restaurateurs and most importantly, consumers, we also believe that all fresh fruits and vegetables must be held to the same standards, regardless of their origin.

Second, produce safety standards must be mandatory, with sufficient federal oversight in order to be credible to consumers. Strong and clear federal oversight is essential to building and maintaining public confidence in all of our products. The industry's integrity and ability to defend ourselves in the event of an outbreak depends on our ability to assure the consumer that we are complying with government established, government enforced, and government supported food safety practices.

Third, these standards cannot depend only on marketing programs or voluntary certification, although these programs can be helpful. Again, we applaud those commodity groups working to implement their own voluntary standards, even without federal requirements. Yet, while these programs are an important means for specific sectors of the industry to enhance performance, long-term public trust requires that such standards must be endorsed by the government in an open and transparent process, with full input from industry, academia, consumers and all stakeholders.

Finally, produce safety standards must allow for commodity-specific food safety practices based on the best available science. One size does not fit all in the produce industry, and a federal regulatory approach must contain needed scientific flexibility to address specific commodities differently based on their unique production and handling practices.

It is our goal to drive a U.S. regulatory framework for the fresh produce industry that incorporates these principles as expeditiously as possible. We will work with allied produce industry associations, customer associations for retail and foodservice, the Food and Drug Administration, USDA, members of Congress and all other stakeholders to implement federal food safety policies that are consistent with these principles.

While these steps may not always be comfortable, we are convinced they are necessary to protect the future of our fresh produce industry. We know scientifically that we cannot promise there will never be another outbreak of foodborne disease. But we also know that in the future, we must be able to stand side-by-side with government to reassure the public that together, we have done everything we know to implement and comply with strong mandatory government standards to protect public health.

We ask for your support and encourage you to make your views known as we go forward in this process together.



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