



## Interested in the Produce GAPs Harmonized Standard?

Not quite sure what it is? Confused about how it works? Check out our Frequently Asked Questions below!

### WHAT IS THE HARMONIZED, HARMONIZED TO?

In 2009, United Fresh helped convene a diverse group of stakeholders to review and harmonize existing GAP audit standards, with the goal of developing “*One audit by any credible third party, acceptable to all buyers.*”

Thirteen commonly accepted fresh produce food safety standards were evaluated by a group of 150 volunteer technical experts in the areas of food safety, growing, and handling practices for a wide variety of commodities and growing regions. The group identified the commonalities and selected the words from each that best suited a common standard, without sacrificing any food safety considerations. The end result was the Produce GAPs Harmonized Standard.

### WHAT IS UNITED FRESH’S ROLE IN THE HARMONIZED?

United Fresh facilitated the original development process by coordinating several working groups, consisting of United Fresh members and non-members, who worked on various aspects of the effort.

United Fresh now serves as the Secretariat for the Harmonized Standard. In this role, we maintain the standard and coordinate the efforts of the Harmonized Technical Working Group and Calibration Committee. United Fresh does not conduct audits, issue or manage certificates, set prices, or otherwise influence the audit process. Instead, this is done by audit organizations licensed by United Fresh.

### WILL MY CUSTOMERS ACCEPT AN AUDIT PERFORMED TO THE HARMONIZED STANDARD?

The Harmonized is widely accepted. A representative list of major buyers that accept the Harmonized is on the United Fresh website. United Fresh is always happy to share additional information with buyers who may not understand the scope of the Harmonized, the benchmarking with GFSI, or alignment with the Produce Safety Rule. Not surprisingly, some buyers have additional requirements that can be added as riders or addenda.

## HAS THE HARMONIZED BEEN BENCHMARKED TO GFSI?

In 2016, GLOBALG.A.P North America successfully took the Harmonized (referred to as “HPSS”) through the GFSI *benchmarking* process.

Similarly, in 2018 USDA-AMS’s Harmonized Standard (referred to as “HGAP+”) attained *technical equivalency* with GFSI, a process similar to benchmarking, reserved for government entities. USDA AMS has an [FAQ](#) that explains more about the various audits offered by the agency, and their relationship with GFSI.

While United Fresh does not directly participate in the benchmarking process for the Harmonized, we do stay informed of GFSI activities. In May 2020, United Fresh submitted comments for the “[Race to the Top](#)” Stakeholder Consultation. The comments can be found [here](#).

## DOES THIS MEAN THAT ANY AUDIT TO THE HARMONIZED STANDARD WILL MEET THE REQUIREMENTS OF CUSTOMERS WHO REQUIRE GFSI?

Not necessarily. Although all licensees use the same technical standard (verbatim), the process and structure around conducting the audit is up to each audit organization and is not under the authority of United Fresh. This is part of the benchmarking process and may vary. In addition, there are a few additional topics (e.g., food defense) that GFSI requires be added to the Harmonized, and these topics are handled differently by different audit groups.

## HOW IS THE HARMONIZED SCORED?

The Harmonized does not including a scoring system. Each audit organization may select a scoring approach (major/minor, numerical score, pass/fail, etc.).

## IF DIFFERENT AUDIT ORGANIZATIONS PERFORM HARMONIZED AUDITS, HOW DOES IT REMAIN ‘HARMONIZED’?

All licensees are required to use the same technical standard verbatim, with no changes in wording permitted. Licensees may include *additional* items in the audit, provided that those items are clearly marked, but they may not delete audit items.

Licensees are also required to select at least one person within their organization to actively participate on the Calibration Committee, which is tasked with resolving disputes or other questions regarding interpretation of the standard. The Calibration Committee convenes quarterly to discuss these interpretation questions and to otherwise keep the Committee informed on relevant updates regarding the Harmonized Standard.

## HOW DOES THE HARMONIZED COMPARE TO THE PRODUCE SAFETY RULE?

They line up well. In July 2016, the Technical Working Group (including FDA representatives) for the Harmonized Standard compared the elements of the standard to the requirements in the Produce Safety Rule, and as applicable, the Preventive Controls for Human Food rule.

Changes to the Harmonized were proposed, and the updated standard was open for comment before being finalized in late 2016. USDA’s Ag Marketing Service (AMS) has also worked with FDA to attain recognition that the Harmonized adequately covers the requirements of the Produce Safety Rule. United Fresh supports this recognition.



Produce GAPs  
Harmonization Initiative

## **SO, IF I'M CERTIFIED TO THE HARMONIZED DOES THAT MEAN MY FARM WON'T BE INSPECTED BY FDA?**

A Harmonized audit is not a substitute for a regulatory inspection. However, FDA has verbally stated that they are considering how certification by USDA AMS (a sister agency) may, along with other factors, reduce the frequency of inspection.

## **HOW CAN I FIND SOMEONE TO PERFORM AN AUDIT TO THE HARMONIZED?**

United Fresh maintains a current list of audit organizations that are licensed to use the Harmonized. Producers interested in the Harmonized should reach out to them directly. United Fresh does not conduct audits. Licensed organizations are free to determine all aspects of the audit process including fees, scoring, etc. Producers should evaluate different audit organizations to determine which is right for them.

## **HOW ARE AUDITORS TRAINED?**

The licensing agreement requires that “all auditors under the Licensee’s control, care, employment, or use shall not perform any audits under the copyright work until having successfully completed training using official training materials as prescribed by the Calibration Committee.”

## **HOW OR WHERE CAN I FIND HARMONIZED TRAINING AUDITOR OR GROWER COURSES?**

In addition to resolving interpretation questions, the Calibration Committee develops official training materials for the Harmonized Standard. United Fresh expects to conduct Harmonized Standard training at least 1x / year. Although the training is designed specifically for auditors, growers are welcome and encouraged to attend, as is anyone with an interest in the Harmonized. After much request, United Fresh is considering developing and conducting grower-specific training in the near future.

Licensees may also conduct training, which may or may not be public.

Training workshops will be posted on the United Fresh website. Please contact Dr. Emily Griep ([egriep@unitedfresh.org](mailto:egriep@unitedfresh.org)) if you'd like to request training.

## **I'D LIKE TO AUDIT TO THE HARMONIZED. HOW CAN I DO THAT?**

United Fresh makes the technical standard freely available and licenses it to several audit organizations. We do not conduct audits. It's up to the licensees to employ (or contract with) auditors, ensure they are trained, manage certificates etc. We recommend you contact one of the audit companies to understand how you can become an auditor for them. State departments of agriculture also perform a number of GAP audits. You can find a list of licensees on the United Fresh website.

## **WHAT IS THE PROCESS TO UPDATE OR ADJUST THE HARMONIZED STANDARD?**

Recommendations and requests for changes to the Harmonized must be submitted to United Fresh and then reviewed by Calibration Committee for recommendation to Technical Working Group (TWG). The TWG will then



consider these comments/proposals and make actionable updates as necessary. All changes to the Standards will be published as draft on the United Fresh website with an open industry comment period. Without objection, the final Harmonized documents will become new versions with proper notification to all parties involved.

United Fresh will be initiating a new round of updates in the summer of 2019 and seeks individuals willing to serve on the Technical Working Group.

## **WHAT IS THE PROCESS TO RESOLVE DISPUTES ON INTERPRETATION OF THE STANDARDS?**

First, the dispute should be brought to the organization conducting the audit for internal resolution. If the audit organization is unable to come to a resolution, the question may then be brought to the Calibration Committee. The committee will discuss the scenario in question and come to a consensus on how to interpret the standard in that situation.

A summary of interpretations may be found under the 'Download the Harmonized Standards' tab on the United Fresh website at [www.unitedfresh.org/food-safety/gap-harmonization-initiative](http://www.unitedfresh.org/food-safety/gap-harmonization-initiative).

## **WHO MAKES UP THE TECHNICAL WORKING GROUP (TWG)?**

The Technical Working Group is comprised of over 70 stakeholders, representing, growers, customers, suppliers, government, audit companies, and association staff across various commodity sectors. The TWG includes a broad scope of operation sizes and producing regions from North America. Participation on the TWG is [open to anyone interested in participating](#).

To join the TWG, please contact Dr. Emily Griep ([egriep@unitedfresh.org](mailto:egriep@unitedfresh.org))

## **WHO MAKES UP THE CALIBRATION COMMITTEE?**

The Calibration Committee is comprised of individuals representing organizations holding a licensing agreement for the Harmonized as well as technical industry experts. The Calibration Committee is responsible for real-time dispute resolution on interpretation questions and the development of official auditor training materials.

## **WHERE CAN I FIND THE STANDARDS?**

The Harmonized Standards are freely available under the 'Download the Harmonized Standards' tab on the United Fresh website at [www.unitedfresh.org/food-safety/gap-harmonization-initiative](http://www.unitedfresh.org/food-safety/gap-harmonization-initiative).

## **WHO CAN I CONTACT FOR MORE INFORMATION?**

Contact Dr. Emily Griep at United Fresh with any further questions:

[egriep@unitedfresh.org](mailto:egriep@unitedfresh.org)

(202) 303-3401

