

Sharing Upper Peninsula Grower Experience with Detroit Growers

Food safety has become more important than ever to farmers, food hubs, and food buyers in the past few years as federal regulations change in response to foodborne illness outbreaks. Can small farms comply with the same standards that large-scale farming operations employ to protect the food supply without getting forced out of business?

In order to better understand how food safety certification would look for small farms, and to offer practical best practices and expert advice, a group of ten farms in the Upper Peninsula underwent food safety certification last year as part of an ongoing pilot project. The U.P. Food Exchange, a partnership between the Marquette Food Co-op and MSU Extension with support from the Western Upper Peninsula Health Department, participated in a federal-level group food safety certification pilot project. This project was sponsored by USDA and The Wallace Center at Winrock International and funded by Michigan Food & Farming Systems (MIFFS) through a USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant program (administered by MDARD) and the U.P. Food Exchange.

New Report on Food Safety Pilot Project in the U.P. Gets Statewide Attention

UP Food Exchange Press Release

July 20, 2015

On January 17, 2015 over 450 farmers and local farm advocates came to the 2015 Michigan Family Farms Conference and were able to hear first hand the experiences from those involved in Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP) USDA Group GAP pilot (one of five in the country).

Group GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) enables multiple farmers to work together to reach the standards necessary for GAP certification and then to be collectively certified by USDA if all their food safety plans and practices are documented and verified by the group.

Interest grew as the information spread throughout the state.

In August, as part of a "Four Great Friday's" business series for producers in Detroit, MI, MIFFS connected food safety, Group GAP, and local conservation service experts with farmers from four collective farms within the city of Detroit (Earthworks, Ohana Gardens Detroit, Oakland Avenue Community Farm, and Keep Growing Detroit.) There were also individual farmers, not associated with one of those farms, joined in for a total of twenty-eight attendees.

The agenda was created with the hopes of sharing the complicated information in a listener friendly manner while also honestly presenting the reality of what it takes to be part of a Group GAP pilot. Three key people were prepared to present: Natasha Lantz, Outreach Director, Marquette Food Co-op and Project Co-Lead, U.P. Food Exchange; Phil Britton, Quality Management Systems Specialist and both UP Pilot team member as well as Cherry

Capital Foods employee; Evan Smith, Chief of Operations at Cherry Capital Foods, a statewide local foods distributor. In addition, Michigan State University Extension food safety specialist, Phil Tocco and three Michigan Agricultural Environmental Assurance Program technicians were present to answer questions and share available services related to food safety best practices.

The presenters struggled together with the best way to present all the information without it becoming an “info dump,” . . . overwhelming, uninteresting, and ultimately useless.

Michelle Napier-Dunnings, MIFFS Executive Director and a 20-year veteran of participatory facilitation, began the August 21st workshop with a question to the group, “What do you know about food safety and how is it the same/different than organic certification?” (FYI: Earthworks is an organically certified farm in downtown Detroit.)

Thirty minutes later, the wall was covered with information on flip chart paper and the scheduled presenters were sitting in awe. The experts were amazed! Individually they commented on the wealth of knowledge in this group and that this group knew more collectively than the others at previous food safety workshop gatherings.

Within that asset-based framework, the workshop stayed energized. When Phil Britton presented his PPT on the nuts and bolts of how the Group GAP program works, there were questions and comments throughout. Rather than being overwhelming, his presentation was received by an energized, participatory audience.

In the afternoon, we worked in small groups, listened to other service providers, and had a short presentation by Evan Smith regarding Cherry Capital’s willingness to help coordinate additional farmers interested in Group GAP. And the farms/farmers ended by articulating the roles each would consider playing in the future.

MIFFS mission is to connect farmers to each other and to resource opportunities. Not only was that accomplished in this workshop, but also the “expertise” in the room ended up being everyone! It demonstrated once again the importance of listening first, finding out what your audience already knows, offering additional information, and then working as partners to create greater success for all.