

A Closer Look at Inspecting

BY Carl Newell

Training and Development Center plays a vital role educating the industry

Is your produce being supplied from a facility verified as meeting current Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP)? Are produce staff washing their hands before handling fruit or vegetables? Are they following current guidelines established by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)? Who is verifying compliance with these guidelines?

With recent food safety incidents throughout the country, adherence to such guidelines is more important than ever. The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Fresh Products Branch is a valuable resource for the industry. It can play a key role as an independent auditing service to verify that produce suppliers are following guidelines for reducing microbial food safety risks. It also provides training by teaching commodity grading standards to federal and federal-state inspectors and to individual growers and business people.

The branch is committed to working with growers and businesses to provide inspection and grading services, audit verifications for food safety or identity preservation,



inspector and industry training, and outreach activities. The Fresh Products Branch produce inspectors—including more than 3,500 federally licensed state inspectors—are located throughout the country in all fifty states and Puerto Rico.

These dedicated public servants work at terminal markets and shipping point locations from early morning to late evening, inspecting fruit and



Dr. Carl Newell assumed the Section Head position for the Training and Development Center of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service on October 15, 2006. Prior to accepting his USDA position, he led a proprietary four-year

college in Richmond, VA as the campus director. He transitioned out of the military in 1994 after a twenty-two-year career as a United States Air Force officer.

Key Elements

The Fresh Products Branch of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) plays a key role in verifying that produce suppliers are following guidelines for reducing microbial food safety risks. Some key responsibilities of the branch include the following.

- 🔑 The branch employs USDA-licensed auditors who audit farms, packing houses, and warehouse facilities nationwide.
- 🔑 The branch co-sponsors frequent commodity training sessions with the United Fresh Produce Association.
- 🔑 The branch's Training and Development Center ensures the integrity of inspection results and improves the quality and uniformity of its services.

To learn more about each key element, look for the 🔑 throughout the article.

vegetables based on U.S. Grade Standards or industry specifications.

🔑 The branch also employs USDA-licensed auditors who audit farms, packing houses, and warehouse facilities nationwide. Its customers—farmers, shippers, receivers, importers, exporters, sellers, buyers, and processors—use these services daily on a fee-for-service basis to help ensure they get the quality products they expect.

Training Center

All Fresh Products Branch inspectors are expected to maintain high levels of skills in the performance of their duties. To this end, the Fresh Products Branch's National Training and Development Center was established in 2001. The primary goal of the center is to train and support a pool of trained, knowledgeable, and competent inspectors to carry out their responsibilities to consumers and the fresh produce industry.

The Training and Development Center is located forty-eight miles south of Washington, DC in Fredericksburg, VA. The 17,000-square-foot facility is home base for seven Training and Development Section staff members. The facility has been used to train hundreds of fresh fruit and vegetable inspectors on 161 produce standards for eighty-seven different commodities.

Training Opportunities

Training courses cover general inspection principles and specific commodity classes for new inspectors and refresher classes for experienced inspectors. All courses incorporate training in ethical guidelines, values, and customer service. Experiential training includes mock inspections using actual produce samples purchased from the region's wholesale markets.

Participants inspect samples, practice proper recording methods, and report results on official Branch Terminal Market Inspection Certificates. Training is also provided to "federal and federal-state inspectors in GAP and GHP for audit verification programs.

In addition to training USDA employees, the branch provides training to

individual growers and business people. In fact, since opening in 2001, more than 1,600 students, including new and experienced inspectors and industry professionals, have been trained at this facility.

USDA trainers also can take their programs "on the road" to a company's location, further customizing the program to meet that firm's particular needs. Some class customizations that trainers can accommodate include a focus on specific commodities or a food defense orientation.

Whether you are a wholesaler, receiver, shipper, or government agency, the branch can develop training designed to meet the specific needs of your company. Good Agriculture Practices and Good Handling Practices training are now being refined based on the FDA's "Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables." This publication provides general food-safety guidance at critical points throughout the marketing channels. Although the ultimate responsibility for food-safety regulations lays with the FDA, the USDA is doing its part in ensuring food safety.

🔑 Frequent commodity training sessions are co-sponsored with the United Fresh Produce Association. This Produce Inspection Training Program has been developed into two specialized courses: Introduction to Produce Inspection and Advanced Produce Inspection. New for 2007, each advanced course will include the five most commonly requested commodities: grapes, lettuces, potatoes, strawberries, and tomatoes. In addition to these five, each course is customized with up to ten additional commodities based on the attendees' most common preferences.

"This offering is a unique opportunity for private industry and the government to work together to gain a better understanding of the complexities of the produce inspection system," says Robert Keeney, deputy administrator for USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service's Fruit and Vegetable Programs. "Based on the popularity of this program in past years, we anticipate another successful series in 2007 and look forward to working with our partners in the fresh fruit and vegetable industry."

Food Defense

A growing concern among government representatives and the food industry has been the possibility of a calculated attack on our food supply. Food defense is the prevention or minimization of risk for deliberate food contamination. This is another area in which the Fresh Products Branch is working with growers and businesses. The purpose of food defense outreach is to increase awareness of vulnerabilities in the process of moving produce from farm to table. By identifying weak links in the chain, companies can then take steps to minimize those risks.

🔑 The Fresh Products Branch and its Training and Development Center are dedicated to ensuring the integrity of inspection results and improving the quality and uniformity of its services. The branch staff is committed to its core values: providing impartial, honest, and efficient inspection and audit services to meet or exceed customers' needs and expectations. **BP**

If you have any questions about branch services, contact Leanne Skelton, chief of the Fresh Products Branch, at 202-720-5870. For training-specific questions, contact Dr. Carl Newell, head of the branch's Training and Development Section, at 540-361-1120.

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