

The International Fresh-cut Produce Association (IFPA) represents and provides technical expertise to commercial suppliers of fresh-cut produce, as well as companies affiliated with the fresh-cut produce industry, including equipment manufacturers, retailers and foodservice operators. We represent over 500 corporate members who are actively involved in the \$10 billion plus fresh-cut business. We define fresh-cut produce as any fresh-cut fruit or vegetable or any combination thereof that has been physically altered but remains in the fresh state. These products are items such as bagged salads, baby cut carrots and broccoli florets.

Recently, food safety has become a high profile topic in the produce industry, trade press and consumer media and I am proud to say that IFPA has been diligently working on this important issue since our inception in 1987. In 2001, we published the fourth edition of our "Food Safety Guidelines for the Fresh-cut Produce Industry" which has become an industry standard. Our industry continues to take a scientific and applications-oriented approach to food safety and has been a leader in addressing concerns about fresh produce safety.

The IFPA is a strong advocate for safe handling practices in the produce industry. Our Technical Committee has determined that a meaningful assessment of the safety of fresh produce involves understanding the microbiology of commodities, as well as field production practices, processing standards and handling procedures. We feel that the program being introduced at today's meeting may be missing the mark in assessing the status of the microbiology of fresh produce.

We have several questions that we think should be addressed so the outcome can be more helpful to all involved.

- 1) How will the currently proposed Microbiological Data Program (MDP) provide public health agencies such as the FDA and CDC with meaningful data to enhance produce food safety? In its current design, the data does not appear to be statistically significant. Will this data be appropriate for their work?
- 2) How will the currently proposed MDP compliment the FDA imported and domestic produce surveys? I ask this in light of the fact that the FDA has not yet released the final report for the domestic produce survey.
- 3) Is the MDP data being collected at the appropriate point in the supply chain? The currently proposed MDP will collect samples midway in the distribution chain from farm to consumers where there has been any number of opportunities for contamination. How can the collected data at this point in the supply chain be used to do a risk assessment when upstream handling conditions will be unknown?
- 4) As a follow-up to the previous question, what will your department recommend to the industry if there are positive results if you have no idea where the contamination came from? How will your staff interpret these positive results – will the produce be contaminated or will the warehouse be contaminated or will the packaging be contaminated?
- 5) How will contaminated samples be reported to state/local public health officials and suppliers? Since USDA is not regulating the industry for food safety compliance, who will take

what actions and who will be responsible – the grower or the marketplace handler? How will your staff interpret these results to the public?

6) How did you decide on the specific commodities and pathogens to sample? If this is being done for a public health reason, are the commodities chosen more of a health risk than others and how did you determine that? How will you determine the source of the produce samples, e.g., imported or domestic? How will this information on generic *E. coli* (not a pathogen) and *Salmonella* benefit public health? It may be helpful to clarify the mission of this project so that the sampling plan can be clarified.

7) Who will provide training to assure consistent, and accurate data reporting by the numerous laboratories throughout the United States that will be analyzing MDP samples? The entire USDA MDP is a vast departure from the techniques and technology used in the USDA PDP. A thorough understanding of all facets of fruit and vegetable microbial data collection and analysis must be assured for accurate and reliable data to be generated.

In this type of assessment, there should be careful consideration given to the outcome for the consumer, the government and the industry. We have always considered the USDA-AMS a supporter of the fresh fruit and vegetable industry but this project seems to put the industry in a vulnerable position. Any positive results for pathogen contamination in these produce samples would require action by a regulating body and we want to know how you plan to handle this.

In light of that, we would like to make some recommendations for this project so that all three constituents affected can benefit from the exercise. First, look at the FDA sampling survey just completed on domestic and imported produce and use the appropriated money to design a sampling plan that would carry that study to the next level to answer some of the questions raised by their findings.

Our second recommendation would be to use the appropriations money to coordinate a sampling plan with the annual “Fruit & Vegetable Agricultural Practices Survey” that is conducted by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), another department within USDA. By taking samples from the sites that are included in the agricultural practices survey, you can start to correlate best practices with risk potential so that experts can begin to make appropriate recommendations to the industry about safe handling practices.

Our third recommendation is that we strongly suggest that the USDA MDP contractual agreements with state laboratories and agencies performing the analysis explicitly exclude these agencies from using data and any information collected under the auspices of the USDA MDP, for use in regulatory or follow up action by the state agencies. If this stipulation is not in place and enforced, it could significantly reduce the willingness of companies to participate in the voluntary, non-regulatory USDA MDP.

Our fourth set of recommendations covers technical issues:

- We strongly suggest the use of pathogen positive controls which have biological markers associated with them, to assure that false positives for human pathogens do not occur due inadvertent laboratory cross contamination.

- Generic *E. coli* should not be one of the organisms tested for in this survey, since it is not a human pathogen and there are a number of research reports which clearly show that it is poor food safety indicator organism for fresh fruits and vegetables. Therefore, only *E. coli* O157:H7 should be tested for or alternatively all human pathogenic strains *E. coli* could be tested for.
- Temperatures of produce samples in transit to the laboratories for analysis should be kept below 5°C (41°F) and as close to 0°C (32°F) as possible to prevent the possible multiplication of pathogens in transit. This is an important issue, for example, generic *E. coli* populations in appropriate growth media are capable of doubling in number every 20 minutes.
- Samples received at the laboratory for analysis that are overtly spoiled, bruised or mechanically damaged in transit should not be analyzed since cellular juices released by mechanical damage may free up nutrients for pathogen proliferation which would normally not occur in intact sound whole produce.
- MDP LABOP 5 - Sample Receipt & Wash Procedures for Celery - Section 5.4a Receipt of Samples states "Test all laboratory samples regardless of temperature unless spoilage has occurred." This is simply an inappropriate manner in which to handle microbiological samples since analysis of samples that have been temperature abused will yield data of questionable validity.

Our fifth recommendation is that a new public meeting be held to allow for technical peer review of the USDA MDP by competent scientific academic and industry experts. The notification for this meeting was issued in the Federal Register on December 28, 2001 and the public meeting held less than a fortnight later on January 10, 2002. This is simply not enough time for thorough review of the SOP's, sampling protocols and other technical details of the USDA MDP.

Our sixth recommendation is that the USDA MDP not be launched until the comments and concerns that have been expressed by the IFPA and other interested parties at the first public meeting of January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2002 are addressed and a thorough expert peer review of the program occurs.

Sampling for the sake of sampling is not going to benefit any constituency. We would like to work with USDA to develop data that will provide answers to the questions about sources of contamination and what are the best intervention strategies to reduce or prevent further contamination.

In summary, we would like to thank the department for the opportunity to offer comments and we would like to reiterate that the IFPA supports the use of modern microbiological testing techniques to effectively maintain or enhance the quality and/or safety of fresh produce.

We also assert that the importance of microbiology lies in the validation of intervention steps taken to produce safe products. Generic evaluations of the microbial populations of fresh produce alone do not serve as an indication of product quality or safety. A meaningful assessment of fresh fruits and vegetables involves understanding the microbiology of the commodities, the field production practices, processing standards and general handling

procedures. We look forward to working with USDA to develop realistic approaches to protect our nation's food supply.