

Commissioner's column:

I want to remind produce farmers about the free, voluntary and non-regulatory safety assessments offered through our Produce Safety Program and encourage them to sign up to have one conducted on their farms. These assessments will help prepare your produce farm for produce safety inspections of the Food Safety Modernization Act that are not voluntary.

FSMA was signed into law in 2011 and establishes a "farm to fork" approach to food safety with a focus on prevention. As part of that, the Produce Safety Rule establishes science-based, minimum standards for the growing, harvesting, packing and holding of fruits and vegetables. Farms that produce fresh fruits and vegetables commonly consumed raw may be subject to the PSR, although there are exemptions to the rule.

To help farms be prepared for these mandatory safety audits, we have worked hard to develop the On-Farm Readiness Review as a way to highlight areas where farms need to make improvements in hopes all farms will pass their safety audits.

The voluntary reviews will provide farmers with information and resources to assist in meeting the requirements of the Produce Safety Rule and prepare for inspections. During an OFRR, a farmer has access to produce safety experts that will evaluate on-farm practices and conditions to provide feedback on what is going well and identify opportunities for improvement in food safety practices. The reviewers will provide resources to enhance produce safety practices and will suggest produce safety improvements specific to the farm. All notes taken by the reviewers will be left with the farm at the end of the visit.

The On-Farm Readiness Reviews will be conducted jointly by NCDA&CS Produce Safety Program and Produce Safety area specialized agents from N.C. State University Cooperative Extension Service.

To prepare for the voluntary review, we strongly recommend that at least one person from the farm complete the Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training Course before scheduling an OFRR. Grower training will provide you with essential background knowledge about the FSMA Produce Safety Rule and recommended produce safety practices that will help you to get the most out of the OFRR. It is very important the reviewers observe routine farm operations, such as harvesting, washing, packing, cooling and holding, during the OFRR so reviewers can make accurate recommendations for produce safety improvements specific to your farm. The OFRR should be scheduled when the farm is in production and conducting activities covered under the PSR, so as farms are entering into the production season, it is a good time to make an appointment.

Contact the NCDA&CS Produce Safety Program to request an OFRR and learn more about the process. The program can be reached by phone at 919-614-3082, or email at chris.harris@ncagr.gov.