

## **Commissioner's Column: On Farm Readiness Review**

Recently the N.C. Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services hosted our 14<sup>th</sup> annual Food Safety Forum at the State Fairgrounds in Raleigh. A primary focus of this year's forum was the On-Farm Readiness Reviews (OFRR) for produce farmers, to help them get ready for compliance with the Produce Safety Rule part of the Food Safety and Manufacturing Act (FSMA).

We have been talking about FSMA and the changes it would bring at the farm level for several years. These changes will represent the most sweeping regulatory changes in more than 70 years and the first time inspectors will be inspecting on farm. Our state has been an integral part of the conversation about how FSMA will be implemented and how On-Farm Readiness Reviews will help get our farmers ready.

I believe these reviews offer a chance to educate farmers and inspectors. They are the best way to gain compliance.

Farmers are used to 3<sup>rd</sup> party audits and GAP inspections – they are nothing new. But I know as a farmer it's a lot easier to be compliant when I understand the changes that need making as well as the why and the how behind them.

I can relate to inspectors coming on my farm and think they have the deed to it and not me. I hope these OFRR reviews will result in increased conversation between the farmer and the inspector.

We had the opportunity to take a group of national and state agricultural officials, retail buyers and university staff to Jackson Farming Company in Autryville the day before the Food Safety Forum. At Jackson's farm we participated in an On-Farm Readiness Review demonstration lead by Dr. Chris Gunter and Dr. Lynette Johnston from N.C. State University.

Although the OFRR covers all aspects of the farm from field conditions, packing house, storage and transportation. We focused the demonstration on health and hygiene and the cantaloupe side of the packing house.

Jackson Farming Company is a diverse operation growing sweet potatoes, cantaloupe, watermelon, honeydew, soybeans, corn, peanuts and broccoli. Some of these are covered under the new Produce Safety rule, others are not.

We listened as Chris and Lynette established a friendly walk-around dialogue with Heather Register, food safety coordinator with Jackson Farming Company. Questions included worker training, check-in procedures, what the protocol is if a worker gets sick on the job, how often are portable toilets in the field inspected, how often are water sources tested, what is your cleaning procedures for the packing house, how often do employees go through training and more.

We have been supporting and working towards On-Farm Readiness Reviews for a couple of years. The demonstration at Jackson Farming Company showed that this process can be successful in getting our farmers ready.

I wanted to share with you some of the insights from this demonstration and the follow-up panel at the Food Safety Forum.

1. The OFRR is a conversation between the grower and the reviewer. The purpose is to familiarize the grower with Produce Safety rule requirements and highlight areas where the rules would require additional assessment.
2. The OFRR is NOT an inspection. The assessor is not there to quiz you about your operation, but rather to help you take a comprehensive look at your farming operations in light of Produce Safety Rule requirements.
3. The OFRR are confidential, non-regulatory and voluntary. What happens on the farm stays on the farm. All notes and other records will be given directly to the farmer.
4. GAP certification is not a substitute for the inspections required under the Produce Safety Rule.

Food safety is an agricultural and economic issue, that starts at the farm level. I know our farmers want to do this right. I am a firm believer in educate before regulate and if you are a produce grower then I encourage you to participate in the free, voluntary and confidential On-Farm Readiness Review.

Farmers interested in participating in an OFRR should contact the NCDA&CS Produce Safety Office at 919-614-3082.