This newsletter is intended for people interested in commercial fruit and vegetable production, business planning and North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service meetings throughout North Carolina. For back issues of this newsletter please go to the Jones County Extension website and click on the Commercial Horticulture, Nursery & Turf menu option on the left side of the website. The website address is: http://jones.ces.ncsu.edu

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UPCOMING WORKSHOPS, MEETINGS, TOURS

February 4, 2010 - Fruit Tree Production & Pruning Demonstration. Craven Co. Extension Center. 9 AM – 12 PM. Call the Craven Co. Extension office to register. Bring pruners and gloves for some hands-on practice!

February 4, 2010 - Spring Gardening Tips * Food Safety. Brookwood Baptist Church, Jacksonville, NC. 7 PM – 8 PM. Contact Rev. Roy Parker at (910) 346-8189 to register.

February 11, 2010 - Regional Farmers Market Managers Food Safety Recall Training. Pitt County Extension office, Greenville, NC. This training will show participants how to handle a product recall, how to handle the media and how to deal with consumers if a food borne illness problem were to occur at a farmers market. Participation is limited to 40 people. Call Mark Seitz at (252) 448-9621 to register and for more information.


February 15, 2010 - Horticulture Entrepreneur Leadership Project Information Meeting. Onslow County Extension office. Jacksonville, NC. Contact Mark Seitz at (252) 448-9621 for more information.
February 17 & 18, 2010 - *Western NC Winter Vegetable Conference & 42nd Annual Meeting*. Crowne Plaza Resort in Asheville, NC. Registration and the trade show open at 9:30 am on Wednesday with sessions starting at 12:30 PM. Preregistration is $20 per person before February 5th and $25 after that or at the door.

Everyone is encouraged to stay at the Crowne Plaza Resort where the N.C. Tomato Growers Association has reserved a block of rooms. The room rates are priced at $69.00 plus applicable taxes and the room rates are valid through January 26th (call, they might honor the rate after the cutoff date), so please make your reservations directly with the Crowne Plaza Resort at 1-800-733-3211, or (828) 254-3211. Check in time is 4:00 p.m. on the day of arrival, and check out time is 11:00 a.m. on the day of departure.

For more information, including how to be an exhibitor or sponsor, and a registration form, visit http://nctomatoes.com.

If you have any questions, please contact Ellen Sprague at (828) 685-3989 or ellen_moss@yahoo.com

February 18, 2010 - *GAP Certificate Training, Part II*. 6 PM to 8 PM. Craven County Extension Center, New Bern, NC. Modules 5 & 6 will be covered. Call Mark Seitz at (252) 448-9621 to register. This is part of a three part program. If you need to make up Modules 1-4, call and make an appointment.


Completion of all three modules is necessary to receive a certificate.

March 8, 2010 – *New Bern Farmers Market Board Meeting*. 5:30 PM – 7 PM.

March 9, 2010 - *Food Marketing in the Real World*. Morehead City, NC. If you are already producing a food product, and are thinking about growing your business in 2010, then join us for this informative program.

Space is VERY limited - we can accommodate only 30 people. Registration must be made by payment, and the deadline is March 1.

The agenda and registration form can be downloaded from: http://www.ncagr.gov/markets/agnbizmarketing.htm

**BUSINESS PLANNING**

‘*Tis the Season…*’

“Time to peel off the union suit, put on my shorts and flip flops and start planting!”

**Marketing Idea:**

**Defending The Quality of Your Product**

If you have been in the produce business for long, you no doubt understand how important your reputation is in the mind of the consumer. The reputation of the industry is also a critical
component, but one many of you have little or no control over.

There are countless examples you can review that show the financial impact bad publicity has had on certain crops in the fruit and vegetable industry in recent years. Tomato growers can certainly attest to this after being falsely implicated as the source of an E. coli outbreak in the summer of 2008. The spinach industry, and even the peanut butter industry, lost significant market share in recent food-borne illness events.

In the consumer’s mind the old marketing adage that ‘bad publicity is better than no publicity at all’ does not fly. During food borne illness outbreaks many consumers are confused and get desperate to know what to think or where to turn for information. The media does little to report the details of an event or to provide consumers with the background information needed to dispel false ideas but consumers do not listen.

Therefore it is your job, not your neighbors or competitors to work on and be aware of the food safety problems. I have said before the ‘guilt by association’ problem can and does have as much of an impact on your farm as anywhere else.

Keep these steps in mind going into 2010 to keep the product you are producing safe.

1) Keep accurate seed, fuel, and fertilizer records.
2) Monitor and record your pesticide applications.
3) Have a trace-back plan in place. Implement the plan and keep detailed records about the product you harvested.
4) Monitor and record your migrant labor paperwork.

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FOOD SAFETY

Good Agriculture Practices – GAP

If you have been ready this newsletter at any time over the last few years you would know I have discussed GAPs in some form or fashion many times. I wanted to put in a plug for the GAP certificate program I am leading for growers in this region. I held a 4 hour training on Wednesday, January 27, 2010 at the Craven Co. Extension Center. I was able to cover Modules 1 through 4 of the GAP curriculum. With 5 more to go and with planting day quickly approaching I wanted to give you a chance to attend and not tie up too much of any given day.

For this reason I will be hosting two more sessions to get through the remaining 5 modules. See the meeting schedule above and let me know if you can or need to attend.

For those of you who cannot attend these or other GAP certificate training programs, there is a lot of good information available from NCSU on the NC MarketReady website: www.ncmarketready.org.

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BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Product Liability

GAP certification is a hot topic today. I have written extensively about it in this newsletter, as have others in national trade magazines. It is not a new topic but I thought I would share a brief piece of information as to why sitting through GAP certification and or having a GAP audit done for your farm might be a good idea.

The following information is from the NC MarketReady: Good Agriculture Practices
Training Initiative, Module 8 – Managing Liability and Risk.

I particularly want to share with you some of the legal issues involving food safety and why GAP might help you if you were ever sued in court for a food borne illness outbreak.

Ted Feitshans, NCSU Department of Agriculture and Resource Economics Extension lecturer, is NC certified attorney on staff and shared in this module some information about the difference between civil and criminal court and how it would apply to GAPs.

Mr. Feitshans explains that in criminal court the standard of proof is very high because society does not want innocent people sent to jail. In civil court the burden of proof is much lower. The plaintiff only has to have 50 percent or more of the proof go in their favor to win the case.

This is significant because the source of a food borne illness outbreak is often difficult to prove and it is difficult to show with scientific certainty who is responsible.

Growers must consider the bad publicity for their farms — and to some extent the industry — when deciding how far to go in fighting a claim against them. This is due to the way the courts try civil lawsuits. According to Mr. Feitshans the plaintiff in a civil case has a low standard of proof (>50% of evidence in their favor) to know that it is going to be difficult to prove innocence.

All of this gets complicated in the produce industry considering the source of contamination can come from anywhere in the supply chain: field, workers, harvest containers, storage containers, packaging, trucks, etc. With so many variables in play, there is little chance that a favorable verdict would be rendered by a jury. This according to Mr. Feitshans is why such a high percentage of cases are settled out of court before trial.

The point of this is to highlight why GAPs can be an important tool in the ‘worst case’ scenario of being hauled into court.

If you were sued, GAP certification can help you deflect claims of poor sanitation, harvest handling, quality issues and many other factors. How? Documentation!

Those who attended the Jan 27 program in Craven County will recall how many times documentation is mentioned in the GAP curriculum developed by NCSU. It is important because in the eyes of an attorney I met at a conference, “If you do not have documents, good attorneys will quickly latch onto this and highlight every error you made in producing the food.”

So while GAPs certification does not deflect or absolve you of liability, it will be a good first step in the fight for a favorable civil court ruling if you were ever so unfortunate as to face one. Without this certification proving more than 50 percent innocence is a long, uphill battle.

If you have questions about any of the information, upcoming meetings, business strategies, or crop production management issues, please call me at the Jones County Extension Center at (252) 448-9621. I can also be reached by email at: Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu.