Commercial Horticulture:
Future Cooperative Extension Programs, Business Planning
and Crop Production Issues & Alternative Crops

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, Tours & Meetings

February 5, 2008. Private Pesticide Applicator License Recertification Class. 1 PM – 5 PM. Lenoir County Extension Center. Kinston, NC. Contact Mark Keene at the Lenoir County Extension office at (252) 527-2191 to register or for more information.

February 6-8, 2008. 25th Mid-Atlantic Direct Marketing Conference and Trade Show. Sheraton Inn, Dover, DE. This is an excellent conference for anyone currently in or considering a roadside or direct marketing business. I attended this in 2007 – excellent farm tours, speakers, conference. Contact Carl German at elgerman@udel.edu or by phone at (302) 831-1317 for more information or go to their website at: www.madmc.com.

February 12, 2008. Private Pesticide Applicator License Recertification Class. 1 PM – 5 PM. Lenoir County Extension Center. Kinston, NC. Contact Mark Keene at the Lenoir County Extension office at (252) 527-2191 to register or for more information.


DATE CHANGE!! February 26, 2008. Regional Farmers Market Managers Meeting. Jones County Civic Center. Trenton, NC. Hwy 58, 1 mile south of Trenton. Contact Mark Seitz by email at Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu, or at (252) 448-9621 to register or for more information.

General Information

Did You Know… Cooperative Extension is officially 90 years old this year. However, Jones County Extension is 98 years old this year! The Jones County Extension office officially opened in the fall of 1917. However, prior to 1917 J.C. Parker was the first agriculture Extension agent assigned to the county from 1909 – 1911. The first Extension home agent started July 1, 1929.

Pesticide Applicator Recertification Training Opportunities

If you are in need of NCDA&CS Private Pesticide Applicator Recertification safety training (V credits), there are opportunities to receive these credits in both Lenoir and Jones County.
In Lenoir County, agriculture agent Mark Keene will be holding pesticide recertification on February 5 and February 12. Training on both days runs from 1 PM to 5 PM. Call the Lenoir County Extension office at (252) 527-2191 to register.

**Business Planning & Management:**

**Income Tax Time**

Taxes, after all, are dues that we pay for the privileges of membership in an organized society. ~Franklin D. Roosevelt

It's income tax time again, Americans: time to gather up those receipts, get out those tax forms, sharpen up that pencil, and stab yourself in the aorta. ~Dave Barry

Did you ever notice that when you put the words "The" and "IRS" together, it spells "THEIRS?" ~Author Unknown

We all know and love filing income tax forms. For most of us, it is an evil necessity that we must do every year. While we often complain about the lack of return on investment from the taxes we pay, compared to citizens in other countries, we do very well. For this reason, we should consider what paying taxes in a free society offers us.

Cooperative Extension is a government agency unique to the United States. Cooperative Extension provides research-based information at no charge to citizens all over the US. Most countries do not share information as freely as we do in the US, and as a result, citizens in rural communities in most places around the world are locked into a system of generational poverty that is not easy to escape.

While that example is certainly an over simplification of the many benefits we receive from paying taxes, it does not address the tax headaches that farmers and small business owners in eastern North Carolina face.

Farmers and many small business owners have a difficult challenge ahead of them every tax year. The tax codes constantly change and the complexity of running a small or large farm venture can make the process daunting. For farmers who do their own income tax returns, the headache of filling out income taxes yourself can lead to worries of missed deductions or inadvertent mistakes that might lead to an audit or in a worst case scenario, fines by the IRS.

Farmers that hire tax advisors or accountants to handle their taxes, have less of a headache, but they still have work to do. These farmers must still compile for their accountants or tax preparers, the records necessary to file legal tax returns. To assist in this process, NC State University Extension Specialist Guido van der Hoeven, and Annette Dunlop – Small Business Development Specialist, have put together an excellent outline of changes in the 2007 tax rules as they apply to farmers and agriculture businesses. You can find their article online at:

**Tax Tips for Your 2007 Returns:**

Every farm is different, every farmer’s income is different, and with that you will have different rules, regulations and tax liabilities to consider. Use the article: *Tax Tips for Your 2007 Returns*, to assist you in this process, or call me if you have questions or would like a printed copy of this document.

**Crop Production**

**Food Safety & Food Borne Illness**

Nationally...

- 76 million cases of food borne illness
- 325,000 people hospitalized for food borne illness
- 5,200 needless deaths each year
- Economic losses between $10-$83 billion
- Estimated $50 million loss by strawberry industry after mistakenly being indicated as the source of food borne pathogens in 1996

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1 Welcome to The Quote Garden! 
http://www.quotegarden.com/taxes.html
Locally…

- 19 produce related outbreaks between 2003-2005 in FL, GA, TN, SC and NC
- 1,413 people became ill
- Largest single outbreak 425 school children
- Most common source was leafy greens and the causal agent was Norovirus

Do these numbers bother you as a grower of fruit and vegetable crops? Are you concerned about the image the produce industry is developing when outbreaks like this continue? You should be, because it affects your bottom line.

I attended a Southern Region Small Fruit Consortium (SRSFC) Extension agent training, which focused on food safety issues. I want to share a few notes and thoughts from that meeting with you. For some, these topics are familiar. For others, they might not be. One way or another, I hope to convince you that you need to take the steps necessary to begin or update your existing food safety plan.

Food safety is an issue in the minds of many consumers. Facts and figures such as those listed above, are widely used by media, advocacy groups and others wanting to “tell a story”. They get used, misused and abused, and they do not tell the success stories about how many millions of people that are fed around the country or the thousands served every day here at home.

While 1996 and 2003-2005 data is not the most current data to be quoting, it is an example of the kind of information that consumers latch onto and do not understand. It is what the media points to when food safety scares hit the news. It is the kind of data that is not easily dismissed and it does considerable damage to the reputation of the industry we all work in.

It is for reasons like this that you as a producer need to develop a food safety plan to document what you do to keep the produce you grow safe. As an individual producer you might think there is no need to worry about having a food safety plan. If you are not selling to a large processor or to a retail grocer, the odds that you will be asked to defend yourself in court are probably small.

There are a few questions about food safety you should consider before you decide whether or not to create a food safety plan for your farm.

- What will it cost and is it worth the time and effort? Today that cost might be higher than you want to pay. However, given the scale of the outbreaks that occur, how can you afford to not create a food safety plan?
- Does the fact that you do not sell to a large food processor or retail grocer absolve you of the liability you incur by being a food producer?
- Does keeping records and documenting the practices you use on your farm to keep the fruit and vegetable crops you grow safe, absolve you of food safety liability?
- Do consumers – or more importantly the attorneys who represent them – care about your family, your farm, or your personal integrity, if they get sick from something you grew?

The answers to all of these questions are, NO!

Attorney David Babcock from the law firm of Marler Clark in Seattle, WA, – the premier food borne illness litigation firm in the US – spoke about food safety and the law. The law that comes into play in this case is called Strict Liability. Mr. Babcock defined strict liability to mean:

- The focus is on the product not the conduct of the producer
- You are liable if:
  - The product was unsafe and thus defective
  - The defective product caused injury

In other words, he told the Extension agents attending the SRSFC that if his – or any firm – could trace the outbreak of a food borne illness back to a farm, and to a specific crop, and that product caused a client to get sick, you and your farm will be liable and you / your farm will pay damages. He went on to say that the only thing documentation of your food safety policies and procedures is going to do is minimize the cost to you and your insurance company.”

While that is a scary proposition, let’s talk about what you can and should do. What food safety documents or programs should you follow?

There are at least two programs you should have in place or consider adopting – GAPs and HACCP. GAPs – Good Agricultural Practices – is a voluntary, nationally
recognized food safety program designed to help farmers “focus attention on the importance of minimizing microbial contamination during crop production, harvest, post-harvest handling of fresh fruits and vegetables.” GAPs, “requires a pro-active, systematic approach by everyone involved in growing, harvesting, packing, distributing and preparing fresh produce.”

HACCP is “a system [designed] to control [food] safety as the product is manufactured, rather than trying to detect problems by testing the finished product. HACCP is based on assessing the inherent hazards or risks in a particular product or process and designing a system to control them. [With HACCP] specific points where the hazards can be controlled in the process are identified.”

While you may not be selling to outlets that require a GAPs or HACCP plan, the day is coming when more and more buyers and customers will demand such documents. If you are selling to large retail grocers and have not yet been asked for a GAPs plan, expect to be asked for one in the very near future.

Cornell University’s GAPs program recommends the following steps – from the Food Safety Begins on the Farm: A Grower Self Assessment of Food Safety Risks - be followed to begin developing a GAPs program for your farm.

1. Select which fields or commodities you will review. If you cannot decide which fields should be reviewed, start with a main field for produce production. It may be more sensible to evaluate a whole crop commodity or enterprise (e.g. fresh market cabbage production) if you have multiple fields [or rows] of that specific crop. What is most important is to complete the assessment, so pick a field or a commodity and begin.

2. Complete the five worksheets in the Food Safety Begins on the Farm: A Grower Self Assessment of Food Safety Risks titled:
   - Record Keeping
   - Worker Hygiene Training
   - Farm Biosecurity
   - Crisis Management
   - Toilet and Handwashing Facilities

3. Identify the other worksheets relevant to the field or commodity you are assessing by answering “Yes” or “No” to the questions in the tab “My Farm Assessment”

HACCP is another important component of the food safety challenge for farmers. However, for the sake of brevity and because HACCP rules and regulations vary based on the products and processes you are involved with, I will not go into much detail in this newsletter.

The important thing about GAPs and HACCP to remember, is to begin the process of developing a GAPs or HACCP plan if you have not already done so. GAPs and HACCP can help you find problems in your operation, and ultimately help you do a better job of managing your farm. In the long run, implementing a GAPs or HACCP program can help you and your employees become better food safety managers.

In the training at Savannah, GA, Marler-Clark attorney David Babcock suggested no amount of documentation is going to absolve you from liability, if the problem started on your farm. Documentation can however, help you deflect and possibly decrease the amount of liability you face, should a problem be traced back to you.

After hearing this and listening to the discussion that ensued… my recommendation is this…

1. Start a GAPs program on your farm if you do not already have one.
2. Purchase and maintain a minimum of $1,000,000 in product liability insurance for your farm.
3. Go to the Marler-Clark webpage and read some of the stories of the cases they handled. If the results don’t scare you into starting a GAPs program, they should!
4. Document everything you do that is in your GAPs plan that is related to food safety on your farm. If you have policies in place to keep the produce you grow safe, but you do not document what you say you are going to do, that you did it and how often you did it, in the eyes of the law it wasn’t done!

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2 Food Safety Begins on the Farm: A Grower Self Assessment of Food Safety Risks. Pg. 1. Department of Food Safety, Department of Horticulture, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853.

For more information go to the following websites:

HACCP Principles
http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/foodsci/ext/pubs/haccpprinciples.PDF

Food Safety Begins on the Farm: A Grower Self Assessment of Food Safety Risks
http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/indexhighspeed.html

Marler Clark L.L.P.
http://www.marlerclark.com/

I will be happy to come to work with you to start a GAPs program for your farm. GAPs is not a mandatory program at this point, but as authors Richard N. Baines, Paul J. Ryan* & W. Paul Davies conclude in a paper titled HACCP at the Farm Level – The Missing Link in Food Safety & Security, “There is a missing link in managing food risks in [food] supply chains, this can be addressed by the adoption of HACCP at the farm level.”

4 Baines, Richard N., Paul J. Ryan* & W. Paul Davies 
HACCP at the Farm Level – The Missing Link in Food Safety & Security. Royal Agricultural College, Cirencester, UK & the *SQF Institute, Washington DC. 

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

“Persons with disabilities and persons with limited English proficiency may request accommodations to participate by contacting Mark Seitz, Commercial Horticulture Agent, at 252-448-9621, or email: Mark_Seitz@ncsu.edu, or fax: 252-448-1243, or in person at the Jones County Extension Office at least (3) days prior to the event.”