

## Training helps farmers minimize risk and expand markets

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March 4, 2013 – Recent reforms of U.S. food safety laws have left farmers and growers scrambling to comply with new regulations. With training created and provided by Virginia Cooperative Extension, farmers in Virginia and adjoining states are proactively writing their food safety plans and having their farms audited for U.S. Department of Agriculture Good Agricultural Practices certification.

"More and more buyers and supermarket chains are requiring that farms be GAP-certified," according to Wythe Morris, agriculture and natural resources Extension agent in Carroll County. Morris has been developing and implementing the farm-based GAP educational training since 2008.



A Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services inspector speaks with farmers during a GAP certification audit.

To be certified, handlers and packers must create a written food safety plan unique to their farm or business. The plan covers all aspects of their enterprise - from the field to the distribution center - and includes worker sanitation, water quality, harvest, and packaging, among other topics. Farms also need to be audited annually by a third party to ensure compliance.

"We provide hands-on training during every session. We work through the farm plan as we go through the materials," Morris said. "Before participants complete the training, they will have 75 to 80 percent of their written plan completed. When they leave, they have ownership of the program."

The thought of completing the certification process can be overwhelming for some growers, according to Amber Vallotton, agriculture and natural resources Extension agent in Rockingham County. But through group meetings with growers, produce buyers, and Virginia Tech food safety experts; hands-on training;

and one-on-one support, Vallotton has successfully ushered growers through the process.

"This is a big time investment, and having others reinforce their success and showing that the process is doable lends a lot of creditability to the program," said Vallotton.

To date, more than 300 individuals representing 220 farms in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Kentucky have completed the training. Since 2011, 48 Extension agents have been trained to assist and teach farmers in other parts of Virginia.

According to Morris, "food safety" and "locally grown" are marketing points that allow growers to reach broader markets.



"If I hadn't gotten my GAP certification, I would have been out the door with some of my buyers because they are requiring growers to be certified in order to do business with them," said James Light, owner of Lights Farm in Laurel Fork, Va.

Once a grower is certified and verified by the USDA, their name goes into a national database that buyers can search by state or commodity.

"It is not only a food safety tool but an excellent marketing tool as well," said Morris. "Three years ago, there were six Virginia growers in the database. Now there are more than 50, with more to come."