



Commission's GAP Program Continues to Build Momentum

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In just two years the California Avocado Commission's Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) program is yielding very impressive results, with more than 600 California avocado groves having gone through GAP certification representing more than 30 percent of the industry.

In addition, under the Commission's GAP Incentive Rebate, \$100,000 has been paid out to GAP-certified growers for their actual audit cost. And, based on the large number of growers who participated in the most recent CAC-GAP workshops held the first week of December, all indications are for the success to continue.

"It's encouraging that growers are realizing the impor-

tance of becoming GAP certified and taking the necessary steps," said CAC President Tom Bellamore. "GAPs are increasingly important to our foodservice and retail partners, and certification is essential to our premium positioning strategy because it demonstrates our commitment to deliver on our quality promise."

This was the third series of GAP workshops hosted by the Commission since the launch of the program in November, 2011, and for the first time growers were offered a unique opportunity to hear directly from a major buyer of California avocados. Colista Yates, who is senior manager for global quality assurance for Brinker International, which

owns Chili's and Maggiano's Restaurants, spoke candidly about her company's commitment to food safety and its expectation for approved suppliers to be GAP certified.

"It was enlightening for us (growers) to hear first-hand what a major buyer like Chili's expects in terms of our food safety practices," said Art Bliss, Somis grower and California Avocado Commission Board member. "I now have a clearer understanding of why GAPs are important, not only to ensure the safety of our fruit, but also to help protect the strong Hand Grown California avocado brand."

Over the last few years GAP certification of growers has become increasingly important to consumers of fresh produce due to some high-profile food safety incidents, a few of which resulted in death. In addition, the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), passed in 2011, places responsibility for the safety of all produce sold in the United States on the Food & Drug Administration (FDA). Once finalized, FSMA regulations will require growers to demonstrate compliance. Based on the FSMA Draft Rule, growers who are certified against the CAC-GAP program would likely fulfill the necessary requirements.

Although avocados are considered a low-risk commodity that haven't been directly linked to any microbial outbreaks, there have been illnesses involving fresh guacamole. This can result in a "guilty by association" situation, where avocados, the key ingredient in guacamole, may be recalled along with the other produce items found in the guacamole, most of which have historically shown a great-



er probability for microbial contamination. If a food safety emergency were to occur that implicated avocado as one of the suspects, it could help shift the focus away from avocados if, during the initial FDA trace back, it was discovered that a GAP program was in place beginning with the farm. Ultimately, any food safety issue linked with avocados, regardless of the country of origin, could cause significant market disruption for California avocados, but the overall impact may be mitigated if GAPs are in place.

Remember, GAPs are intended to protect people and communicate to our customers that thought and actions have gone into minimizing the potential for contamination by pathogens. GAPs allow us to ensure the public that California avocado industry practices are safe.

If you have not yet become GAP certified I would strongly encourage you to consider taking that step. Many growers find as they go through the GAP certification process that they just need to document their current practices. Most of the handlers can provide assistance, or call the Commission office and we can help. It's important that we all do our part to uphold California's unparalleled reputation for growing avocados that are safe, nutritious and of the highest quality.

More information on the GAP program and the GAP Incentive Rebate may be found on our website at www.californiaavocadogrowers.com/growing/gap. 🥑