

Fresh Produce Safety

Cane Creek Valley Farm

Editor's Note: This is one of three case studies documenting farmers' experiences participating in the NC Fresh Produce Safety Initiative. Cane Creek Farm is a mid-size NC operation that has taken a proactive approach to fresh produce safety. Attending GAPs training prepared the farm for certification and strengthened its ability to respond to market demands, food safety costs, or an unforeseen situation such as an outbreak.

Cane Creek Valley Farm is a 33-acre certified organic vegetable farm in Fletcher, NC that is owned and operated by Amanda and Jeremy Sizemore. The farm's primary markets are wholesale buyers and a growing community supported agriculture subscription program (CSA).

Cane Creek's wholesale buyers include five grocery chains and two resellers, with the market focusing on tomatoes, broccoli, leaf lettuce, collards, and summer squash. The CSA offers a diversity of produce to its more than 300 members, including a full array of spring and summer vegetables, herbs, and other specialty items.



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Jeremy and Amanda Sizemore at Cane Creek Valley Farm in Fletcher, NC. Cane Creek is a certified organic vegetable farm.

Amanda completed Tier 1 of the NCMarket Ready Fresh Produce Safety – Field to Family Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) Curriculum training in 2010. The training gave her the opportunity to learn about GAPs and assess the farm's current practices before devising its food safety plan and pursuing GAPs certification.

"I have a greater awareness of the farm's potential vulnerabilities, especially during growing season," Amanda said. "Our land for vegetable production borders a dairy, and the fields and cow pasture are separated by a gravel road with a vegetative buffer on both sides of the road. Even though my parents own the dairy and take good maintenance measures to prevent their lagoon from overflowing, it's still a potential risk to us."

Some risks identified in current practices at Cane Creek have been reduced by making changes. Other risk areas have been noted but not

changed. An example of a current practice that falls into this category would be in post-harvest handling. During handling, the produce wash water is changed every two hours, with the produce cooler and picking trailers sanitized every Tuesday.

"We don't keep records of these practices," Amanda said. "We have good hygiene practices – we just don't log them. It's a matter of putting a clipboard on the picking trailer, in the cooler, and in the portable toilets. "Even though keeping records would be a GAPs measure that could reduce our liability, we don't think our current practice is contributing to an increased food safety risk."

The GAPs training has helped Cane Creek improve some of its preventive measures for fresh produce safety. The farm now uses well water for all plant protection spray applications instead of creek water. Jeremy Sizemore designed a portable hand-washing station using two 55-gallon barrels when Amanda learned that



Jeremy Sizemore checks produce in the cooler at Cane Creek.

commercial hand-washing stations were unavailable through the local portable toilet supplier. Hand-washing stations are now available in the field and in the break area.

Other fresh produce safety measures include employees using disposable gloves for picking, cleaning harvest buckets, conducting regular water tests, and having a designated lunch area.

Cane Creek has seven employees that are a mix of local and contracted Hispanic labor. Each employee is instructed on workplace hygiene and safe production practices.

Jeremy Sizemore supervises the workers, and Amanda serves as the primary enforcement officer for employee practices. If poor behavior is observed even once, the employee does not return to Cane Creek.

Amanda acknowledges that, especially on a small farm, practices can be unique and that it would be hard for growers to adhere to very strict

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Amanda Sizemore

rules. So far she and other farmers have been working with NC Cooperative Extension agents to find resources and practical guidance for implementing GAPs, in addition to learning from firsthand experience.

“We utilize a mobile packing house in the fields – a shaded trailer fitted with tables for sorting produce directly into cardboard boxes,” Amanda said. “When heavy rains last year required us to bring the produce indoors, we had to set up a temporary packing line. It made us think about how we might have to handle packing if our mobile packing house didn’t meet GAPs certification.”

The Sizemores are currently members of the NC Tomato Growers Association, involved with the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, and supply Eastern Carolina Organics. They believe that it will become even more important to network with growers who are similar in size to see how they implement GAPs and handle issues such as product traceability.

So far the grocery chains that buy produce from Cane Creek have been more concerned with traceability measures — just one element of GAPs certification — rather than whole farm certification. The CSA members, which account for about 15% of farm sales, have been interested in issues mostly around the farm being certified organic, as opposed to being certified with food safety measures. Amanda anticipates that customer demand will require the farm to install a traceability system – starting with developing an in-house label – and to be GAPs-certified very soon.

“GAPs training was one step toward preparation for GAPs certification,” Amanda said. “We’re not ready yet – there’s a lot of paperwork to get in order. The training helped me learn what paperwork is

required to become certified and where changes will have to happen on the farm to reduce vulnerabilities to outbreaks.”



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