

Fresh Produce Safety

Cold Mountain Farm

Editor's Note: This is one of three case studies documenting farmers' experiences participating in the NC Fresh Produce Safety Initiative. Cold Mountain 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 also strengthened its ability to respond to market demands, food safety costs, or an unforeseen situation such as an outbreak.

Cold Mountain Farm is a Century Farm in Waynesville, NC and is operated by Bill Holbrook, a sixth generation farmer. The farm borders the Pigeon River and is surrounded by the Blue Ridge Mountains. Holbrook has been farming full-time since 1993, growing tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, and tobacco.

In 2008, Holbrook completed one of the first trainings on fresh produce safety offered by NC Cooperative Extension using the *NC MarketReady Fresh Produce Safety-Field to Family Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) Curriculum*. He was also one of the growers that participated in the creation of a food safety plan template



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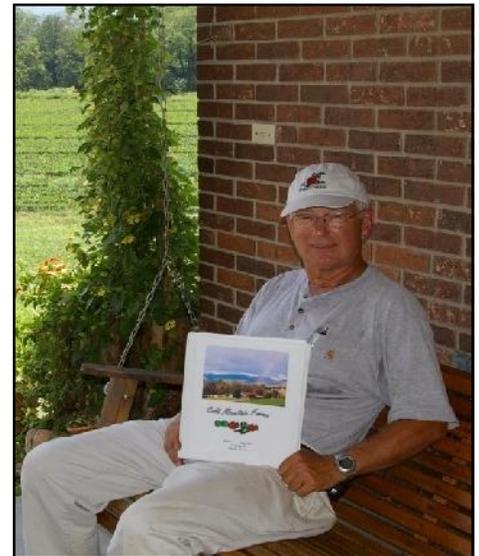
that is a necessary plan for becoming GAPs certified.

After these trainings, Holbrook immediately started to implement practices necessary for GAPs certification, including writing the farm's food safety plan and scheduling a third-party audit with the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

Cold Mountain was GAPs certified for one year and then the certification lapsed. Holbrook decided that, since the certification did not increase the amount of produce sold or expand the number of markets served, the benefit to him of certification did not outweigh the costs. He does feel confident about recertifying the farm, given his previous experience, if it becomes necessary to sell his produce.

Cold Mountain still follows and implements many of the practices and documentation required for GAPs certification. With assistance from his local Extension Agent, Sue Colucci and a Spanish interpreter, the farm requires its field workers to participate in a food safety employee training at the beginning of the season. Employees sign documentation that they understand and will adhere to hygiene practices outlined in the training.

Holbrook also constructed a simple, portable hand-washing station, made from a drinking cooler with signage, soap, and paper towels attached to the frame. The unit is small and can be easily disassembled to move it to new locations.. This helps Cold Mountain employees and management follow good sanitary practices regardless of where they might be working.



Bill Holbrook of Cold Mountain Farm in Waynesville, NC.

Cold Mountain has six fields, each averaging four to five acres in size along a two-mile stretch of property and employs seven Hispanic workers at peak harvest. All of the produce is sold to a nearby packing house, which washes and sorts the produce. The packing house supplies wooden harvest bins, and Holbrook provides picking buckets, which he has learned must be cleaned with a brush in pre-season and rinsed as necessary during the harvest period.

Using the packing house greatly reduces the produce handling that happens on the farm. Holbrook provides the packing house with information about the field location and the harvest date, so the packing house now maintains most of the traceability records for the farm.



Workers check on crops at Cold Mountain Farm.

“GAPs training made me more aware of the farm’s vulnerabilities,” Holbrook said. “I have a better understanding of GAPs in general and the importance of traceability. I also know more about the effect of different pathogens and how to identify potential sources of contamination.”

Since Cold Mountain Farm borders the Pigeon River, there are unusual opportunities for potential crop contamination. People traveling down the river with their dogs often stop on the riverbanks to lunch or rest and may also decide to come into the fields. Even though “no trespassing” and “keep out” signs are posted along the field perimeter, Holbrook still observes regular violations.

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Bill Holbrook

“People will try to harvest produce, and their dogs sometimes run through the fields,” Holbrook said. “Posting signs definitely makes me feel like the Ebenezer Scrooge of the neighborhood, and the signs detract from the natural beauty of the mountains. But people are stealing and letting their dogs run through the fields, which could contaminate the crop.”

Cold Mountain obtained GAPs certification before it was required by buyers. The largest cost associated with GAPs certification was paying for the third party auditor. Two site visits, including travel and inspection time, were \$1400. However, Cold Mountain was able to obtain assistance from NCDA & CS’s cost-share program that paid for \$600 of the costs for having a third party GAPs certification.

Holbrook also conducted water testing twice during the harvest season to assess his water quality. The water samples came from the river, which is used for irrigation, and from the well, which is used for drinking water. Other costs included a minimal fee for the Spanish interpreter at the training, the time to assemble the farm’s food safety plan with data logs, and the addition of hand-washing stations.

Holbrook is a member of the NC Tomato Growers Association and has willingly shared his experience with other growers.

In 2009 Holbrook was invited to Washington, DC, to speak on how provisions in the farm bill would help small businesses. He discussed the potential effects on small farmers, answered questions from members of Congress, and voiced concerns over increased on-farm regulations.

“I resent being told how to farm,” Holbrook said. “I do appreciate how GAPs made me more proac-

tive about the farm and fresh produce safety. I’m more prepared to respond to market demands or to handle an illness outbreak.”



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