

Fresh Produce Safety

Patterson Farm, Inc.

Editor's Note: This is one of three case studies documenting farmers' experiences participating in the NC Fresh Produce Safety Initiative. Patterson Farm, Inc. is a large-scale 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 outbreak.

Patterson Farm, Inc. of China Grove, NC, provides wholesale vegetables, u-pick fields, and agritourism events. The 350-acre operation also includes a landscape nursery and greenhouse and a re-pack facility.

The farm has never had a produce recall since the business started in 1935; however, that fact did not protect it from losses in 2008 when a food-borne illness outbreak implicated tomatoes across the nation. Extensively covered by the media, the outbreak led consumers to stop buying all tomatoes – the single largest crop grown by Patterson.

“Even though the outbreak was later traced to Mexico,” owner Doug Patterson said, “we found out that you



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Patterson's Farm of China Grove, NC specializes in wholesale vegetables, u-pick fields and other special farm events.

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Doug and his brother Randall are co-owners of the farm and are committed to keeping up with the latest initiatives in fresh produce safety to ensure that their product quality remains high. Patterson Farm is a large commercial operation that has officially implemented many good agricultural practices (GAPs) across the board. The repack facility was USDA GAPs-certified in 2008, and the farm worked with NC Cooperative Extension to hold an educational mock audit in 2009, which helped teach its own employees, other area farmers, and extension agents on how GAPs would apply to field and packing houses.

The tomato fields, strawberry fields, and packing house at

Patterson Farm were GAPs-certified in 2010. The Patterson brothers, working with NC Cooperative Extension and the NC Fresh Produce Safety Task Force, invited the FDA to conduct its farm investigations course at their operation. Doug is also active within the industry, serving as a member of the NC Tomato Growers Association, the NC Strawberry Association, and the NC Agribusiness Council.

“GAPs are a hot topic among growers right now,” he said. “In particular, mid- to large-scale operations are having conversations about food safety through newsletters, board meetings, and training opportunities.”

Since tomatoes are the largest crop at Patterson Farm, most resources available for GAPs focus on them. Rowan County Cooperative Extension comes to the farm every year to



Wooden bins now replaced by plastic bins that allow for easy of cleaning.

conduct six to eight hours of hygiene training for more than 250 employees. The training covers basic hygiene, blood-borne pathogens, food security, and wound care. Each employee is required to sign a form that states they have completed the training as part of GAPs documentation. Employees found in violation of the hygiene practices covered by the training receive verbal and written reprimands from their crew leaders, and employees who come to work sick can be terminated immediately.

This employee training costs about \$10,000 a year, plus an additional \$5000 for training materials and documentation forms. Doug believes that the cost is justified.

“Our employees are handling produce during the time it is most vulnerable to contamination,” he said. “Some GAPs are worth the cost right away, and others may have to wait. You have to decide what’s most important to do first.”

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Doug Patterson

In an operation the size of Patterson Farm, the costs associated with potentially reducing risks can be significant. Doug estimates that \$25,000 was spent recently on replacing wooden machinery platforms with metal platforms and that almost \$30,000 will be spent replacing wooden harvest bins with plastic bins. Costs such as these were balanced by the decision to wait on installing fencing and security around the pack house.

“Our employees live on the property surrounding the pack house,” Doug said, “and they are well-trained in produce safety. Security didn’t seem like such a priority at the moment compared to swapping the bins and platforms.”

The third-party audit for Patterson Farm, conducted by Primus, cost about \$2500 and focused on certifying tomatoes and strawberries. Since Patterson’s GAPs certification is directed at specific crops, that cost has the potential to increase if buyers demand certification for additional commodities. The farm currently sells tomatoes to 30 distributors, five of which require GAPs certification. Buyers have called and requested a copy of the GAPs certificate, as well as the farm’s overall audit report and score.

Patterson has not experienced an increase in the amount of produce sold or the number of markets served; however, the farm has been able to maintain current markets. As an adopter of GAPs, Patterson is already looking toward its next step in fresh produce safety – barcoding for traceability.

“Barcoding will require us to install hardware and software on the packing line and that will be expensive – probably around \$200,000,” Doug said. “If a quality issue arises, we can trace forward to other buyers receiving product from that field or date and determine if it’s an isolated incident that relates to storage or

transport or if there’s a bigger problem.”

Doug would like to see some grants made available to farmers, both small and large, for implementing GAPs. Offsetting costs for regular water tests, traceability measures, or initial audits could help farmers move closer toward improving fresh produce safety. Patterson Farm has started simple, inexpensive GAPs with its u-pick strawberry fields.

Customers are encouraged to wash their hands and use a foot mat prior to entering the fields. This consumer involvement with GAPs allows the farm to gauge public interest in food safety on a regular basis. Patterson’s website also offers more information about GAPs.

“Depending on the size of your operation, GAPs can be costly,” Doug said. “However, we learned with tomatoes that an entire industry can be affected by an outbreak, not just one grower. I don’t want another farm’s lack of GAPs to harm my business, so the cost is worth it to me. I support uniformity in food safety legislation.”



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