

## Farm Worker Health and Hygiene

### **Background**

It is estimated that there are slightly more than 1 million hired farm workers employed in U.S. – roughly one third of the estimated three million people employed in the agricultural labor force.

Since farm labor is physically demanding, hired farm workers are usually younger, less educated, white, Hispanic, male, married and more likely to be foreign born. Their economic status, lack of health insurance, as well as cultural and language barriers, prevent large numbers of these workers from obtaining the health care services that they need.

Farm workers have intimate contact with the fruits and vegetables as they harvest, sort and pack these foods, so worker health and hygiene becomes a matter of concern. Pathogenic organisms of human health significance including Salmonella species, E.coli O157:H7, Shigella, Cryptosporidium, Cyclospora, Hepatitis A, and Norovirus associated with infected farm workers, have been implicated in outbreaks involving strawberries, green onions, raspberries, tomatoes, leaf lettuce, basil, parsley and other produce items.

Some of the factors contributing to outbreaks associated with produce caused by infected workers include lack of adequate water supply, workers with limited hygiene education, poor or no toilet facilities, bare hand contact with produce items, lack of food contact surface sanitation and lack of childcare for workers.

Investigations of farms and packing houses that had been incriminated in produce associated outbreaks, revealed that infected workers and poor worker hygiene were often implicated.

### **Effective Worker Education and Training Programs**

Today, with Good Agricultural Practice (GAPs) audits of farm operations being required by produce buyers, there is a section in most audit checklists, including the USDA GAPs and Good Handling Practices (GHPs) Audit Verification Checklist that addresses:

#### Worker Health and Hygiene

- Workers must recognize that when they are sick, they should not report to work, or alternatively, report their illness to a supervisor who can assign them to a job where they will not handle produce.
- Workers displaying symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, severe abdominal pain, exposed cuts, sores or open wounds, Hepatitis A or yellow jaundiced skin and eyes should not have direct contact with food.
- Workers with upper respiratory infections should also be assigned duties not involving food handling.

- Workers who have been removed from contact with produce should only be returned to these jobs when cleared by a licensed health care professional, stating that they are no longer infectious
- Instruction on the prompt and proper treatment (first aid) for cuts, abrasions and other injuries, as well as policies and procedures on the specific handling and disposition of produce and food contact surfaces that come in contact with blood or other body fluids.

#### Personal Cleanliness

- Taking a shower every day, wearing task-appropriate clean clothes to work, keeping fingernails trimmed short and clean, using only designated toilet facilities at all times (either field toilets, toilets in the packinghouse or other appropriate facilities), washing hands thoroughly and often, using appropriate head gear, and not eating food or candy, chewing gum or using tobacco products while on the job working with produce are common personal hygiene items.

#### Water

- Clean, potable water from a sanitary source for farm workers is needed for consumption and hand washing and reduces the likelihood of enteric organisms contaminating the hands of workers.
- Drinking water should be provided to ensure that workers do not get dehydrated and ill while working. The water supply should be in good working order and be monitored on a daily basis.
  - Water should be stored in clean and previously sanitized containers and tanks that are cleaned and sanitized daily.
  - The containers should be covered, kept away from sun and excessive heat and single-use, disposable cups should be provided.

#### Jewelry and Personal Adornments

- Jewelry of all kinds including rings, bracelets, earrings, necklaces, piercings, as well as false finger nails and other personal adornments such as badges, buttons, etc. can create a physical hazard if they should break or become dislodged and fall into the product.
- Pens, pencils, thermometers, and other small items should not be kept in coat or shirt pockets as they might fall into the product.
- Appropriate head gear should be worn when workers are handling product and facial hair must also be covered

#### Proper Toilet Use

- It is vital that growers provide clean and sanitary toilets and hand washing facilities that are properly stocked with soap, water and single-use paper towels in the field as well as in packinghouse operations. Providing these facilities close to where people are working and enforcing proper use will promote good health and hygiene, reinforcing the farm's commitment to produce safety.

#### Hand Washing

- Proper hand washing is the single most important way to prevent the transmission of infectious diseases and should be practiced by all workers who handle food.
- Hand washing is an activity that should always be done before beginning work and should be repeated frequently throughout the day. It is especially critical after performing any of the following activities:
  - Using the toilet

- Eating foods or drinking beverages
- Returning to work after a break
- Coughing, sneezing or blowing the nose
- Touching or scratching the face, mouth, nose, skin, hair, or ears
- Smoking or using chewing tobacco
- Touching dirty surfaces, equipment or utensils
- Handling dirty raw materials, trash, garbage, or waste
- Handling contaminated or potentially contaminated materials
- Performing maintenance on any equipment
- Touching or handling agricultural chemicals including fertilizers, pesticides, and cleaning materials
- Any other situation that may lead to contamination of the hands

### Gloves

Since bare hand contact with ready to eat foods has often been linked to foodborne illness outbreaks, it is important that workers wear gloves when handling produce.

Clean, intact gloves can provide an effective barrier between hands and produce.

- Once disposable gloves are removed, they should be discarded and not reused
- Reusable gloves should be washed and sanitized frequently and thrown away when they become old, soiled, torn or uncleanable.
- Gloves are not a substitute for proper hand washing.

### **Conclusion**

People who work on farms and in packinghouses play a key role in assuring the safety of fresh fruits and vegetables that they harvest, sort, and pack. Top management commitment to food safety, a well designed and implemented farm worker education and training program, clear and enforced rules for food safety and sanitation, as well as attention to details, will reduce the risk of produce-associated foodborne illnesses linked to workers.