

Chapter 2:

Food Safety is Important

Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe why food safety is important to your farm direct business or Alberta Approved Farmers' Market
- Address consumers' concerns about food safety
- Define foodborne illness

Chapter 2: Food Safety is Important

The material in this chapter gives farm direct marketers and Alberta Approved Farmers' Market Managers an understanding of why food safety is important to their business and their market. The food safety plan you build as you work through this manual and then implement will enable you to address consumers' concerns about the safety of their food.

Consumers Demand Safety

Food safety is keystone to our food supply. Consumers demand quality and safety in the foods they buy whether they're purchasing from a farmers' market vendor, restaurant, large supermarket or small convenience store. Over the past decade, Canadians have become increasingly aware and concerned about food safety with almost half worried about the safety of the food they eat. Not surprisingly, consumer surveys rank food safety as being almost as important as health care.

Almost 50 percent of Canadians are worried about food safety.

Table 2.1 **Top Food Safety Issues of Personal Concern**

Issues	% of Respondents
Bacteria/contamination in food	20
Contamination from handling	15
Antibiotics/hormones/steroids/drugs to fed animals	7
Use of pesticides/herbicides/spray	4
Freshness	3

Food safety concerns are diverse.

Source: Ipsos Reid Consumer Perceptions of Food Safety and Quality 2004

Consumers have a general concern about food safety but when pressed to list specific issues, bacterial contamination was the area most frequently recorded.

In spite of increased media reports of people getting sick from contaminated food or water, Albertans are very confident in their food providers and the safety of their food supply. In fact when compared against Canadians as a whole, Albertans are more confident on all issues. They are especially confident with their farmers' markets, producers who sell direct and grocery stores.

Consumers in the Prairies have the highest level of confidence in the safety of Canada's food supply.

Whenever possible almost 60 percent of Canadians eat food that is locally produced. An Ipsos Reid survey conducted in May 2005 reported 85 percent confidence level by Canadians in the safety of food purchased at farmers' markets and direct from producers. Eighty percent of Albertans are confident in the safety of Alberta-produced food.

While Canadians are generally confident in the safety of their food, they have concerns with some areas of the supply chain. Consumers view the processing industry, restaurants and farmers as having the most important roles in food safety.

“Food safety and quality products are the foundation of our business. If consumers don't have confidence in our products they won't purchase them. It's our responsibility as a producer and vendor to provide safe products for people to buy.” Darlene Hegel, Valta Bison

Consumer Perceptions

Surveys indicate that:

- Over one-third of consumers believe that if a problem is going to occur, it will happen during the processing of a food.
- About one-third of those surveyed believe that a problem is mostly likely to happen on the farm in foodservice.
- Just under ten percent believe the problem is most likely to arise at the grocery store

Table 2.2 Where Canadians Feel Food Safety Problems are Mostly Likely to Develop

Location of Concern	% of Respondents
During the processing of foods	38
In restaurants	15
At the farm	15
During transportation	10
In the home	10
At the grocery store	9

Source: Ipsos Reid Consumer Perceptions of Food Safety and Quality 2004

Consumers have perceptions about where a food safety problem is most likely to develop.

In another survey, Albertans believe that everyone has an important role to play in food safety. Farmers received the highest rating at 85 percent, but that was only slightly higher than food processors.

Table 2.3 **Importance of Suppliers for Ensuring Safety of Food**

Supplier	% of Respondents Who Ranked Very Important
Farmers	85
Food processors	80
Retailers	79
Food distributors	75
Restaurants	74

Source: Ipsos Reid Food Safety Consumer Perceptions and Behaviours 2005

As a farm direct marketer, you can reduce the risk of a foodborne illness and maintain consumer confidence in your food by implementing food safety best practices at the market. Evaluate your production and market food safety practices. Focus first on those areas of greatest concern to your customers: cleanliness, safe handling, proper storage, production and freshness. Implement changes as required.

“The driving force behind changes in our food safety practices was customer demand.” Greg Sawchuk, Muriel Creek Cattle Company

Market managers and farm store operators need to be aware that the safety of food products in their market or store is of concern to customers. Pay close attention to these products. Work with your vendors and farm direct suppliers to ensure that their products are safe and that they are perceived by your customers to be safe.

“Some of our customers are requiring food safety best practices right now or they just won’t buy from us.” Helen Doef, Doef’s Greenhouses Ltd.

Farm direct marketers have a role in ensuring safe food.

Food safety is another marketing tool in your arsenal.

Food Safety – A Marketing Tool

Consumers expect their food to be safe – always. All players in the food industry stake their business on the safety of their food products every day. Simply put, the agriculture and food industry operates in a culture of food safety.

“Food safety is our key competitive advantage. Food safety is becoming a huge differentiator and we’re well positioned to respond to increasing consumer demands for confidence in the food they buy. Canada can be a world leader in the global food supply if we go from doing a *good* job in food safety to doing a *great* job.”

Michael McCain, President and CEO, Maple Leaf Foods Inc.

Food safety is one promotion tool to use to market your products and differentiate them from others in the marketplace. You can use your food safety practices to advantageously position your products. Tell your customers about how you handle your food and what you do to provide them with the safest products. However, ensure that your actions support your words.

Be aware that there is a potential danger in using your food safety program as a marketing tool. You can’t control food safety to the same degree that you can other product features. Control is reduced with each step and player added to the supply chain. In addition, your control is only as good as the weakest link. Furthermore, as consumers become more informed about food safety, their attitudes and behaviours may shift, resulting in greater or different food safety demands.

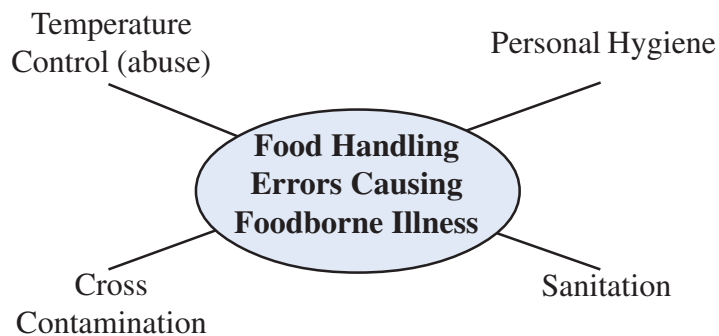
Consumer polls indicate that about half of Canadians are concerned about food safety. The food and agriculture industry is responding to consumer demand for a continued safe food supply by expanding existing and implementing new food safety programs. These programs are driven by industry, not government, in response to changes in the market place.

“Food safety is critical when you have that one-on-one contact with customers. It’s a trust relationship so you have to go above and beyond their expectations.” Greg Sawchuk, Muriel Creek Cattle Company

Foodborne Illnesses

Foodborne illnesses are caused by consuming unsafe or contaminated foods, water or beverages. They're called foodborne illnesses simply because food acts as the transmission vehicle for harmful organisms and toxic substances. Foodborne illness frequently results in temporary disorders such as nausea, diarrhea and flu-like symptoms but can lead to serious long-term health consequences and even death. Food that looks, smells and tastes good can still cause serious foodborne illness. If you have experienced nausea and vomiting accompanied by stomach cramps and diarrhea, then you may have been a victim of food poisoning and not the 24 hour flu.

Foodborne illnesses are often caused by food handling errors in four areas:



In Alberta, more than 3000 cases of foodborne illnesses are reported each year. The actual number is likely much higher as many cases go unreported. People often self diagnose foodborne illness as 24 hour flu and do not seek medical help due to the mildness of the symptoms. In many instances, the symptoms may not appear until days or weeks after ingesting a pathogen. This time lapse makes it difficult to identify the cause of the illness and the particular food that was contaminated. As a result, it's estimated that only 1 to 5 percent of foodborne illnesses are reported.

The Impact of Foodborne Illness

Foodborne illness is a serious and growing problem that costs lives and money. Thousands of Albertans become sick each year and some die after eating contaminated or mishandled foods. Children, the elderly and those in poor health are especially vulnerable to foodborne illness. Health Canada estimates 2.2 million cases occur annually across the country. The cost to the Canadian economy is staggering. According to Health Canada estimates, the increased health care costs, reduced productivity and lost markets amount up to six billion dollars annually.

CLEAN: wash hands and surfaces often

SEPARATE: don't cross contaminate

COOK: cook to proper temperatures

CHILL: refrigerate promptly

Microbial foodborne illness represents a significant percentage of the total estimated cases. At about a million cases each year, Health Canada estimates the cost of microbial foodborne illnesses at more than \$1 billion. These figures become even more significant when you realize that most of these cases are avoidable.

By preventing foodborne illness outbreaks, farm direct vendors and farmers' market managers can prevent people from getting sick and avoid bad publicity, loss of reputation, expensive legal fees, medical claims, wasted food if recalled and quite possibly, closing their business or market.

As you read through this manual, you'll learn how to reduce the risk of foodborne illness by improving your food handling practices.

What's Your Acceptable Risk?

Foodborne illness is preventable. Minimize its risk by practicing safe food handling methods. The costs of foodborne illness to the farm direct marketer or farmers' market manager may be financial, medical or legal. The costs associated with foodborne illness and the damage to the reputation of the farm direct marketing business or farmers' market are a high price to pay. How much risk are you comfortable taking? A foodborne outbreak traced to your operation could put you out of business.

“In this day and age, food safety is critical. We have 60 plus vendors, 107 stalls and 35,000 square feet of retail space. One incident where something gets out of control can shut down the market. If we have one vendor affecting 60 to 70 families, it's going to have an impact on their livelihoods.” Anne Lambert, Calgary Farmers' Market



Level of Risk

Evaluate your level of risk by answering the following questions.

What is the impact of losing customers who eat contaminated food and become ill? _____

Whose responsibility is it if there is a food safety incident at the farmers' market or farm store? _____

How will you assume the financial responsibility if legal action is taken against you? _____

What other financial resources do you have if you lose your business or the market closes because of a foodborne illness outbreak?

How will you handle the loss of reputation that accompanies a foodborne outbreak? _____

If a foodborne illness occurs, are you financially prepared to deal with the consequences? Does your insurance policy provide any coverage against a food poisoning incident? If so, what is your level of coverage? _____

Summary

Canadians are increasingly worried about the safety of their food supply. Fortunately for farm direct marketers, Albertans are confident in the products you produce. But this confidence is fragile. A major foodborne incident could reduce this level of confidence and support.

It is your responsibility to do everything possible to ensure that you are providing safe food. It is crucial that your food is safe: every product, every sale and every market day. If customers are unhappy with the products they purchase from you or at your market, they will not be back. Word of mouth advertising from a bad experience is not good for future business.

Market Manager Responsibilities

As a manager of an Alberta Approved Farmers' Market you must make certain that the market is a safe place for food to be sold. Safe food handling practices by employees and vendors will help ensure that your market does not contribute to the contamination of food with biological, chemical and physical hazards. As you walk through the farmers' market, check that all vendors are doing their part to ensure the safety of the food they sell.

“We have an operations staff of about 20 people for our market. I made sure they all got copies of the Food Safety Checklists so they are aware of the requirements for cleanliness of the washrooms, garbage and facilities.” Sonia Meyer, Lethbridge Farmers' Market

What's Next

What do food safety hazards, bad bugs and indirect transmission all have in common? They all can lead to foodborne illness. Read the next chapter, Chapter 3: Bad Bugs to learn more about the causes of foodborne illness.



Resources

If you need more information or have food safety questions about this chapter contact:

Safe Food Systems
Agri-Food Systems Branch, Food Safety Division
Alberta Agriculture, Food & Rural Development
Phone: (780) 427-4054. Dial 310-0000 first for toll free access.