



Voluntary Certifications

Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs)

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In recent years a voluntary USDA food safety audit program called “Good Agricultural Practices” or GAPs has received increased attention within the agricultural sector. In many cases, this attention is driven by buyers from grocery chains or produce distribution companies who are requiring that their suppliers be “GAP certified.” In addition, the passage of the 2010 Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) has highlighted the GAP program (and its parallel for packers and processors, the Good Handling Practices) both as informing FSMA’s future rules and highlighting producers’ and processors’ current food safety practices. Fortunately, WSDA has been able to support farms with their food safety goals through a project called “Bridging the GAPs.” To help clarify what GAP is, how it relates to direct marketing, this fact sheet includes:

- Benefits of becoming GAP certified;
- The USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) Audit Program;
- Resources and additional information for farmers.

Benefits of Becoming GAP Certified

Becoming GAP certified is not required by state or federal regulations. It is a voluntary food safety audit that says your farm or business is following agricultural production and handling practices intended to minimize food safety risks in fruits and vegetables. While there are ample challenges to becoming GAP certified, especially among smaller-scale and diversified farms, there are also may be compelling reasons to consider it.

One clear motivation to become GAP certified (meaning that your farm passed the audit) is that certain buyers are requiring it. This is especially true for institutional markets (e.g., schools, hospitals), produce distributors, and retail grocery outlets motivated to manage the risk of food-borne illness and recalls. In addition to the USDA certification, there are a number of private food safety audit programs available. Farms and food businesses should check with buyers to confirm their specific requirements. In other cases, farms may do food safety audits such as GAP in order to document their production and handling practices even when buyers don’t require it. This extra step may be a production and marketing risk management strategy for the farm.

While GAP is not widely known in the general public, some farms consider third party food safety certifications as an effective way to communicate to direct market customers that they are following best practices to provide safe products.

The USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) Audit Program

The USDA Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) Audit Program is a **voluntary** program for businesses growing, packing or processing fruits and vegetables. These programs are designed to demonstrate that the farm or business is following a set of food safety agricultural production and handling practices based on Food and Drug Administration's "Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables." The GAP and GHP audits show commitment by management and employees to follow and maintain guidelines to help minimize the potential risk for microbial contamination of the product.

For Washington State fruit and vegetable producers, the GAP audit is offered by the WSDA. *Because the program is voluntary, an audit is performed only at the request of the applicant.* The audit covers manure management, harvest, worker sanitation, packing house operation, storage, transportation, trace back, and other food safety topics. Farms and food businesses may request to be audited on some or all of these areas, depending on their specific business model and what their buyers require.

How long does it take?

It takes approximately 2 to 7 hours to complete an audit. The time necessary to complete an audit is dependent on many factors including the size of the operation, the number of crops covered by the audit, and the audit type. A small family farm growing one crop might only take a couple of hours, but a large diversified operation would take significantly longer.

What does it cost?

The federal rate for audit services is \$92 per hour per auditor, including travel time to and from the audit site and any preparation time needed to perform the audit. Currently WSDA is charging \$75 per hour but will change to the USDA rate in the near future. WSDA also charges mileage to and from the audit site.

Who does the audit?

A USDA-trained and certified GAP/GHP staff from WSDA's Fruit and Vegetable Inspection Program performs audits for WSDA.

For more information about GAP or GHP audits, contact the WSDA Fruit and Vegetable Inspection program by calling (360) 902-1833, emailing ccrump@agr.wa.gov, or visiting www.agr.wa.gov/Inspection/FVInspection/GAPGHP.aspx.

Resources and Additional Information for Farmers

WSDA supports farms in achieving food safety goals through a project called "Bridging the Gaps": www.agr.wa.gov/Inspection/GAPGHP. The goal is to improve food safety and develop education and outreach services to support Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP). The project identifies and shares best practices relating to on-farm food safety for small, mid-sized and diversified fruit and vegetable farms. Bridging the Gaps also provides training to help WSDA auditors better serve small and diversified farming operations, and coordinates workshops and tools

for the farming community to share examples of safe growing practices that meet the GAP certification standards.

The “Bridging the Gaps” project includes:

- a series of on-farm workshops on small, diversified farms around the state;
- a video to introduce GAP/GHP at www.agr.wa.gov/Inspection/GAPGHP/Videos.aspx; and
- online resources such as a Q and A from farmers at www.agr.wa.gov/Inspection/GAPGHP/GAPGHPQA.aspx.

Many organizations and universities provide templates, information, and resources for farms seeking to develop food safety plans, improve food safety practices and successfully complete GAP/GHP audits. Among those linked from the WSDA Bridging the Gaps website are:

Cornell University Online Gaps Produce Safety Course: www.gaps.cornell.edu
Create a Customized Food Safety Plan: www.onfarmfoodsafety.org
On-Farm Food Safety Project website: www.onfarmfoodsafety.org
University of Minnesota Standard Operating Procedures Templates:
<http://safety.cfans.umn.edu/fsp4u>

Recommended Fact Sheets

19. WSDA Food Processor License and Facilities
22. FAQ on the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)

For further information, to provide comments, or suggest a resource to add to this fact sheet, please email smallfarms@agr.wa.gov or call (360) 902-2888.