

Scientist to Ohio's Produce Growers: Be Proactive, Set Own Food Safety Standards

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WOOSTER, Ohio -- Ohio's produce growers are considering developing statewide food safety standards to get a step ahead of national rules now being considered -- rules that Ohio's smaller growers fear could drive them out of business.

"There's a growing consensus among produce growers that there are two tacks the state's growers can take: Do nothing, and we'll end up with standards that don't fit the state very well, or be proactive and set standards that make sense for Ohio," said Doug Doohan, fruit and vegetable specialist with Ohio State University Extension and a leader of the Ohio Roundtable on Safe Production of Fresh Produce.

Doohan said growers are being spurred into action by a proposal for a national Marketing Agreement Regulating Leafy Green Vegetables. Many of Ohio's smaller growers who grow and sell leafy greens -- lettuce, spinach, collards and similar crops -- say they will simply stop growing those crops if the national standards that are developed look anything like the California agreement put into place in 2008. While that would be a loss for Ohio consumers who prefer to buy local foods, leafy greens aren't a major crop for most of Ohio's smaller produce growers.

The larger concern is that similar standards for tomatoes, melons, cucumbers and other major Ohio crops will likely soon follow the leafy greens agreement, said Doohan, who is also an associate professor of horticulture and crop science and a researcher with the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. "Leafy greens are just the tip of the iceberg."

A recent article in the San Francisco Chronicle, "Crops, ponds destroyed in quest for food safety," is circulating among Ohio growers. Doohan said it does a good job outlining the unintended consequences of California's leafy greens agreement, which was put into place after spinach contaminated with E. coli O157:H7 killed four people, left 35 with acute kidney failure, and hospitalized 103. Critics of the agreement say that it undermines sound, ecological practices recommended for years to reduce use of farm chemicals and improve the environment, and calls for unrealistic, near-sanitary conditions in farm fields.

"With the current way national agreements are being developed, they're being driven by large growers in the states with the largest production," Doohan said. "Ohio is just one small voice. If we want to establish standards based on the best science and the best agricultural practices for Ohio, we need to do so now."

One of the problems is that growing conditions in the largest produce-growing states are much different from those in Ohio, Doohan said. "California's production areas are basically desert -- in Ohio, the biggest problem we have is dealing with too much rain. Here, we have a natural, rural interface on our farms, with woodlots and riparian zones that I don't think Ohioans want to give up. We don't want a 'scorched earth' policy here."

In addition, Ohio has a large contingent of Amish farmers who grow produce using horse-drawn farm equipment.

"Right now, the science tells us that horses are probably not a problem in regards to E. coli," Doohan said. "OARDC scientists have applied for a grant to study this more carefully, but in the meantime, we can develop standards that, for example, call for keeping horses out of direct contact with the crop within 30 days of harvest. That kind of guideline would make sense for Ohio's Amish farmers and would protect consumers."

In fact, Doohan said, he believes that the produce farms in Ohio that have the best food-safety-related practices in place are from two ends of the spectrum: Both the state's largest produce growers, who sell to large retailers throughout the state and nationally, and its smaller farmers, primarily Amish, who sell at produce auctions like the one in Mount Hope, have strict but sensible farm-based food safety practices, he said.

"That's the point. One standard won't work in Ohio -- we need a tiered system that makes sense for different types of farmers if we want to keep all of our producers in business and allow for expansion."

Developing such an agreement will be a time-consuming process, Doohan said. "It will take a lot of consultation with Ohio's vastly different types of produce growers," he said. "That kind of consultation is expensive. We're hoping for support from the Ohio Department of Agriculture for this project."

In addition, an educational component in the agreement would be essential, Doohan said.

"Developing a tiered, Ohio-based, comprehensive agreement in the next year or two that takes into consideration our small growers will position us well for the future," Doohan said. "But we only have a small window of opportunity for this. If we don't do it now, Ohio will probably end up having to meet standards most appropriate for California."

Doohan suggests that produce growers interested in learning more and possibly participating in developing new policies should contact Steve Carver at the [Ohio Produce Growers and Marketers Association](http://www.ohio-produce-growers.com) at opgma@ofa.org.

Doohan also hopes to work more with colleagues in OSU Extension to deal more directly with produce-related food safety issues. For example, he's finishing up a specially funded project now in which he and colleagues have conducted food-safety training with 1,100 growers and those who work with growers, and he is about to mail about 2,000 packets of produce-related food safety information to produce farmers and others in the industry. But he is concerned that reduced levels of funding statewide over the past few years may cause those efforts to subside.

"Food safety is the No. 1 issue in the fruit and vegetable industry today," Doohan said. "We need an ongoing program and a sustained effort to address it."