



WASHINGTON GRAPEVINE

A report on the inside happenings of government.

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Harmonized Audits And Standards

In mid-May, the Technical Working Group (TWG) of the Produce GAPs Harmonization Initiative released its first Draft Harmonized Standards. The draft represents a major step by the TWG toward establishing a single audit standard for an industry that has been plagued by myriad auditing bodies and standards. The Grapevine sat down with Dr. David Gombas, senior vice president of food safety and technology at United Fresh to find out just what the Draft Harmonized Standard means for the industry.

Grapevine: Given the process used to create it, the Draft Harmonized Standard is a “greatest hits” of the multiple current standards in place. How does this help keep what works and change what doesn’t?

Dr. Gombas: Every GAP audit or food safety standard we’ve considered was developed by a group of experts, and was tested and accepted by at least some part of the industry. That meant we had some great raw material to build on. We looked at these standards and asked, “What’s applicable to a wide range of commodities, size operations, regions and production and handling practices?” We were able to select the best wording from each.

GV: Are there any aspects of the auditing process that are already standardized?

DG: At the 50,000-foot level, all GAP audit standards and processes are already the same. They can all trace their genesis to the 1998 *FDA Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables* (aka, the GAPs Guide), which recommended that growers have a food safety plan that considers the potential for pathogen contamination from agricultural water; compost and soil amendments; produce handlers and their equipment; tools and containers; and animals, both domestic and wildlife. These are still the primary food safety risk factors in agricultural production today.

GV: What have been the biggest hurdles in the process?

DG: We’ve had two concerns so far: buy-in on the harmonization process and the harmonized standard. It’s easier to create a new standard than to build on an existing standard — I believe that’s why we have so many out there. So we were concerned that the TWG might slip into that mode — creating new words rather than harmonizing those that are already being used.

Also, many companies and customers already have their favorite audit — the one they best understand and trust. Audit organizations obviously believe the standard they are using is best. So we were concerned that vested interests would pull the TWG toward one standard or another.

I’m glad to report that neither issue has emerged. The TWG stuck to the process of harmonization to complete this first phase, and everyone worked together to choose the standards that best met the needs of harmonization, regardless of their own preferences.

GV: The biggest successes?

DG: The biggest success so far has been the support from stakeholders. There has been tremendous participation from the industry on the TWG. There are now more than 100 participants, including some from Canada and Mexico. We’ve also had strong financial support, in terms of meeting hosts, from Darden, McDonald’s, Yum Brands/Taco Bell, Texas AgriLife Extension Center, U.S. Foodservice and Sysco, and more organizations committed to host future meetings.

The second success has been from the Steering Committee — the produce industry business leaders who have to buy-in on the need for harmonization and will have to accept the harmonized standard when completed. Last month, at the joint meeting of the Steering Committee and the TWG, faced with the reality of a standard that was ²/₃ drafted, the Steering Committee reaffirmed the need and their commitment to the vision of “one audit, performed by any credible third party, acceptable to all buyers.”

GV: What are the potential savings created by the Draft Harmonized Standard?

DG: Today, there are more than a dozen GAP standards being used by and for the produce industry, all more than 90 percent the same in what is being audited, yet all slightly different in expectations and how the audit is performed. If there was one audit that a critical mass of buyers would accept, everyone would use it. For those being audited, multiple, slightly different audits are an unnecessary diversion of limited food safety resources, without actually improving food safety. For customers of those audits, the audit differences make it difficult to compare operations. Having a single standard that is used consistently by all audit organizations provides a common yardstick for measuring operations’ food safety practices, and allows those operations to concentrate their resources on managing food safety, instead of managing different audit expectations.

GV: Now that the Draft Harmonized Standard has been released, what is the next step?

DG: Now that a first draft has been assembled, the TWG faces a greater challenge: Adjusting the draft to apply to the widest possible range of commodities, regions, size operations and production practices.

When we began the process, it wasn’t clear whether a single standard for all GAP operations would be possible. However, the process has taught us that even though the food safety plans may vary from operation to operation, the audit questions appear to be the same. Whether that stays true as we get into the final details of the harmonized standard remains to be seen but so far, we are optimistic that the Steering Committee’s vision of “one audit, performed by any credible third party, acceptable to all buyers” can be achieved.

A copy of the Draft Harmonized Standard is available online from the United Fresh website at: http://www.unitedfresh.org/newsviews/gap_harmonization.

