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Fresh Produce Safety Is Focus of N.C. Cooperative Extension Workshop

KANNAPOLIS, N.C. – As headlines document more cases of contaminated food in the U.S., North Carolina Cooperative Extension faculty are in the midst of training Extension agents in all 100 counties in proven practices that help to ensure the safety of North Carolina's fresh produce.

Almost three dozen Cooperative Extension agents are scheduled to attend a training session April 30 and May 1 at the Mountain Horticultural Crops Research and Extension Center at Mills River, south of Asheville. The training will focus on Good Agricultural Practices, known as GAPs, and agents completing the course will then schedule their own training sessions for anyone involved in handling fresh produce, from farmers and field hands to packing houses that store the produce and truckers that deliver the produce to grocery store chains or local farmers markets and roadside stands.

"Farmers are keenly interested in implementing practices that minimize risks to the food supply and they are receiving added pressure from industry to implement Good Agricultural Practices and become GAPs certified," says Diane Ducharme, member of the N.C. State University Program for Value-Added & Alternative Agriculture and co-chair of the N.C. Fresh Produce Safety Task Force. She also serves as N.C. State University's GAPs program coordinator. "This training is designed to ultimately educate farmers on GAPs so they can minimize risks and also put practices in place to help them become GAPs certified in the future, if needed."

Currently, GAPs certification is voluntary for North Carolina farmers, though recent outbreaks in other parts of the country have resulted in increased pressure for all farmers to become certified. Cooperative Extension agents from across the state have registered to attend the workshop, but most are coming from western N.C. counties, including Buncombe, Cherokee, Jackson, Watauga and Yancey. Previous training sessions were held in November at the N.C. Research Campus in Kannapolis and in March at the N.C. Cooperative Extension Center in Wilson County.

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Susan Colucci, an Extension area specialized agent for Buncombe, Haywood and Henderson counties, says getting certification in Good Agricultural Practices is “a hot topic” for growers in western North Carolina. At least one packing house that serves tomato and pepper growers in several western counties has indicated to farmers that they will need GAPs certification in the future to sell their produce to the packing house.

The workshop addresses such Good Agricultural Practices as checking for sources of waste contamination near crops, verifying safety of water used to irrigate crops, regular hand washing procedures, cleanliness of trucks that transport produce, and maintaining the “cold chain” temperature of produce from the field. It will also explain procedures for tracing produce bought in the store or farmers market all the way back to the field where it was picked, Ducharme says. Such “traceability” has become important for health officials when an incident of contaminated food occurs. Not only does it help identify the source of contamination, but traceability also enables a farmer or packing house to show that its produce was not the source of the problem, she added.

“North Carolina farmers work hard to provide a safe food supply. They make a conscious effort to address issues that will enhance their operations and alleviate food safety concerns,” says Ducharme. “This training is designed to educate them on research-based practices and to strengthen their current efforts. In short, it helps farmers and the public.”

Learn more at www.ncfreshproducesafety.org.

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