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## Profitable Agriculture Alternatives Newsletter

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### Prevent Contamination at Pick-your-own Operations

#### UPCOMING CONFERENCES

**When:** April 23, 2007, 6:15 p.m.

**Where:** Smithfield, NC

**What:** "Profitable Produce: Safe Food Handling & Liability Protection"

**Who should attend:** Fruit and vegetable growers, especially those who have pick-your-own operations and retail stands!

**Contact:** Amie Newsome, amie\_newsome@ncsu.edu OR Annette Dunlap, annette\_dunlap@ncsu.edu

**Cost:** \$15, includes dinner

**Registration deadline is April 16!**

Berry picking time is right around the corner. Farmers will soon be handing out pails to customers, who will fill them with fresh, ripe strawberries, blueberries and blackberries. Chances are, they'll pop a few juicy fruits into their mouths along the way. No danger of any possible disease? Right? Wrong!

"Fresh produce can become contaminated at any point along the farm-to-table food chain," cautions Lynn Turner, Ph.D., Professor of Food Science at NCSU. "The major source of microbial contamination with fresh produce is associated with human or animal feces."

In other words, customers may come to the farm to pick berries, and they may contaminate their own food because their hands are not clean. Or, there may be contamination from animal waste that has run off into water used for irrigation. Workers who pick produce that is then offered as "ready-picked" may also have unclean hands.

#### Taking Preventive Measures

Remember the spinach incident from last summer. Spinach sales of all producers plummeted following the reports of an E.coli outbreak from raw spinach. All it takes is one reported incident in North Carolina to destroy the season for every producer in the state. Cooking foods kills dangerous microbes, but food consumed raw contains the potential for disease.

So, prevention is always preferred to after-the-incident correction. Here are some steps to take that can help prevent contamination:

- Post safe food handling instructions in a prominent location
- Provide sanitary wipes for customers and encourage their use
- Require workers to wash hands immediately before picking produce
- Keep containers and counter surfaces clean and sanitary

Irrigation water can be a hidden source of contamination. "Whenever water comes in contact with produce, its source and quality dictate the potential for contamination," Turner notes. So, producers should take steps to minimize the danger of microbial contamination of fresh fruits (and vegetables) from irrigation water. Some things to consider are:

- Know routes & handling of surface water sources, seasonal influences on quality and any microbial monitoring programs of the supplier
- Identify potential sources of contamination
- Ensure wells aren't contaminated by surface run-off and soil infiltration
- Water used with foliar applications should be from a pathogen-free source
- Use potable water for foliar applications within two weeks of harvest

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## Prevent Contamination (cont.)

- Manage use of animal manure or biosolid waste closely
- Keep domestic animals out of the field
- Take steps to reduce vector attractants

Pick-your-own operations are a fun and enjoyable activity for customers, and a great income opportunity for producers. Taking these preventive steps can help continue the pleasure for the public and the profits for farmers!

For more detailed information, check our web site at: [cals.ncsu.edu/value-added/toolkit.htm](http://cals.ncsu.edu/value-added/toolkit.htm)

## Reduce Your On-Farm Liability

Managing risk is an important part of farm operations. Producers need to take a look at their operations and identify those areas that may increase their on-farm liability. One essential way to reduce liability is to follow the safe food-handling recommendations outlined on page one of this newsletter. There are also other factors to consider when operating a farm business.

**Take routine steps to reduce your risk of exposure.** If you are operating a pick-your-own operation, inspect your property daily. Look at the condition of your parking area and walkways. Make sure these areas are free of debris and clutter. Remove large rocks or stones, identify exposed tree roots and take any other appropriate steps to decrease the danger of someone tripping or falling on your property.

**Inspect your farm stand.** Make sure surfaces are well-sanded and that there are no protruding nails or screws. Make sure your farm buildings are in good repair, even if they will not be used by visitors. Keep farm equipment stored away from areas where you have customer activity.

**Look carefully at your parking area.** Clearly designate vehicle traffic areas with highly visible markers. Drivers should be able to determine where they are to park, and pedestrians should be aware of traffic patterns.

**Have at least two on-site employees for pick-your-own operations.** While one employee is staffing the cash register, the other employee should be in the field area watching customer activity. Be especially attentive to children, who may run outside of the designated area or who may want to climb on equipment.

**Keep good records.** Maintain records of any pesticide used, the name of the product(s), the rate(s) used to apply the material and the date(s) of application. Keep similar records for irrigation, noting the source(s) of the irrigation water. The objective of these records is to demonstrate your use of Good Agricultural Practices in crop management. Good record-keeping can help you if someone accuses you of selling contaminated produce.

**Purchase the right kind of insurance coverage.** Talk to your insurance agent about the type of activities you have on your farm. A general farm liability policy may cover certain types of on-farm activities, but it may not cover others. It is important to have the right kind of coverage to protect your property and your livelihood. Most general farm liability policies provide products liability coverage only for raw agricultural products. If you are doing even minimal processing you will need additional products liability coverage. Resolve any doubts by reviewing your coverage with your insurance agent or broker.

Good risk management techniques are designed to reduce your liability exposure and protect your farm and your income. Take some time to review your current practices, and change those that will reduce your risk.