



# Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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Contact: Jason Kelly (360) 902-1815

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
P.O. Box 42560, Olympia, Washington 98504-2560  
Visit our Web site at: [agr.wa.gov](http://agr.wa.gov)

## Food safety audits of fruit and vegetable growers expanding rapidly

**OLYMPIA** – After high-profile food-borne disease outbreaks and increasing concern among produce distributors, fresh fruit and vegetable farmers are seeking third-party verification of farm practices that reduce the risk of E. coli, listeria and other illnesses.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) is conducting a growing number of audits using USDA Good Agricultural Practices and Good Handling Practices. Through the process, WSDA's auditors verify that growers and processors are following best management practices to reduce the risk of microbial contamination of fresh produce. More than 128,000 acres of Washington produce were audited last year, up from 10,200 acres in 2005.

Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) audits cover the growing process of fresh fruits and vegetables in the field. Good Handling Practices (GHP) audits review the procedures used at produce warehouses and packing plants. GAP audits are conducted during the growing and harvesting season, while GHP audits can be conducted year round.

While the audits are voluntary, an increasing number of national wholesalers and retailers are requiring GAP/GHP certification from the growers and processors from whom they source their foods. Federal nutrition programs, including the nation's school lunch program, began requiring GAP/GHP audits last year for all produce. Many international buyers are also looking for proof of the audit.

"We want the buyers of Washington fruits and vegetables to know that they are getting the highest quality produce on the market," said Jim Quigley of WSDA's Fruit and Vegetable Inspection Program. "GAP audits allow our growers to keep pace with the competition and sell to national and international buyers increasingly concerned about farming practices. By reducing the risk of microbial contamination, these audits can help guard against a major product recall that can impact a business for years to come."

WSDA conducted 97 GAP audits in 2007, up from 16 audits the year before. In 2008, demand is expected to exceed last year's requests. Audits are valid for one year and are conducted on a fee-for-service basis.

The WSDA auditor looks at a wide range of procedures along the food supply chain that can prevent the spread of bacterial illnesses, including:

- Field irrigation water tested for the presence of microbial organisms;
- Measures to prevent livestock waste from contaminating crops and water;
- Ability to trace back produce to a particular field and date of harvest;

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- Covered, clean trucks to haul all produce;
- Potable water used for food processing and hand washing;
- Proper storage and refrigeration of harvested produce;
- Documented pest control programs in warehouses; and
- Proper sanitation training for farm workers and packing house employees.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture defined the terms of the GAP and GHP audits, and developed the audit checklist used to evaluate growers. WSDA performs the audits to meet or exceed those requirements, and provides tools to help producers prepare for the audit process.

Washington's potato industry has been an active partner in developing the GAP audit process for both fresh and processing potatoes. The Washington State Potato Commission and individual growers have worked with WSDA to develop prototype standardized operating procedures used to audit potato farms. The industry has made GAP audit certification one of the requirements written into growers' contracts this season.

“Our growers, as stewards of the land, know they have to continue to take extra steps to insure the safety and quality of our food,” said Chris Voigt, executive director of the commission. “The potato industry has embraced the GAP program to insure strong confidence in the safety of locally grown produce. The WSDA science-based audit system is a model for other countries to follow.”

Growers of other crops are beginning to request the service. Last year, WSDA auditors visited farms growing potatoes, apples, pears, sweet corn and onions. Growers of other commodities are likely to request audits this season. Washington growers produce a larger volume of fruits and vegetables than farmers in any other state except California and Florida.

WSDA has 22 licensed GAP/GHP auditors in central Washington. The WSDA auditors are also licensed fruit and vegetable inspectors who grade produce for quality. They also certify that international shipments of produce meet the export markets' requirements and are free from plant pests and diseases.

More information about GAP/GHP audits can be found at: [www.agr.wa.gov/Inspection/FVInspection](http://www.agr.wa.gov/Inspection/FVInspection).

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