

Enhancing The Safety of Locally Grown Produce

Does Your Produce Make the Grade?

Produce quality can be compromised during harvesting, post-harvest handling, and transport. Growers will commonly remove fruits and vegetables that are damaged, rotten, or of inferior quality. Institutional buyers should also inspect and remove damaged produce when it is received. As the old adage says, “one bad apple spoils the bunch.” Any blemished produce not culled by the grower can quickly deteriorate, leading to entry points for harmful pathogens and increased risk of contamination (Figure 1). Even produce that was of high quality when it left the farm can be damaged during transport, providing an opportunity for foodborne pathogens to thrive.



▲ **Figure 1.** Poor temperature control can lead to extensive mold growth.

School nutrition personnel responsibilities

School personnel are responsible for making sure the produce they receive is of optimal quality for their school children. Below are some of the key points to keep in mind when receiving produce:

- ◆ Inspect transport vehicles and containers for cleanliness, odors, debris, chemical usage or animal transport, including pets. (Figure 2).
- ◆ Check produce for insects and signs of insects. Insects can transmit foodborne pathogens.
- ◆ Discard rotten or decayed fruits and vegetables to prevent more produce from being affected. Foodborne pathogens thrive and even grow in bruised and decaying produce.



▲ **Figure 2.** Produce should be delivered in covered containers and not be exposed to the environment during transport.

- ◆ Check and record the temperature of fruits and vegetables upon arrival and get them to the desired storage temperatures specified in *Proper Storage of Produce* as quickly as possible.
- ◆ Record all information needed for traceability, including grower name, address, phone number, items received, farm label (lot number or other unique identifier) (Table 1).
- ◆ Verify that your traceability program works by conducting a mock recall at least once a year.

Table 1. Example Receiving Log.

Date	Grower/ supplier	Address	Phone	Items Received	Amount Received	Lot No.
3/27/15	John's Berries	123 Court St. Anywhere, USA	(505) 456-7890	Strawberries	25 lbs	0001-01-22-324

Action steps for recall planning

- ▶ Step 1: Assemble a recall team. The recall team should include school administration, nutrition staff, and health officials. Other team members may include regulatory partners, such as the state department of agriculture. One person should be in charge of coordinating any efforts associated with a recall.
- ▶ Step 2: Review records to determine traceability of produce purchased from local growers. Records would include grower(s)/supplier(s) contact information and lot information (date, lot number, amount received) (Table 1). Records should be reviewed to determine how produce was held, processed and served and the quantity served to students.
- ▶ Step 3: Prepare draft press releases and parent communications that specify the risk, signs and symptoms of the illness, what steps should be taken by those exposed, and what is being done to remedy the problem.
- ▶ Step 4: Delegate a third party food safety expert to evaluate your recall plan for completeness initially and any time changes are made.
- ▶ Step 5: Conduct a mock recall to practice your plan each year. Note any weaknesses and re-train personnel, if necessary.

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