

Cantaloupe: Food Safety Priorities – next steps

January 27, 2012

The cantaloupe industry met in San Diego, Calif. Jan. 11 with academic experts, public health and agricultural regulators and food safety professionals to chart a path to enhanced food safety for domestically-produced and imported netted melons. Together, the group identified three areas for collaboration that would result in the highest level of food safety for cantaloupes and agreed to immediately invest time, talent and money in each of those areas. The three outcomes included improving the understanding of risks and controls through basic and targeted research, developing cantaloupe-specific guidance (netted melons), and aggressively extending current melon guidance and new information to the entire industry. While the Center for Produce Safety is swiftly responding to the need for research in its soon-to-be released request for proposals, industry trade associations were charged with the task of meeting the other critical objectives.

A group of trade associations including Florida Fruit & Vegetable Association, Fresh Produce Association of the Americas, Georgia Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association, Produce Marketing Association, Texas Produce Association, United Fresh Produce Association and Western Growers quickly came together to advance deliverables in the areas of guidance and education. The organizations identified two steering committees and charged them with developing processes and timelines for deliverables in these areas that were constructed to ensure accessibility, inclusiveness, transparency and timeliness. These criteria were established to engage stakeholders and other organizations around the country and outside the United States in these initiatives.

The steering committee for guidance includes Allison Moore, communications director, Fresh Produce Association of the Americas; Dr. Bob Whitaker, chief science and technology officer, Produce Marketing Association; Dr. David Gombas, senior vice president, food safety & technology, United Fresh Produce Association; and Hank Giclas, senior vice president, strategic planning, science & technology, Western Growers, who have collectively agreed to facilitate the development of commodity specific guidance for netted melons. Using a series of monthly meetings, slated to begin in March 2012 and continue through June 2012 the steering committee is committed to delivering a final product—a new netted-melon-specific guidance document—to the industry by the end of July. The developmental meetings will be held in different areas of the United States but will also be accessible online for those who wish to participate remotely. Growers, buyers, auditors, academic experts as well as regulators from state agencies, the FDA and the USDA will be invited and encouraged to participate in both development and review phases. The guidance will address all operations within the supply chain and crafted to address the diverse regions and processes in which netted melons are produced and handled.

A steering committee for extension, education and outreach was also organized to ensure the food safety effort involves as many stakeholders as possible. Charles Hall, executive director of Georgia Fruit & Vegetable Growers Association; John McClung, president of the Texas Produce Association; Martha Roberts of University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, and; Tom Stenzel, president of United Fresh Produce Association will work closely with the guidance committee to maximize the reach of information on both existing and developing food safety guidance. The group will tap into existing networks and strengths of trade associations and university extension programs both in the U.S. and abroad to reach cantaloupe growers around the world.