



GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

help provide consumers safe, quality local food

BJ Bender and Caitlin Youngquist

The continuously expanding network of farmers markets provides Wyoming residents a bounty of local produce, meat, eggs, pastries, canned items, crafts, and cosmetic products.

How can vendors ensure they offer safe products, and how can consumers make wise choices in purchasing quality food products?

The Wyoming Food Freedom Act (WFFA) specifies foods prepared in an unlicensed, uninspected, home kitchen can be sold from the producer to the direct end-consumer without inspection and certification as long as the consumers are informed the food has not been inspected or certified.

Produce, cooked foods such as pastries, prepared and packaged items, canned items, raw and pasteurized milk



products and eggs are allowed. There are some exceptions. Some items are not covered by the WFFA, for example, meats other than poultry, must be USDA or Wyoming inspected. Produce that has been altered but not added to a cooked food product is not protected by the WFFA. This is one of the most difficult elements of the WFFA to navigate. For example, lettuce heads picked out of the garden can be sold without licensing or certification, but lettuce that has been cut, washed, spun and bagged would need to be prepared in a licensed kitchen before sale.

Safe preparation of food is still a top priority for producers, but without a set of guidelines the licensing process usually provides, ensuring food production remains safe can be more difficult. Following GAPs can help.

Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) and Good Handling Practices (GHPs) refer to procedures producers can use to ensure food safety. Understanding USDA guidelines such as GAPs and GHPs can help local farmers and ranchers offer safe products as well as help consumers purchase, transport, store, and prepare these products safely.

Examples of GAPs include routinely testing water and soil for pathogens, ensuring products are sanitary, ensuring workers are healthy and follow proper hygiene procedures such as routine hand washing, maintaining a sanitary packing facility, keeping products at the proper temperatures, maintaining detailed records for trace-back ability, and keeping an up-to-date Farm Food Safety Plan.

For Producers

GAPs certification is voluntary for producers primarily selling direct to consumers (such as at farmers markets). However, many food distributors and retailers do require GAPs certification from growers and suppliers. Small farms and ranches that wish to sell locally may not

need to meet GAPs or Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) requirements now, but as operation size increases and as food production laws change and evolve, producers may eventually be required to maintain GAPs or FSMA compliance by requesting USDA audits.

In some ways GAPs certification is more rigorous than FSMA but more easily attainable. For example, GAPs certification requires the producer maintain an on-farm food safety plan, while FSMA does not. However,

FSMA has several requirements that would be covered by maintaining a food safety plan.

GAPs are a great way to minimize risk and ensure consumer safety regardless of whether a producer wishes to become certified or not.

For Consumers

There are several things local food customers can do to make safer choices and purchase high-quality food.

First, look for producers familiar with and practicing GAPs – some producers display their GAPs certificate in their booths. Educate yourself on basic food safety practices. For example, did you know washing many fruits and vegetables before storing increases your risk of food-borne disease? The use of water that is 10 degrees cooler or more from the internal temperature of the fruit or vegetable allows the skin to be permeated by the water along with pathogens that could be present on the skin of fruit.

Washing fruits and vegetables before storage also increases moisture, which can speed up the



Good Agricultural Practices course helps educate residents

The Powder River Basin Resource Council and University of Wyoming Extension hosted their first intensive Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) course in Buffalo in June taught by Connie Fisk and David Lott from the University of Nebraska Extension.

The workshop was made possible by a grant from the Wyoming Department of Agriculture's Specialty Crop Program. Powder River Basin Resource Council provided scholarships for several of the 25 attendees from across the state.

decomposition process. With many fruits and vegetables, it is safer to cool them down before washing and only washing them immediately before consumption to prolong their shelf life.

Much of this information is available on the USDA's web page for GAPs and GHPs. Don't be afraid to ask producers about their products and how it gets from farm to table – local producers understand some of the reasons people buy local food is so they know where it comes from and understand how it gets from a farm to their forks.

If a member of a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farm, take advantage of the relationship you have with the farmers. Many CSAs offer opportunities to participate in on-site events where you can experience firsthand how they grow and process their products.

The following tips can help keep fresh food safe and nutritious.

Producer:

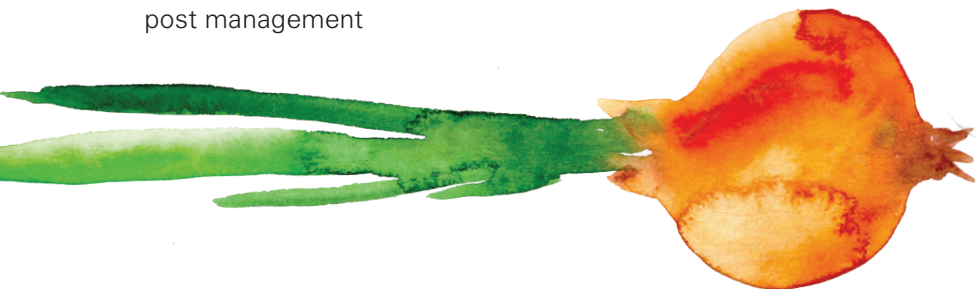
- Know and understand FSMA and GAPs regulations
- Promote transparency of your operation with consumers
- Routinely test water for pathogens and chemical contaminants
- Maintain sanitary packing and storing areas
- Practice proper manure and compost management

- Keep very detailed records
- Maintain a GAPs food safety plan

Consumer:

- Do your research on food safety. The Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics has some very helpful resources for food safety practices at home:
bit.ly/foodsafetypractices
- Wash fruits and veggies according to standards:
bit.ly/washfruitveggies
- Store food properly to minimize contamination or spoilage at home:
bit.ly/safefoodstorage

If you have a concern about a product purchased from a local farm, communicate with the producer and/or consult with your state department of agriculture



Wyoming's Food Freedom Act comes with responsibility

Wyoming is unique in that we have the Wyoming Food Freedom Act (WFFA) – there are fewer restrictions on the production and sale of local food compared to numerous other states. While the act makes local food much easier to grow and access, this freedom comes with great responsibility to grow and market food safely.

Adherence to Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) is one way for producers to meet these responsibilities. GAPs is a national program of voluntary audits established in 1998 and has much in common with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) passed by Congress in 2011.

Farmers markets are good examples of a place GAPs can be implemented by producers and sought out by consumers to improve and maintain the quality and safety of fresh produce.

University of Wyoming Extension educator **Caitlin Youngquist** is based in Washakie County and serves northern Wyoming. Contact her at (307) 347-3431 or cyoungqu@uwyo.edu. **BJ Bender** served as a University of Wyoming Extension Intern this summer in Washakie County.