

California Tomato Farmers “The Fresh Standard” For Food Safety

Background:

In 2006, a group of like-minded tomato farmers came together to form a cooperative based upon quality and a commitment to food safety and social responsibility. The California Tomato Farmers members have committed to abide by mandatory standards for quality, food safety and working conditions. These new guidelines are called “The Fresh Standard.” Simply put, “The Fresh Standard” means that when consumers reach for a tomato grown by a California Tomato Farmers member, they are selecting a tomato of the highest quality, grown under the strictest food safety standards and harvested by workers who enjoy a safe and positive work environment.

All members of the California Tomato Farmers (CTF) are family-owned farming businesses producing fresh, field grown tomatoes in California. Every member is committed to new standards for how they grow tomatoes. In total, the members of the CTF produce nearly 8 out of every 10 fresh tomatoes grown in California.

How Was “The Fresh Standard” for Food Safety Established?

One of the first objectives for members of the CTF was the establishment of “The Fresh Standard” for food safety. “The Fresh Standard” for food safety is a list of requirements and guidelines based upon scientific research and previous good agricultural practices, which were first established in 1999. Throughout the last nine years, the California tomato industry through the California Tomato Commission conducted a wide range of food safety research through the University of California into the growing, harvesting, packing and transportation of fresh tomatoes. As this research yielded new information, the industry revised the Good Agricultural Practices accordingly.

Today, the CTF has taken what has been learned from recent outbreaks and ongoing discussions with health officials and updated the requirements and guidelines to establish “The Fresh Standard” for food safety. These standards were peer reviewed by scientists from the University of California, Davis and Cornell University. Further, the CTF has formed an advisory panel comprised of government agencies, our customers from retail and foodservice, university scientists and farm labor advocates. This advisory panel reviews and continually provides input on “The Fresh Standard” for food safety.

How Will the Cooperative Verify Its Members Are In Compliance with the New Standards?

All members of the CTF undergo food safety audits conducted by United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspectors to confirm compliance with “The Fresh Standard” for food safety. These audits are in addition to any other third party audits that a member may employ. Failure to comply with “The Fresh Standard” for food safety will

result in the expulsion from the cooperative. The list of current CTF members can be found on the website at www.californiatomatofarmers.com.

What Are “The Fresh Standards?”

“The Fresh Standard” for food safety focuses on five primary areas:

- 1) Water Quality
- 2) Soil Amendments
- 3) Environmental Conditions and Risks
- 4) Worker Health and Hygiene
- 5) Harvesting, Packing and Shipping

Can You Elaborate on the New Water Quality Standards for Farms?

“The Fresh Standard” for food safety requires regular testing of all irrigation water from reservoirs, canals or wells. Water quality for irrigation must meet the same requirements for recreational water use as defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The water must be tested as close to the point-of- use as possible. CTF members are required to keep all test results and/or certificates of analysis available for inspection for a period of at least two years. CTF members are also required to perform sanitary surveys prior to the use of irrigation water and constantly monitor the impact of environmental factors on irrigations sources, such as storms and flooding.

What Are Soil Amendments and What Are the Requirements on Farms?

Soil amendments are commonly used on farms throughout the country. These amendments are derived from natural sources that are added to soil to re-introduce nutrients and improve soil texture. Because many of these materials come from natural sources, like manure, they may contain pathogens.

For CTF members, any fertilizer applied to a field must list the supplier and have a letter or certificate from the supplier stating the source of the fertilizer. Processed manure or other soil amendments must be properly composted and have an accompanying statement that they are approved for use on food crops. The use of biosolids or raw manure is forbidden for crops grown by CTF members.

What Are the Environmental Risk Standards?

Members of CTF are required to monitor land use adjacent to their tomato growing operation. If the adjacent land use involves any type of livestock operations, physical barriers are required and preharvest soil testing may be required as well.

Members are required to conduct environmental assessments, including just prior to harvest. These assessments require growers establish berms or other barriers to prevent or mitigate runoff from animal contamination and monitor animal movement that might pose a risk to fresh tomato production.

What are the Requirements for Worker Hygiene?

California has the strictest rules and regulations in the nation in the areas of worker safety and field sanitation. For years, all California farmers have been required by law to

supply an adequate amount of clean restrooms and hand-washing facilities in locations where crews are working. “The Fresh Standard” for food safety require enhanced worker training in the areas of hand-washing and regulates the use of gloves in the field.

The standards also require workers who show symptoms of illness to be reassigned to paid activities that do not involve contact with food or food surfaces. CTF members believe that in the absence of such a policy, it is likely that workers will not report their illness for fear that they will lose wages.

What About Harvesting Standards?

Prior to harvest, growers are required to conduct a preharvest assessment that includes a survey of animal movement, flooding from sources other than irrigation, and any signs of tomatoes being contaminated by animal feces. Any plants or tomatoes suspected of contamination are tested to detect any contamination prior to harvest. Contaminated fruit cannot be harvested.

“The Fresh Standard” for food safety require that any surfaces that come in contact with tomatoes, such as harvest containers or bins, be treated as food contact surfaces and must be cleaned and sanitized. Bins or boxes made of corrugated cardboard should be used only one time, or if used in repacking by the original grower/shipper, it may only be reused if in compliance with the provisions of the California Ag Code.

The new standards also require enhanced training for harvesting crews on the principles of microbial food safety risk reduction. Smoking, food and drinks are prohibited near harvesting areas.

A preload checklist for trucks transporting tomatoes to the packing shed is also required.

What Standards Must Be Followed at the Packinghouse?

First, all CTF member packing facilities must have documented personnel training programs and a comprehensive product recall plan which includes a mock recall test annually.

Regarding water use, any wash water that comes into contact with the tomatoes at the packinghouse must be of potable water quality as defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Approved water sanitizing systems are required to maintain that drinking water standard. Incoming product is not allowed to come into contact or be stored near washed, cleaned fresh tomatoes. Logs showing water changes and sanitation equipment calibration must be kept and available to inspectors.

Regarding packinghouse employees, workers must be trained in proper food handling and food safety. These training sessions must be documented and signatures of employees in attendance at each session must be obtained.

“The Fresh Standard” for food safety also include packinghouse cleaning requirements for all equipment, master cleaning and sanitation procedures for the entire facility, facility

design requirements, standards for storing and use of packing materials, proper maintenance of the facility, pest control provisions and first aid policies.