



Good Agricultural Practices Series

Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) Certification in Tennessee

*Faith Critzer, Assistant Professor,
Department of Food Science and Technology
Annette Wszelaki, Associate Professor and Commercial Vegetable Extension Specialist,
Department of Plant Sciences*

What is a GAP third-party audit?

Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) are best practices for growing, harvesting, packing and transporting produce that will help minimize the risk of foodborne illness associated with these products. Two primary events occur during a GAP audit: 1) a trained third-party representative comes to your farm and observes the practices on the farm and in the packinghouse, and 2) the auditor reviews the food safety plan, standard operating procedures (SOPs) and documentation of adherence to the food safety plan and SOPs. An audit is a means of verifying that you are complying with/following GAP and may be required by the buyer (distributor, retailer, restaurant, school, etc.) of your produce.

Who conducts a GAP third-party audit?

There are several organizations that conduct GAP audits. These organizations include the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agriculture Marketing Service (USDA-AMS), Primus Labs, NSF Davis Fresh Technologies, AIB International, Silliker, Scientific Certification Systems, ISO International Standards Organization and GlobalGAP. A list of websites that include various audit organizations is maintained by the national GAP program and can be accessed at <http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/weblinks.html>. Audit organizations have varying paperwork requirements

and costs associated with their services that also should be considered when choosing an auditing firm.

Are all GAP audits the same?

No, there is a great deal of overlap between GAP standards for various audits, but not all GAP audits are exactly alike. Even within a single-service provider, there may be several types of GAP audits offered. Let's use the USDA-AMS as an example. Currently, they offer six GAP audits (Produce GAPs Harmonized Audit, USDA GAP & GHP, Tomato Food Safety Audit Protocol, Mushroom GAP, California Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement and Arizona Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement). These audits may be specific to a food type, such as tomatoes or mushrooms, or to a growing region, such as California LGMA or Florida Tomatoes.

How do I select an audit type and organization?

First, you need to determine what audit(s) your buyer(s) will accept. This will be one of the primary drivers for what audit you select. It is advisable to determine this early on and to get the buyer's audit requirement(s) in writing. Once you have determined what audits are acceptable to your buyers, you must decide which will work best with your operation. The United Fresh Produce

Association created an audit benchmarking matrix that can be accessed at this website: <http://www.unitedfresh.org/matrix2011>. The audit benchmarking matrix serves as a tool to make side-by-side comparisons of audit organizations and food safety standards most commonly used by the food industry. When you enter the matrix website, select Pre-Farm Gate or Post-Farm Gate. On the following page, select the organizations that you are interested in comparing and expand the program elements to learn how various organizations compare.

You also should become familiar with the specific standards that various audits cover. These can be accessed at the organization's website along with an audit checklist that matches what an auditor would use in the field when conducting an audit. Audit standards will be separated by field operations and packinghouse operations. Additionally, cost should be a consideration when making this decision. The United Fresh Audit Benchmarking Matrix also includes this information with approximations for average time to conduct an audit.

What do I need to do to prepare for a GAP audit?

Once you have determined the type of audit and organization you will use for your farm, all you have to do is schedule the audit, right? No, there are a few preliminary steps that should occur before scheduling your GAP audit. First, review the standards for the type of audit you have selected. Make sure that these standards align with your farm's food safety plan and SOPs and that you have sufficient documentation (e.g., logs and records) of these practices to demonstrate compliance. Once you have gone through this exercise, you should conduct a self-audit. During a self-audit, you play the role of the auditor and use the organization's checklist to honestly assess your operation's compliance with GAP standards.

Let's use the USDA-AMS Harmonized GAP audit as an example. First, you would review the standards for this audit. The standards are broken down into two sections:

1) Field Operations and Harvesting, available here:
<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5099625>

2) Post-harvest Operations, available here:
<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5099626>

Take this opportunity to review your food safety plan, SOPs and records to make sure they will satisfy the audit standards. This also is a good time to document the review of your food safety plan, which must be done on an annual basis or sooner as changes are made.

Next, you will conduct a self-audit of your farm using the checklists provided by the organization. The USDA-AMS Harmonized GAP checklists can be found for the Field Operations and Harvesting as well as Post-harvest Operations standards as a Microsoft Excel document at <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/HarmonizedGAP>. When conducting the self-audit, you should evaluate your operation thoroughly and critically in order to make this a meaningful exercise. Once completed, review the audit requirements for compliance and determine if your farm would "pass" the self-audit. Every audit has different ways of determining GAP compliance, but most look for a certain point value or percent of questions that must be in compliance for each section. There also will be certain questions that *must* be in compliance or an automatic audit failure will result.

How do I schedule a GAP audit?

Once you have all your documentation in place and have conducted your self-audit, you are ready to schedule an audit. To schedule an audit, you should visit the website of the organization that will conduct the audit. Typically, you will be given an email address or phone number to begin the scheduling process. If you use an organization that requires you to pay for the auditor's travel time, it may be beneficial to coordinate with other farms in your area, so that the cost of auditor travel can be shared.

Are there other resources that can help with the cost of my GAP audit?

You should contact the Tennessee Department of Agriculture's (TDA) Market Development Division at 615-837-5160 to determine if funds are available to cover a portion of the cost associated with your farm's GAP audit. Another program implemented by the TDA is the Tennessee Agricultural Enhancement Program (TAEP), which also may be able to assist with costs associated with improvements to farm infrastructure and equipment to meet GAP requirements. More information on this program can be found at <http://www.tn.gov/agriculture/enhancement/index.shtml> or by contacting producer.diversification@tn.gov or 1-800-342-8206.

What are the consequences of a poor GAP audit?

If your operation fails to pass a third-party audit, you will have an opportunity to address any problems that the auditor found and correct them. First, you should review your operation's deficiencies with the auditor. He or she will be able to identify some areas that are of a higher priority than others. Once you have identified the deficiencies that need corrective action, you can begin working to bring these areas into compliance. After correcting these items, you can schedule a follow-up audit.

What are the potential benefits of electing to participate in a GAP audit?

By becoming GAP-certified, you will increase the marketability of your produce. Many retailers such as supermarket chains, school systems and restaurants are requiring a third-party GAP certification. In addition, these same retailers are seeing a growing rise in demand for locally grown produce. If you elect to undergo GAP auditing, you would be well-positioned to fill this niche in the produce supply. In addition, while undergoing GAP certification does not guarantee food safety, implementing GAP does reduce the risk that a foodborne disease outbreak will be tied to produce grown on your farm.

Resources

Below are some additional resources that will assist you in developing a farm food safety plan.

National GAPs Educational Materials — Farm and Packinghouse Record-keeping Sheets:
<http://www.gaps.cornell.edu/rks.html>

New Mexico State University Downloadable Food Safety Signs:
<http://aces.nmsu.edu/ces/foodtech/gap-nm.html>

University of Minnesota Food Safety Plan for You (FSP4U): <http://safety.cfans.umn.edu>

University of Tennessee Vegetable Production — Food Safety Resources:
<http://vegetables.tennessee.edu/foodsafetyresources.html>

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