

UNITED FRESH FOOD SAFETY & TRACEABILITY NEWSLETTER #1



United Fresh
New Zealand Incorporated

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Welcome

Welcome to the first edition of this newsletter. Food Safety & Traceability concerns us all, regardless of where we fit in the fresh produce supply chain. The United Fresh Executive had therefore started to expand its focus into this area in mid 2013, when it became clear that government efforts to update the Food Safety legislation were finally gaining traction. Following our Food Safety workshop in November 2013, several of our members became involved with the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) process of updating its understanding of how the produce supply chain worked – and much to MPI’s surprise, we turned out to be just as complex as we had kept on telling them!

Incidents

In 2014 the industry experienced two significant food safety events. First came a Hepatitis A scare in March 2014, related to Royal Gala and New Zealand Beauty apples as well as Golden Queen peaches, after it was discovered that one Hawke’s Bay packhouse worker was a disease carrier. Luckily, no consumer infection was found to have occurred but the incident obviously came with considerable bad publicity, inconvenience and additional cost for impacted growers, packers and retailers.

In September 2014, the *Yersinia pseudotuberculosis* incident affected more than 100 consumers and hospitalised 35 of them. Investigations by the Ministry of Health, MPI and the Institute of Environmental Science & Research initially pointed the finger at lettuce/salad and carrots but MPI’s final report “did not find the source of the pathogen”. As we all know, the cost to industry was substantial.

Food Safety Workshop November 2014

Our second Food Safety workshop had already been planned when the Yersinia incident occurred. The learnings we took from the workshop and the message MPI sent United Fresh at the workshop led to the establishment of the United Fresh Food Safety & Traceability Committee. Why did we add 'traceability' to the name? It is simple – without traceability, food safety cannot be assured. It would therefore be pointless to solely focus on keeping our produce safe if we could not manage and trace the process.

United Fresh Food Safety & Traceability Committee

The Committee had its initial meeting in April and has set itself a substantial work programme for 2015. Our goals include;

- Together with Horticulture New Zealand initiate a Yersinia review from an industry perspective. Committee Vice Chair Matt Dolan (Hort NZ) and United Fresh Food Safety Representative Anne-Marie Arts (AgriChain Centre) will be meeting with MPI shortly to get the process under way.
- Finalise the draft New Zealand produce industry food safety framework so that our members can work on improving food safety & traceability aspects of their business on the basis of a common domestic industry platform.
- Identify, scope and initiate suitable industry traceability pilot projects which will assist industry in developing additional expertise needed to fully integrate traceability into its supply chain strands.

Closing Comments

As consumers, we all like to think that what we eat is safe. It therefore comes as a huge surprise when we realise that such optimism is not always well founded. The produce supply chain is complex and when something goes wrong, we are typically all impacted, be it directly through being a grower, packer, wholesaler or retailer or indirectly as a service provider or competitor who will be hit by the same negative publicity.

If we have learned three things from the Yersinia incident as an industry, they are these:

1. Everyone will have an opinion and the media is typically interested in a good story and not the facts. The early obvious answer is not necessarily the correct one.
2. Bad fruit and vegetable food safety publicity is damaging for all our business, so we might as well work together as an industry to improve our systems and ensure we can minimise the fallout from any future incident.
3. The better prepared we are and the better we understand how to keep our produce safe, the easier it will be to maintain consumer confidence in the face of adversity.

As I am writing this, MPI is also busy finalising the Regulations that will support the Food Act when it will be fully implemented from 1 March 2016. The Committee lodged a submission on behalf of the domestic produce industry during the Regulations consultation phase and we will keep you informed via this newsletter and the United Fresh website on any new developments and progress.

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