

October 2021



United Fresh
Technical Advisory Group

Risk Ranking Project Update

This project is championed by United Fresh with support from MPI and The NZ Food Safety Science & Research Centre. The main aim of the project was to ascertain what the real fresh produce food safety risks are and where research funding should be prioritised in New Zealand.

The research team was led by Nicola King from ESR. A literature review was completed which informed the project. An industry technical advisory group was established which attended four workshops and worked with the science team to reality check the work undertaken.

The complexity of the fresh produce industry was highlighted, and the science team developed a model to rank products and risks in as simple a way as possible. This resulted in 13 food groups and 14 hazard groups identified, thus making 176 pairings of Products and Hazards. (As an example, leafy vegetables were the Product and *Listeria monocytogenes* was the identified hazard for one pairing).

The main evaluation criteria were, adverse health events, hospitalizations and deaths, presence in food, recalls, size of industry and market vulnerability.

There was significant debate about several of these product and hazard combinations appearing in the listings. Debate is good and can be a catalyst for further discussion at sector group level as to whether the sector agrees or if more work needs to be done to review and or control the potential hazard.

Data Gaps identified

Significant Data gaps were identified in information around Fresh herbs, nuts, tree fruit, mushrooms and vegetable row crops e.g., broccoli, cauliflower and asparagus, celery etc. This doesn't mean to say there is no meaningful information, rather that it was not readily available.

In addition, some potential hazards were identified as lacking in information for fresh produce. This included Parasites such as *Cryptosporidium*, *Giardia*, *Toxoplasmosis* and Viruses such as *Hepatitis*, *rotavirus*, *sapovirus* and some environmental contaminants.

The science team have crystallized the work into themes and questions, as to where the source of the issue comes from. The Major themes are Water, People and Waste. Supply chain and consumer behaviour were also identified.

Water quality/safety: What are the barriers to growers making decisions about whether water is safe to use?

People behaviour/culture: What are the barriers to good hygiene?

Waste: How can the risk of zoonotic microorganisms being transmitted from livestock be reduced? Organic soil amendments: How can the risk of fruit and vegetable contamination be reduced?

Supply Chain/Chain of Custody: Are there particular high-risk points in the food chain where contamination occurs, or the concentration is permitted to increase?

Consumer Behaviour: How can consumers be better connected with fresh produce production, so they also take responsibility for food safety?

The final report is in draft format and is being reviewed. The report is extensive, and a summary will be prepared for wider circulation. We are aiming to consult with industry sector groups and interested parties on the findings and to explore how major research findings can be championed.

Several other opportunities and benefits were identified during the project. A go to list of industry technical experts was compiled. In addition, the question of how do we as an industry capture and utilise the data from various testing and monitoring undertaken.

United Fresh held a webinar which discussed the outcomes of the project on Sept 29th. More detail on what the outcomes and actions emerging from the project will be circulated.

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