

NEW YORK FRUIT QUARTERLY

Editorial

Food Safety – the New York Standard

It has been an exciting seven months as Commissioner for the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets. With a lifetime of experience involved in this industry, I do have a deep understanding and appreciation for all sectors of New York agriculture. However, with this new responsibility, I am more in-tune than ever before with the safety of our food supply.

At the Department of Agriculture and Markets, we are unique in that we are one of the few agencies in the State that has both promotional and regulatory responsibilities. We can categorize much of our work in three primary areas: economic development, environmental stewardship and food safety. As fruit growers, I don't need to explain the challenges associated with maintaining a profitable business, nor emphasize the importance of good stewardship efforts. But I do want to talk about food safety and the impact that issue is having everywhere, especially on your farm or orchard.

Over the past year, there have been back-to-back stories on food borne illnesses – whether it was the *E.coli* outbreak in spinach, the salmonella outbreak in peanut butter or the more recent ban on Chinese seafood. Regardless of the product, the topic is not merely food quality anymore, today the issue is food safety.

How can consumers be assured their food is safe and produced under the safest conditions possible? How can you as fruit growers help preserve consumer confidence?

Fortunately, buying local is a trend that presents a win-win situation for New York growers. This trend has grown exponentially in recent years, with the assistance of the Pride of New York program. Consumers find comfort in knowing where their food is grown and marketing opportunities such as farmers' markets and roadside stands allow consumers the chance to establish a relationship with you – also aiding in consumer confidence.

But what about those consumers who do not have the opportunity to establish a face-to-face interaction with you, the grower? How are we able to portray the extra measures you all take in ensuring a safe and wholesome product?

One answer is participation in the State's Produce Quality Assurance Program. PQAP uses a voluntary, incentive-based approach to bring safe handling and quality control practices to the farm level and enhancing produce food safety at the retail level. PQAP is not a regulatory program, but a verification system available to fruit growers, packers and distributors. Our farm products inspectors are trained and certified to provide third party audits for buyers who insist on such verification.

Recognizing that this issue is consumer-driven, and that consumers have greater expectations of producers and their food than ever, programs that address produce quality and food safety are going to become more important in coming days. These programs will not only be consumer driven, but they can ultimately be a contributor to greater profitability, since they ensure a better quality product, and that is a quality that can be marketed.

Thank you for your support thus far and I look forward to working with many of you in the upcoming months as we find new ways to ensure food safety and consumer confidence in the marketplace for the superior product you grow.

Patrick Hooker,
New York State Agriculture Commissioner

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FRONT COVER: Gala apple harvest in the Hudson Valley, 2007.

BACK COVER: Examples of fruit damage caused by Oblique banded leafroller.

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