

## On the front lines of food safety — farmworkers have your back

More retailers seek produce, peace of mind from growers certified by the Equitable Food Initiative

BY **COOKSON BEECHER** | MARCH 24, 2017

Who better than the people in the front lines to recognize and call out the enemy?

That's the underlying strategy of an approach to food safety that relies on farmworkers to spot possible problems in growing fields and packing sheds. Such problems include deer droppings in the field, manure drift from a nearby field, dirty packing boxes, equipment that hasn't been cleaned well or often enough, and even the lack of adequate hand-washing facilities.



Two cases in point:

- In 2012, deer droppings in a strawberry field in Oregon contaminated the berries with E. coli O157:H7. At least 14 people were sickened, and one person died.
- In 2011, unclean equipment and improper packing procedures at a Colorado farm contaminated cantaloupes with Listeria. At least 147 people were sickened, and 33 people died.

Such outbreaks could have been avoided had farmworkers been trained to spot potential problems — and more importantly, to report them to their managers.

Fortunately, the value of farmworkers in the battle against foodborne illnesses is coming to the forefront thanks, in large part, to the [Equitable Food Initiative](#) (EFI). In farms certified by EFI, workers know they won't be fired or see diminished earnings if they call out a problem, as would be the case in many farm operations where workers get paid piece rates and speed is the all-important driver.

Listen to what a farmworker says about the way things are, for the most part, on a typical farm not certified by EFI.

"If I see something wrong and speak up, the first thing they would do is fire me," farmworker Ramon Torres told [Food Safety News](#) in an earlier interview.

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Why would he be fired? Because addressing possible food safety problems could slow operations and reduce yield. Sometimes it might be as simple as quickly putting up a temporary barrier in a field where wildlife droppings are seen and not harvesting produce from a few square yards. But some situations could call for scouting an entire field to see if the deer have left droppings anywhere else before the workers can go back to harvesting.

Delays like that can be costly to the farmer, as well as to the farmworkers. It's not how agriculture works. Instead, it's about getting the crop picked as fast as possible so it can be loaded onto trucks and taken to the warehouse, processing center, or grocery store.

Because produce crops are perishable, they're not like other products such as car parts or computers. They have to be picked when they're ready or they'll rot in the fields — a loss for the farmworkers, the farmers, the retailers and the consumers.

In the midst of this dilemma is how little the farmworker's voice counts for anything.

"Respect would be a very good thing," Torres said. "I've never experienced that."

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration recognizes the farmworkers' important role in food safety, saying "the farmworker is a key component in the food chain for ensuring the safety of covered produce."

"Covered produce" is, for the most part, produce that will be eaten raw and is therefore "covered" by the new produce regulations mandated by the 2011 Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are about 48 million cases of foodborne illness annually — the equivalent of one out of every six people being sickened each year. These illnesses result in an estimated 128,000 hospitalizations and 3,000 deaths.

The Equitable Food Initiative is working to reduce these numbers by putting farmworkers front and center in the battle against foodborne illnesses. For the consumers, the EFI label slogan — Responsibly Grown Farmworker Assured — gives them confidence that the farmworkers have played an important part in making sure the food is safe and that the farm or company hiring them treats its workers with respect, which includes good working conditions and fair wages.

In addition to food safety training, the workers and management receive classes in conflict resolution and problem solving, which helps things go more smoothly in an industry that's dealing in perishable food that needs to get picked and packed as quickly as possible.

These people skills are especially helpful when a worker sees a possible food-safety problem and immediately reports it to management.

"Building a safer and more equitable food system," is EFI's motto.

**The EFI trustmark signals a new level of assurance that food safety protocols are being observed, that pesticide use is carefully managed, and that workers are treated fairly on a continuous basis.**



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**The Equitable Food Initiative is a nonprofit organization that receives funding from The Atlantic Philanthropies, Broad Reach Fund, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Cedar Tree Foundation, Oxfam America and The Walt Disney Company's Supply Chain Investment Program.**

**Members of Equitable Food Initiative's board are:**

- ★ Andrew & Williamson Fresh Produce
- ★ Bon Appétit Management Company
- ★ Center for Science in the Public Interest
- ★ Consumer Federation of America
- ★ Costco Wholesale
- ★ Farm Labor Organizing Committee
- ★ Farmworker Justice
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## Costco and Whole Foods

Out in the marketplace, two major retailers, Costco and Whole Foods Market, have signed on, agreeing to pay more for foods bearing the EFI label. They haven't raised their prices for consumers, though. The extra money the retailers pay for EFI foods is slated to go to bonuses for the farmworkers, which will make up for the loss in wages during slow downs to take care of food safety problems.



“Safe and wholesome produce begins with dedicated training of, respect for, and protection of farmworkers,” said Costco’s vice president for general administration Arthur D. Jackson Jr. in a news release about the chain’s agreement with EFI. He also said that EFI “creates value and improves working conditions and corporate culture at the same time.”

Peter O’Driscoll, EFI’s executive director, said Costco’s leadership believes it’s important to know what’s happening between audits, and to check that food safety requirements are being met all the time — not just on the day the audit was conducted.

“By engaging the workforce to verify that standards are being met and the operation is in compliance between audits, this can be done,” O’Driscoll said. “Retailers want to know that workers can report problems and help solve them. It gives retailers confidence that there’s a culture of compliance.”

EFI-labeled produce is currently available in the retailers’ locations in Washington, California, Colorado, Arizona and Utah.

## EFI making inroads

A non-profit, which has been incubating since 2009, EFI began certifying produce farms in 2014. Taking a cooperative approach, it brings growers, farmworkers, farmworker organizations and retailers together to improve food safety practices, working conditions and pesticide management in the produce industry.

It also provides standards and training that are benchmarked to the Food Safety Modernization Act. Unlike focusing on detecting outbreaks and issuing recalls, as was the case in the past, the act’s emphasis is on preventing foodborne illness outbreaks.

In 2014, Andrew & Williamson’s Crisalida strawberry farm in Ventura County, CA, was the first in the United States to receive EFI certification. In a recent interview, O’Driscoll said EFI has certified another six of the company’s berry operations.



A crew heads into an Andrew & Williamson strawberry field where they are the front line of food safety defense, watching for evidence of animal incursions that could have contaminated the fruit with dangerous pathogens. *Photo by Nicholas Wray*

The farm has created what they refer to as “red-button moments,” where each and every worker is empowered to push a “red button” when they see an area of high concern — whether it has to do with food safety, environmental or labor issues.

“We have created a list for each of these three pillars of high-risk items and informed workers on what that might look like,” said Amalia Zimmerman, director of social responsibility at Andrew & Williamson.

“They know they are responsible for pushing that red button, which means going to a supervisor to explain what is going on or what is being affected, and all work will stop until there is resolution to the issue. They do not have a fear of retaliation to use the red button. In fact, when they speak up, we will applaud the worker instead of telling them not to report such things.”

Other farms and farming operations in the United States, and then Canada and Mexico, followed suit, among them, Earthbound Farms, Pacific Agra, Houweling’s Nurseries, Windset Farms, NatureSweet, and Alpine Fresh.

The crops certified under EFI at these farming operations include strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, Brussels sprouts, baby lettuces, Asian greens, baby spinach, baby kale, baby mustards, arugula, cilantro, Romaine lettuce, heirloom lettuces, tomatoes, bell peppers, cucumbers, tomatoes, Walla Walla sweet onions, mango and pineapple, green beans and broccoli.

## Into Mexico — food safety all the way

Many U.S. consumers would be surprised to know just how much they rely on fresh produce from Mexico, especially during the winter months, when the weather shuts down many U.S. farms.

According to the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#), Mexico is by far the largest exporter of fresh produce to the United States, accounting for almost 70 percent of U.S. vegetable imports and almost 40 percent of fruit imports. In 2015, about 44 percent of all fresh produce imported to the U.S. came from Mexico.

More specifically, the United States imported \$5.5 billion of vegetables and \$3.9 billion of fruit and nuts from Mexico — of that \$1.8 billion in tomatoes and \$1.3 billion in avocados.

“Obviously Mexico is an indispensable source of fruits and vegetables for the United States... they can’t find other options easily,” Markout Group president Alex Larreategui told *Fresh Fruit Portal*.

Food safety is part of this trade equation. Under the [North American Free Trade Agreement \(NAFTA\)](#), Mexico and the United States eliminated all tariffs and quantitative restrictions on agricultural goods. At the same time they strengthened scientific ties to eradicate diseases and pests, conduct research and enhance conservation.

O’Driscoll said considering these numbers, it’s not hard to see why EFI wants to welcome Mexican farms and processors onboard.

But there’s more to it than that. American consumers, in their zeal to eat healthier food, are eating more fruits and vegetables thus making produce a larger part of their diet.

Then there’s also the Food Safety Modernization Act, which imposes food-safety requirements on imports.

“It puts the burden on U.S. buyers,” said O’Driscoll, pointing out that through the Foreign Supplier Verification Program, U.S. importers must demonstrate that all of the food safety requirements have been met for produce grown abroad.

In August 2016, EFI reached a milestone when NatureSweet’s plant in San Isidro, Mexico became the 10th EFI-certified facility.

NatureSweet is among the groundbreakers of the fresh tomato industry. Grown in greenhouses, the company’s seedlings are planted in coconut husks, which helps them resist disease and requires 80 percent less water. Within 24 hours after picking, they are packed, shipped and on their way to grocery stores.



EFI-labeled tomatoes from NatureSweet’s San Isidro operation adhere to EFI’s strict food safety standards, which are built on industry best practices for preventing and detecting contamination in the fresh produce supply chain.

Again, the farmworkers are an essential link in the food safety chain that stretches from the farm to the packing shed to the store to the consumer.

“Companies like NatureSweet are helping to pioneer a unique combination of people development and rigorous third-party (food safety) verification,” said Kenton Harmer, certification director at EFI.

Then, at the beginning of this year, EFI announced that Alpine Fresh Inc., had received its first farm certification for two farms in Puebla, Mexico. It began distributing the first organic and conventional French beans and organic broccoli with the EFI label in the United States in January.

This marks the the second EFI certification for Alpine Fresh as the farms join its MangoPack operation in Tecate, Mexico, which was certified in March 2016. The Alpine Fresh certification has expanded EFI's certifications to seven Mexican states, three U.S states and one Canadian province.

Regardless of the location, the workers play an important and respected part.

“When managers and workers come together as part of the leadership team, the workers will often have the best solutions to the problems the team is collaborating on,” said Alma Rivera, social responsibility compliance manager for Alpine Fresh Inc.



“And when the workers hear from management how much their expertise is valued and how management wouldn't have been able to come up with a good solution without them, they feel a greater sense of ownership and pride for the good for the company.”

And, yes, Mexican agricultural exporters are worried about President Trump's talk about imposing a 20 percent tax on Mexican goods coming into the United States to pay for a wall between the two countries. But at the same time, as long as the value of the dollar is high and the peso low, they believe that can help compensate for the tax. Besides which, the challenge for U.S. buyers would be to find enough perishable produce during the winter months to satisfy the booming market demand.

In the meantime, O'Driscoll said EFI is also optimistic about certifying farms in Central and South America.

### Looking ahead

In 2016, during a tour of an Andrew & Williamson farm to learn more about EFI, then-Labor Secretary Thomas Perez said “EFI may seem an outlier today, but this is going to be mainstream tomorrow. I have no doubt about it.”

O'Driscoll agreed, saying he can feel “a really exciting sense of growth.” EFI has certified 19 farms to date and trained another 13 in preparation for certification. He expects to bring at least six more growers under contract in the next few months.

“Suppliers are calling us and also telling each other about us,” he said. “We are ambitious and see the opportunity to support the industry to be more responsible and sustainable.”

O'Driscoll also sees this as a sign of a transformation in the industry.

“We have to make sure that labor is part of this transformation,” he said.

Farmworker Torres agrees.

“Finally, they would be listening to us — the people who are working in the field,” Torres said. “Now we could be respected as people — the people who pick food for all of you.”

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[Christopher Valadez](#) • 1 week ago

Dear Ms. Beecher,

The article misleads the reader into thinking it's customary for a farming operation to dissuade field employees from voicing food safety concerns when handling fresh produce for fear of employer retribution due to pressure to turn a profit. The framework you use to encapsulate the positive spin for the Equitable Food Initiative (EFI) could not be further from what's actually true.

Employees are integral to on-farm food safety. For the operations we represent, I'd argue food safety is part of each company's culture, a bedrock component that is not just top-down, but also bottom-up in terms of executing risk-based food safety practices aimed at ensuring safe food makes its way into the hands of the consumer. To suggest that without EFI farms lack the adoption and execution of food safety practices because of a negative impact onto profit, or that farm employees "for the most part" or based on "a typical farm" refrain from reporting food safety concerns for fear

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