



FOOD SAFETY AND WORKER TRAINING

PRAIRIE DRIFTER FARM

FARMERS: Joan and Nick Olson

LOCATION: Litchfield, Central MN

LAND BASE: 33 acres

MARKETING: 85% CSA plus local food co-ops, restaurants, and donations to food shelves and pantries

EMPLOYEES: Two owners, two full-time seasonal, and one part-time seasonal

FOOD SAFETY BASICS: Have a written farm food safety plan. No certifications required by buyers and qualified exempt from FSMA.

Joan and Nick Olson came to farming after years of teaching, and that experience shows in the way that they work with their employees. In addition to providing vegetables to their central Minnesota community, they see their farm as a platform for educating a new generation of farmers, their CSA members, and the wider community. In the nine years they've owned and farmed on this property (having farmed five years previously), they've made many food safety upgrades, including infrastructure improvements as well as lots of inexpensive, thoughtful improvements to systems and trainings that farmers of any scale could implement.

Food Safety Training

Several years ago, Joan and two other farmers created a four-hour training on post-harvest handling with the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. When the Food Safety Modernization Act's (FSMA) produce safety trainings began in MN, Annalisa Hultberg from UMN Extension began recruiting farmers to help with each of the full-day trainings. Joan joined the team of trainers, which has bolstered UMN's trainings by including the real-life experience of farmers. Additionally, working in these trainings has improved Prairie Drifter Farm's existing food safety practices and worker training.

Worker Training

- In addition to hands-on learning, they provide intentional education outside of the workday. Prairie Drifter Farm partners with another nearby farm to do evening talks about topics that are of interest to the employees, such as financial management, pest management, soil health, or holistic management. Each



employee fills out a growing season learning plan based on parts of the Farm Beginnings Course. (Nick taught Farm Beginnings for many years with Land Stewardship Project, and they use some course materials to guide learning.) The employees are expected to really drive their own education to shape what they reap from the process. Having learned from other farmers, Joan and Nick feel that providing this education is their responsibility.

How they train: When employees arrive at the farm, they are given a binder with employee paperwork, the farm's food safety plan, and printed training materials relevant to their early work on the farm including greenhouse management and an Employee Guide to the farm. Additional materials, such as a guide to irrigation on the farm, are given later in the season as new work arises. After a week of settling in, the whole team has a 90-minute meeting where they all—including the owners—discuss work styles: how they like to learn; how they like to communicate; how to know when they're upset; how they deal with stress; how they best take constructive criticism. That meeting has helped form a cohesive team and helped employees feel comfortable and safe to raise questions, as well as an honored and needed part of the crew. Joan feels it really helps her and Nick manage employees more effectively. A week or two before the harvest begins, Joan presents a 90-minute training on postharvest handling in a classroom setting. They then do a walkthrough of the packshed and the practices used there, including how to perform the cleaning and sanitizing process, how to clean the whole packshed, and how to sanitize the tools, shelving, and totes. Employees are asked to read the food safety plan before the first harvest. In the first few weeks of harvest, there are a lot of check-ins, hands-on training, observation, and on-the-job retraining when needed. Mid-season, they conduct a more formal check-in on the employees' whole experience and what they need to excel. Based on employee feedback, they also ask employees to reread the food safety plan mid-season as a refresher. Finally, they have an end-of-year check-in, which is their time to discuss what worked, what didn't, and what employees would suggest changing. Trainings are documented on a spreadsheet.

- For second-year employees, Joan and Nick also provide the option to independently tend a plot of land and take their produce to a farmers market on the side. This is a low-risk

opportunity for employees to create their own processes and explore financial planning.

- Prairie Drifter Farm has six workshare members that come weekly during their 18-week CSA season. About a week before the harvest begins, they host a workshare meeting where they share the food safety plan and a workshare guide. The workshare members read the food safety plan and then get a detailed tour of the packhouse and entire farm. The farmers train the workshares on food safety, handwashing, and hygiene. Some workshare members have been returning for five years, but they attend the yearly meeting as a refresher. Additionally, a visitor policy is posted on the website, and any members on the farm for work parties are instructed about handwashing and the location of bathrooms.

- Modeling good behavior and destigmatizing illness and injury is important. Joan announces her own small cuts and models how to handle those injuries. When she got a stomach bug a few years ago, she modeled good practices by sitting out the whole first week of harvest (which was tough!).

Farm Food Safety Plan and Systems

- Joan reviews their food safety plan, which was modeled after UMN's template, every winter to make sure it is still relevant and clear.

- They conduct hands-on trainings but have written Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for backup and reference. Joan says, "If all of the systems are in my head and I'm telling everyone verbally, the power is mine. If it's written down and accessible, then employees have a chance to train workshares, have more agency, and feel more empowered."



That's probably one of the best changes that's come out of having written procedures. Along with improved food safety has come improved efficiency."

- The first year or two, the learning curve was steep, and Joan spent a lot of time creating SOPs and determining exactly which records they needed to keep. Creating written SOPs forced them to make systems that work for all employees and that are consistent and easily trainable.

Policies

- Prairie Drifter Farm has standard sick, injury, jewelry, tobacco, and eating policies, based on the template food safety plan from UMN. They're extra careful about washing hands after eating because they have CSA members with intense nut allergies.

- Because they have laying hens and a few pet goats, the farm has dedicated chore boots and rain gear, a place to store that gear, and specific shovels for any animal chores. Joan and Nick's children have their own chore boots and are very diligent about where they may not walk when wearing them. The farm even has spares for visitors who want to visit the goats!

Food safety improvements

Prairie Drifter Farm has made a lot of food safety improvements over the last nine years, including:

- Metal walls in the packshed
- Updated handwashing sinks
- Updated coolers
- Bought new washing equipment: barrel and brush washers
- Added a lean-to for barrel and brush washers
- Everything is on wheels to facilitate easy washing and cleaning underneath



- Changed the water system so that it's all delivered overhead
- Improved drainage to get the mud and water to drain outside of the pack areas
- Added a slab near the lean-to with a garage door to keep the packshed sealed from rodents and pests
- Improved hydrant system, installed better lighting and new, more cleanable surfaces
- Bought new totes
- 22-acre, 10-foot deer fence around production area (!!)

Many of these changes were thanks to grants and cost share opportunities, including a Value Added Grant Program through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture. Funding for implementing farm food safety is one aspect of this grant program, which aims to help increase the sales of Minnesota agricultural products and/or increase market access. Their other grants weren't specific to food safety but did help Nick and Joan improve food safety on the farm. The MN Department of Natural Resources provides assistance up to \$5K worth of materials if a farm has proven damage from wildlife, which was part of the funding for the deer fencing. Also, they received some matching money through the journey person program of the Land Stewardship Project. All of these food safety improvements are certainly impacting the safety of the produce, but they're also so impactful in other areas, like efficiency and overall happiness.

- If they had unlimited funding, they'd love to insulate the packshed and rebuild the summer kitchen, expanding the structure to add a community gathering area, bathroom, and shower.

"Our check-ins provide a chance for our employees to be a really important loop in the improvement of our ever-changing farm-in-progress. They have absolutely added to the value of our farm by improving systems, making some of the small details work, improving efficiency, and making an all over better living experience here on the farm."
-Joan Olson