

National Young Farmers Coalition – Focus Group 1 Podcast – Transcript

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Intro: Welcome to the Young Farmers Food Safety Focus Group Series. I'm Maggie Kaiser, the Produce Safety Training Coordinator for the National Young Farmers Coalition. Throughout the summer of 2020, I, along with Bre Sliker, Billy Mitchell, and farmer facilitators from across the country, hosted a series of focus groups with farmers, where we discussed the challenges and successes of implementing various on-farm produce safety practices. And we recorded them. Because we want these conversations to be a resource for you, in every session we bring together farmers with similar experiences for a discussion about a specific farm food safety topic. We begin each one with a farmer presentation followed by a roundtable discussion where farmers share problems and solutions with one another. We hope you enjoy them and find some practical information for your farm.

[Music]

[01:04]

Maggie: I just wanted to start us off by introducing myself first. My name is Maggie Kaiser, y'all have probably seen my emails. I'm the Produce Safety Coordinator for the National Young Farmers Coalition as well as a farmer and nursery grower in New Orleans. So that's the experience that I'm coming to this focus group with. I'll have y'all go around and do introductions in a moment, and if you could say your preferred pronouns, that would be great too. Mine are she/her/hers, and then D. from Rock Steady will be our farmer co-facilitator today. And, D., I will have you introduce yourself more fully in a moment. So as far as the agenda for today, in just a moment we will go around and introduce ourselves. Then we'll hear from D. about their operation at Rock Steady Farm and Flowers, and then we'll open it up and have a roundtable discussion, so you will get us going with that. And then we'll wrap up. And I also just want to mention that my goal for all of us today is that we are here learning from one another. I hope that you are able to find some useful tidbits that you can bring back to your farm operation and I think we are all coming at this from really unique perspectives. Our farms are all different and we are the experts of our operations and that is really valuable information that you all are coming to this with thinking about it from the perspective too of no one knows everything but together we know a lot. With that, I would love to go around and do introductions. D., can we start with you and if you would share your name, your preferred pronouns, where you're farming and also why you were interested in participating. Maybe if there was some reason beyond being asked to do that?

[03:04]

D.: Sure. My name is D. I use all pronouns or D. Farming in upstate New York about 2 hours from New York City and I'm participating on this call because I'm trying to figure it out, and I'm down to discuss with other farmers to understand what they're doing and how I can better improve my practices, our practices here on the farm, and make this space as safe as we can for everybody on the farm.

Maggie: Great, thanks. Did you want to invite the next person?

D.: I see Harold Long, so I'm going to choose you.

Maggie: Is that you, Nancy?

Nancy: Yes I am. I'm talking for Harold here. We're farming in Murphy, NC.

Gillian: I'm Gillian, I farm in Washington state. Right now just a one-person operation, so some different considerations and farms that have more people working together, and I was interested in participating in this for a couple of reasons. First of all, just the hours of research I put in trying to even figure out what good practices were for my CSA in light of Covid, and would love to just share best practices and what other people have figured out.

Moretta: Hey everyone, this is Moe. I am in California, Berkeley, I co-manage a CSA in downtown Berkeley called Berkeley Basket. We've just been following what Alameda County has put out as far as how to operate or run a business that interacts with the public, like, what are the protocols around Covid? But also acknowledging that those regulations don't necessarily factor in farmers. Just trying to glean and put together a Covid-protocol that works for us. I'm just very curious how everyone else is doing it. And my pronouns are they/she.

[05:21]

Gillian: Oh yeah, and it says Gillian, my pronouns are they/she as well.

Ben: Hello, this is Ben from Unadilla Community Farm in upstate New York. We do an Education Center and it's a beginning farmer training program in addition to also growing produce to sell. We've been transitioning towards direct marketing and doing a CSA. Having the CSA be a bigger and bigger portion of our sales every year, we still sell some wholesale and farmers market also. I'm here because this year in light of Covid and everything, a lot of people are asking about what are we doing for food safety and especially in light of Covid. And we've been trying to up our game, so definitely trying to do lots of research and do my homework about having good practices here and knowing what is the standard and what people are looking for.

Maggie: I think we'll take it to D. now. D., can go into a bit more detail about what they're doing at Rock Steady?

D.: Cool, thank you, Maggie. I appreciate you, Maggie – at the head of the call, [you] sort of naming the fact that the term expertise, or expert – I don't feel like an expert. The fact that you asked me to co-facilitate this knowing what my experience is, what our team's experience has been, it's evolving. We're still understanding [this]. The protocols that I wrote at the end of March, we were tweaking in the beginning of April, which I, in all transparency, haven't touched in probably four weeks. We're just really all working it out. I know that Maggie had sent the link to the document that I created – the hygiene and sanitation practices for us. I think it was you, just as far as you naming all the research, and I'm sure many of you have also been doing research, at the federal level, CDC, local level, local counties, local health departments. We've been inundated with information that's literally changing from the morning to the evening. And it's been bonkers really to be able to understand and put your finger on. How do you wrap your head around where to begin?

[07:53]

D.: Yeah, I really like writing manuals so you see that I have in there just some general stuff about hygiene and safety. If you're not only feeling ill about Covid, [it also includes] if you have a stomach virus, that's a really highly transmittable disease, right? So, stay home if you got a stomach bug, don't come to the farm, you know. There is hand washing – again, the 20 second rule. That's that's hygiene practices that all farms should be doing. Restaurants [too], that's just basic food safety, cleaning and Sanitizing. All that spiel is new. I added all the harvesting stuff, the wash/pack and processing [information]. The whole idea when I was writing this is about your hands, right? Your hands being the biggest vector because you touch everything, right? You touch your face and then you touch your pen. You touch your phone. You touch the hoe, the truck, the steering wheel. There's an infinite amount of spots that are on the farm that multiple people are touching at multiple times a day. Wrapping my head around that too was part of this spin-out that I had. I was like, holy shit, how are we gonna do this? What if it's not enough? I just really needed to get past that and just start a framework of where to start from. I was amending it as I was moving along, but I also realized too that we have a returning crew of four people, plus we have new people, but we had returning four people, so my business partner and I have a really well-established relationship with these four people. And so, we often just talked about it. What makes sense? I didn't really want to wear masks from the jump and I felt that if you were wearing a mask and you're breathing on it all day, and then you touch your mask and you touch your phone, or you touch the tool, and you hand that tool to somebody. In my head I thought, "That's a chain and you don't wash your hand fast enough." There were all of these steps that were really tweaking me out. Ultimately, it doesn't feel right

for me to say, “No, we're not going to wear masks” or “Yes, we are gonna wear masks.” We collectivize the conversation, or collectivize the decision process, because, shit was popping, it got real. There was also the emotional level [thinking about] the world in a pandemic that we also had to hold. For us, having a team of four at the time, now six, [meant] including everybody on the practices and some of the decision-making processes around what should we do. I'm trying to give the bigger farm picture. The days of the beautiful CSA distribution being a wonderful, welcoming space where people get to pick and choose and be in awe of the display that you're creating for them. Everything is now in a wax box, which is really disappointing. We had to make the decision where we had a box, every single CSA share that we had. And we have a 365-member CSA. Thinking about the logistical aspect of, “How are we going to do 365 boxes in a week? How are we going to sanitize the boxes? What do we do? What's the protocol? What's the CDC saying about how long [Covid] lives on the surface? It was just this whole roller coaster spinning sometimes.

[11:33]

D.: So, what we have outlined in this document has been a really good framework for how we're doing it. Just thinking of the overall farm sanitation – it's not as bad as I thought it was going to be. I thought it was going to be taking all of this time out of our day, we'd just be constantly retracing our steps and cleaning everything that we touch. Ultimately, we're doing the best that we can. If we were to sanitize or wash every surface that we touch, we wouldn't be farming, so what do we do? We now have set seven hand washing stations: two in the truck, one at the bathroom, one at the Porta-Potty, one at the Greenhouse, one outside the wash/pack. I'm gonna put another one outside the Tool Bay, so at any opportunity – wash your hands. You know we have a rigmarole at the end of the day. [We wash] the Porta-Potty, the trucks, any hand tools, the wash/pack gets even more sanitized than it did before, [now] with bleach water. I feel like I'm doing the best that I can, [but] in full transparency, I'm thinking “What if it's not enough?” There's a tension: Some days I'm okay with what we're doing, and then some days I'm thinking “Shit, are we doing enough? Are we gonna be okay? Is everybody gonna be okay? What if one of the team members gets it? Is that my fault?” I just want to be really transparent about that again: Not identifying myself as an expert, but just identifying myself as somebody who's trying to do the best that we can in something that's absolutely unprecedented.

[13:11]

Maggie: Yeah, I think that's all you can do.

D.: Yeah, and I think that's a good stopping point. I would love to open it up.

Maggie: Thank you all for listening to D. Do you have questions for them? I think that that's a great place to start. Whoever has questions, feel free to hop in.

Gillian: I am just curious about masks. It's something that we've gone around a lot on, and I started my CSA pack deliveries two weeks ago and I've been noticing how often I adjust the mask. And I try to sanitize every time, but it's just not realistic on a 10 hour day, but that happens. In my state, there's pretty strict requirements around mask usage. In Washington state, they've said that all essential businesses that are open need to be using masks. I'm just curious, what are people doing? Has anyone found magic ways of not touching your face or your mask?

Maggie: I wish I had a good answer for you, Gillian. Especially as the temperature gets hotter. It's 90 degrees in New Orleans and so humid, and wearing a mask for hours at a time is so hard.

D.: Yeah, I'm curious about how other farmers are handling the masks. What are y'all doing on your farms about it?

Ben: Yeah, I'm not sure what the rules are, or if any rules have even been written yet. But this year, we've switched to delivery only for CSA. And we've assigned every family a waxed box with their name on it.

Each family has two boxes: one that they currently have their produce in, and then the next week we drop off the next box and pick up the empty box. And then we sanitize it using 99% isopropyl alcohol.

[15:14]

D.: I like that. I'll be honest, I was just about to do the math. We've always actually reused the boxes. We do deliveries to New York City. And what we would do is we drop off the boxes one week and then we go the following week and we get the boxes from last weeks, and we wipe them out and everything like that. So, we're going to do the same thing. We're going to reuse them, and we're going to sanitize them again. But if we were to buy boxes for 20 weeks, it would cost us \$10,000 to have new boxes for every week. There's a money issue, there's this virus issue, and this is the part of the tension that I'm holding as a business owner, as a human that cares about other humans, like holy shit, what do I do? The person who was just speaking about reusing boxes – we're reusing them too, but we are sanitizing them. In handling, when we're in the pack out, we are using reusable gloves that we're constantly sanitizing during the process. We are wearing masks. The delivery person – when he packs out he's wearing gloves. He's wearing a mask. He's constantly sanitizing his hands in between stops and wearing gloves.

Maggie: D., have you priced out what it would be to have liners for those wax boxes?

D.: We haven't, I'd be curious if anybody is using liners in their CSA boxes. How that's going? And how's the price point?

Maggie: I don't have an exact price point, but one of the farmers here that does has just been using paper bags too. I don't know exactly how long his shares go, and it was pretty inexpensive, so I wonder if a paper bag liner [works].

[17:12]

D.: I do like the box liner idea, so I will look into that, thank you for that, Maggie.

Moretta: Hey, this is Moe. I had a question. May I ask a question about harvest practices for folks? What are folks harvest protocols and what are your glove protocols? Just noting that we're going through gloves pretty quickly over here and I just wasn't feeling very sustainable. I'm just really curious how other people are approaching it.

Ben: So, we use reusable gloves, we have a big stack. It costs more than the disposable ones upfront, and then they all can get switched off whenever people feel the need to change their gloves. Then those gloves get washed and sanitized afterwards for the next week. So, we have everyone wearing thick, durable, reusable gloves and masks while harvesting.

Moretta: And when you all harvest and you're packing, you're not changing them as often? Are you wearing those gloves pretty much the entire time you're on the farm.? Or how often do you think you're changing your gloves out?

Ben: I guess during harvest, or the day that we're harvesting for the CSA, sometimes you can go the whole time without changing, if you're just in the zone and working. But then, if someone has to go to the bathroom or wipe their face or sneeze and blow their nose, then they get swapped out.

Moretta: Okay, thank you for sharing that.

Gillian: Where did you get the reusable gloves?

Ben: At the Home Depot. I forget what they were made out of. I think we got some latex, and then some [gloves] made of some other thing.

D.: I think that's a really good question, Moe, thank you for asking that. For us, this is something that I went back and forth with when I was writing [the manual]. What logistically made sense? That's why I was really specific. When you get out of the truck – wash your hands. Before you grab your shit – wash your hands. Come in from the field – wash your hands. like I just felt that the reusable gloves don't fit everybody. It didn't make sense to be wearing gloves for harvest, but providing a soap dispenser and a wash spigot for each of the trucks made sense for us. But when we're in wash/pack, and sanitizing at the end of the day, and CSA pack-out, we're wearing the reusable gloves at that stage and wearing masks.

[19:52]

Moretta: We have a hand washing station at each site.

Maggie: I think, Moe, the farm that I work for, we don't wear gloves when we harvest. We wash our hands very frequently. I think that it is safe enough to just make sure that you are washing your hands. Make sure you're doing it for 20 seconds and you know like being really careful about how you turn the spigot on and off. If you're drying your hands with a disposable paper towel, you're throwing it away. If it's reusable, you're putting it to one time use.

D.: With disposable gloves, and probably reusable gloves, but especially disposable gloves, you have to actually take them off in a very specific way. For instance, I'm a righty, so my left hand will take off my right glove, but you have to turn it inside out, otherwise the hand that you just exposed...it's a very specific way. I see Maggie, I see you shaking your head. I hope that helps, Moe. I don't know if it helps, but it may be helpful.

Moretta: It definitely did.

[21:07]

D.: I'm curious what else is on other people's minds. Is anyone else holding any tension about something that they instantiated? Something that you're going back and forth in your head about.

Gillian: Yes, all the time.

D.: There we go.

Gillian: Yeah, every day, every hour, every time I touch my pants during harvest, which is a lot like, well I didn't wash those pants in the last 20 minutes.

D.: Can you be more specific though?

Gillian: Yeah, the absolutely absurd number of times I touch things like my pants, my face, my eye, my glasses, my hat goes off in the winds. If I were to really stop harvest every single time that happened, it would take me a full day extra. I'm trying to figure out the tension of when do I really go back and wash my hands. We were talking about that on an economic basis, the labor pauses, if I were to be as diligent as what would be absolute best practice. [There's] a lot of tension with my putting my customers in danger, how restrictive do I need to be, just every single day since I can't feel really confident that I would not transmit something if I had it to a customer. I think it's been really hard.

D.: Do you have employees?

Gillian: I don't, it's just me right now. And I am doing the protocol of when I drive, I drive to five different sites. My distribution lasts about 6 hours, so it's just a lot of time. Two days of harvest, one day of pack and delivery: It's just a lot of time to be that diligent about every contact my hands might have with something. I've also been going through a ridiculous number of gloves. I'm just kind of trying to figure out. Those kind of casual touches – I haven't trained myself out of ever touching anything. I have made sure I'm always wearing a headset when I'm on harvest/wash-pack days 'cause I'm in communication with

customers, and there was a lot of temptation to check my phone or check the time. It's easier for me to just push a little button that doesn't have the same phone issues. That's been super helpful, but still – wiping my hands on my shirt – happens all the time.

[23:52]

Maggie: I'm curious, this is a question for any of you: have you done any mapping of the touch points of your farm or is this an exercise that you all do in your head? D., I've read your hygiene and sanitation guidelines, so I know that you're doing some rigorous sanitation, but it's hard to get all those point. How do you prioritize?

D.: I'm the business owner, and one of the head farmers, so my house is the only house on farm, but that's also my office. I'm touching stuff inside my house, I come out of my house, I go into the Tool Bay, I fix things, I'm on the tractor, I'm in the vehicles – I'm doing my best just to retrace my steps and unless something is soiled, there's dirt on it and the surface needs to be cleaned off first, I literally go around with a bleach/water spray bottle and I just spray everything that I touched for the day.

Maggie: I think with everything else, if that's what's working for you, that's what's working for you. [The CDC] came out with guidance around Covid being transmittable on surfaces, but they've rolled that back a bit. The droplets that come out of our mouth or from other mucous membranes – that is the primary way that this is transmitted. Not that that is any consolation, but maybe it won't be as much of a stressful experience. Does anyone have last minute wrap up questions or thoughts?

[25:34]

Ben: There's FSMA, there's GAP, there's food safety protocols that are being handed down from above, and it seems like with the Covid thing...Is there some nationwide protocol or statewide protocol for what we are supposed to be doing. It seems to me like New York State has asked me to produce a document explaining what I'm doing, but am I actually receiving any guidance from the state or from the CDC about what should be in that document? It seems to me they should just give me a template and say, "This is what the CDC recommends."

D.: Just briefly, I'll speak to what you're saying about New York State. I think it's ridiculous. Don't say, "Oh, we have to write something," but what do you want us to write? What's good enough? What are we supposed to be doing? You're right. If you want us to do something, write it up for us. And there's no enforcement agency, which I'm glad about – I don't want people showing up with my farm and saying, "Are you doing this?" But at the same time, if you're really gonna want farmers doing our type of work, provide us the document. Tell us what you want us to do.

Maggie: I also have a few templates that I can share with you all that came from other places that are not in New York State, but they're the beginnings of pulling together some hygiene and sanitation policies and protocols, SOPS, that kind of thing. I can share those in an email afterwards too, 'cause that might just help you and give you a starting point, at least, especially if New York State is not offering any more guidance than that. The only piece of advice that I will offer around doing this is just starting with the practices that you are already doing. No matter what it is.

[27:38]

Gillian: Can I ask, has anyone looked up how long theoretically Covid can last on something like a wax box? I thought they were saying 3 days, which means if you have it quarantined for three days, theoretically, you should be able to use it again.

Maggie: Yeah, you are right Jillian, that there was guidance [that Covid could last] up to 72 hours on organic materials which included cardboard and I haven't seen new numbers since then. I don't want to sound alarmist, but I do think that whenever you can clean and sanitize something that is going to your

customers and that you are getting back – that's the best thing that you can do. I'm curious to see too, both from D. and from Ben, if spraying your wax boxes will degrade them faster?

[29:05]

D.: I just wanted to say to everybody – regardless of the scale that you're farming at, we hold a lot as farmers. Our responsibility that we feel to the land that we grow on, how we grow, who we grow it for. We're growing because we want to feed people. We want to nourish people. And I think we also have to remember that, we have to nourish ourselves and take care of ourselves. It is so easy for farmers to just immerse ourselves in our work and work too hard and overwork ourselves, and I think during the conditions that we're all living and working in right now – in the world, I don't mean just in Covid, I mean with the brilliant and beautiful political uprising that's happening in this country right now – I think it's really imperative to reach out to either another farmer to get perspective or just to like bounce off your concerns or your stress. Thank you, Maggie, for making yourself available. I think we have to, as farmers, use the good resources that are out there for us, to guide us and to not let us spin out. It's so easy to spiral. I just really want to encourage everyone to take care of yourselves. Reach out when you need to and don't bear the burden of trying to figure all this out on your own.

All: Good luck, thank you!

Outro: Thanks for listening to our Produce Safety Focus Group series. For visuals from the presentations, more information on this series, and other produce safety resources, visit youngfarmers.org/focusgroups. This podcast was edited by Hannah Biel and recorded in partnership with the National Farmers Union Foundation over the summer of 2020 as part of our FSOP produce safety programming.

[31:19]

Transcribed by Melanie Arthur, National Farmers Union