

National Young Farmers Coalition
Audio: Focus Group Podcast 2 – 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]

[01:03]

Maggie: Thank you so much, all of you for joining today. I'm really, really excited that you make some time. My name is Maggie Kaiser, the Produce Safety Educator for the National Young Farmers Coalition. I'm also a farmer in New Orleans. And I use she/her/hers as my preferred pronouns. I'm going to pass it to Billy and Bre to introduce themselves, and then I'll take us through a few logistical parts of this call.

Bre: Hi everyone, my name is Bre. My preferred pronouns are she/her/hers and I am the intern this summer with the Business Services team at NYFC. I'm currently finishing up a Master's program in Food Studies and I have farmed in the past.

Billy: Hey good afternoon y'all. My name is Billy Mitchell. My preferred pronouns are he/him. And I live in Brunswick, GA, which is down on the coast and I'm the Food Safety Modernization Act, or FSMA Training Coordinator for the National Farmers Union. So I just to talk about food safety all the time. I'm glad to be here.

Maggie: Thank you allWe are going to do farmer introductions. After we do those introductions, I will then pass it to Jenny and she will do a brief introduction to her farm and specifically how Jenny Jack Farms has created systems around worker training and produce safety, and then we'll move into a roundtable discussion for a little bit where we'll get to share. Jenny, I'd love to invite you to start us off.

[03:50]

Jenny: My name is Jenny Jackson. This is Tulsi, our almost 3 year old daughter. I farm along with my husband and a few staff in midwest Georgia about an hour and a half south of Atlanta. We grow diverse produce, a few cut flowers. We are producing mostly for 150 member CSA, but we also have an on-farm market. This is our 14th season farming full time and we operated our farm with apprentice labor for the first 13 seasons and we have transitioned to hourly labor this year. When I'm talking about or referring to communicating with employees a lot of that will be geared toward how we do both, how we've communicated with apprentices in the past and our workers presently. We've just been trying to become more mindful of produce safety, especially since we had a training with Billy Mitchell through Global Growers a couple of years ago, so we've revamped our pack shed, and especially in light of the Covid stuff we are just being more mindful in general of produce safety.

[05:14]

Paul: Hi everyone. My name is Paul. I am an apprenticeship instructor and I work for the Chicago Botanic Garden. Our Urban Farming department, the Windy City Harvest department, we have a lot of different

programs but my role is that I instruct a 9 month apprenticeship course through Chicago City Colleges. I'm really interested in being here today because I've had a lot of different roles, training either apprentices, hourly employees, so I'm always looking to see how other people are doing it to see where we overlap, what are the differences, and especially as more of a diverse population starts to come into farming, whether it be in age, backgrounds, educational backgrounds. I'm always looking for different strategies and how to reach back to people that struggle going into this field, but really can excel in this field if they have the right mentorship.

Deborah:

My name is Deborah. I farm in El Paso, Texas which is in the extreme west corner of Texas and I have been managing a school farm for a K-12 charter school through the IDEA Public Schools system. I started in December. The whole farm started in December so it's very new still. I think that puts us in kind of a unique position where we're still in set-up and we can have a lot of flexibility and implement some good produce safety practices, but mostly it's students who are coming out to the farm and helping, that's really the only kind of employee training that I'll be doing. But I do have an interest in produce safety specifically. I did my Master's at CSU and did a produce safety fellowship there, so it will be great to continue learning and exchanging about that.

[07:13]

Dana:

Hi everyone, my name is Dana. I'm here for two reasons. I both have a small-scale farm that is operated by myself primarily, but that I'm hoping to grow over the next few years. I'm kind of thinking about food safety now as I grow overtime. But then also my day job is managing the marketing and operations for an urban farm cooperative in Mansfield, Ohio. And that group is all relatively new farmers. We have done a year-long training program on some intensive growing techniques and produce safety over the past year. And I think going forward, as I've been speaking with some of the potential buyers for the cooperative, one thing that's become of interest is GAP certification, so I'm interested in how to implement that with our growers. I think one of the things that I'm really interested to hear how all of you have managed is – especially with kind of new or beginning farmers – how to weave in food safety and all of those requirements without making people feel overwhelmed, which seems to be a state that some of my farmers are in sometimes. When we start to talk about a lot of record keeping and some of the food safety requirements. I'm just really interested to have a conversation with everyone today and kind of hear about how you're doing that.

Stephanie:

My name is Stephanie. My pronouns are her and she, and I am also a farmer for IDEA Public School in San Antonio, Texas, on our west-side campus. I am a certified food safety manager so that is kind of where I get my background. A lot of the training I am going to be doing is with children, middle school and high school, so I'm looking forward to learning some new approaches. Finding a way to do it in a way that's not overwhelming because farming is almost always overwhelming in some aspects.

[09:49]

Maggie:

At this point, we're gonna pass it to Jenny and she's gonna walk us through a presentation. Jenny, do you want to start sharing your screen now?

Jenny:

Ok. I'm going to start with some improvements that we made to our wash/pack station in recent years. The first thing we did was we extended our wash/pack area to make it bigger so we could accommodate more tables. We used to set up plastic, folding, 6 foot or 8 foot tables on wash/pack days, but we invested in these stainless tables for packaging, which are better for sanitizing. And then the tables that you see over here on the right, the black tables with drainage. We had a welder come to the farm and make those. We wanted some tables on wheels that we move around, which has been really helpful for us, especially cleaning root crops. We can move those in and out of the sun if we need to. We had two sinks inside our building, but it was pointed out to us at the workshop that we need a dedicated hand washing sink. We were having people wash their hands either in the farm kitchen or the bathroom, but this was an easy thing to install right there by our sinks that we wash the produce. Basically, we're just always verbally reminding employees to wash their hands, especially in light of Covid, upon arriving to work. In the beginning especially, it made me really nervous not knowing what everyone's exposure was. All you

can do is ask people to be careful. To the right of the sink, those are spray bottles that we keep with diluted SaniDate, which is a food grade hydrogen peroxide solution and that's what we use to sanitize the work surfaces, and if we need to, harvest bins and buckets.

[12:02]

Jenny: This was a good investment that we made in light of food safety, but it's also so much more efficient for greens. The kit to convert a washing machine to a spinner – this kit allows you to have a removable fish basket so, not only is it better for removing it to sanitize it, but it just makes bagging so much more efficient. For our walk-in cooler, the food inspector that was at the workshop pointed out that bins are not supposed to be sitting directly on the ground, even inside a cooler, so I'm not sure if this is actually in compliance, but. We're just using these black plastic table tops to keep the bins from sitting directly on the floor. We keep our harvest bins and buckets inside the building off the ground. We just put pallets directly on the floor and they're cleaned at the end of the day after use and we make sure that they're completely dry, before we stack 'em up. We just clean things as we use them with clean water so we only use SaniDate and sanitize stuff if there's an obvious contaminant like bird poop, or if there's something questionable. I tell our employees that: "If you don't know, just spray it and wipe it with SaniDate." But if we're just using bins and buckets to harvest food into, we do not clean those everyday with SaniDate. The way I see it, and what the food inspector really hammered home to us was keeping things dry is super important, and that just makes sense. So we just make sure that we're stacking things up dry once we put them back. We do use SaniDate to sanitize the stainless surfaces as we're packaging food, so if we're dealing with anything that's going on those tables as we're packaging, we just spray it with SaniDate and wipe it off. The sink is probably the thing we pay most attention to since it's staying wet, especially that drain and drain stopper. We spray with SaniDate, let it sit on there, and then wipe it with a clean cloth. When we had apprentices, it was my husband and myself and two apprentices for years. We had a morning meeting every morning. Now that we have a toddler at home and sometimes I can't be down there first thing in the morning. Plus we've got one full time employee and five part time employees. I was just finding that it was taking too long to have a morning meeting every morning to tell everybody what their individual task was. At this point I'm texting each person what they're gonna do before we start work and then, like I said, I try to be down there as people are starting, so if there's any questions that they can ask in person if they didn't respond to the text. And so my eyes are on the same team to make sure that they are washing their hands. The main thing we've learned with managing people in general, and food safety, is checking in, being there with your eyes on what's going on, we found is really important.

[15:30]

Jenny: In light of Covid, the main thing we're doing differently is we have closed our on farm market. But instead of having people come and shop from the market tables, we are requiring customers to pre-order through a barn-to-door online store and then we box all their orders. We do a couple of big packing days because we have the CSA as well, and we're packing the market orders the same way we do CSA boxes now, with these Uline liner bags. Dimensions are in inches: 16x14x24. And it's plenty big enough to fit lots of produce. We're mostly using 1 1/9 inch bushel wax boxes, and so we are taking those liner bags out of the box and handing them off to the customer with the drive-through system, so people don't even have to get out of their car. We take the bag to them and that just minimizes the touch points of so many people coming into the building. This is my husband, Chris, doing the drive through CSA, which we do in a parking lot. One of our deliveries is in a parking lot in Columbus, the nearest city. We wear a mask. I don't like gloves because if we do have to touch something on the customer's car, we can sanitize our hands in between and I just feel better about being able to sanitize and wash hands then change a million pair of gloves.

[17:07]

Jenny: Managing labor for us is still the hardest part of farming – that's what we consider the hardest part of farming. We're not in a cool area where we can attract many young people, so we've had a hard time finding people, honestly, especially in recent years. And we have a CSA, so we're growing a lot of different product. There's just lots of important details that cannot be overlooked. Texting is convenient,

because if somebody has a question they can text me or Chris when we're not around. But what we've realized is we really just have to be around. One of us has got to be around to check in, especially with food safety. You just have to be sure it's done right. This is a picture of just some ways that we communicate with employees with signage. The top is a picture of part of our crop plan. It's a map of the farm and we've got each field numbered with what's growing in that season. Just for clarity, because we've got 27 fields. Like I said, we've only got one full time employee. All of our other employees are part-time and that seems to work out really well for a lot of people. Farming is intense physically and I think a lot of people are really well suited to do it part-time, I wish I could do it part-time. Basically, that's working out really well for us, so when people work Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, which are our most intense days, that's when we do our packaging and deliveries and I think that has helped with attitude as well and just being able to continue doing it. When we had apprentices we really tried to work with them a good portion of the time, we were training them and we took that seriously. That is all I have for my presentation, I'm looking forward to hearing from the other growers what has been your experience with adapting to Covid? One thing I'm curious to hear is how folks deal with sanitizing, you know, to what lengths do you go to sanitize your harvest bins and buckets? We've heard of growers doing it every day at the end of the day. I'd be curious to hear how other people manage that, if you think it's necessary.

[19:46]

Dana: Yeah I can talk about that. For sanitizing, we have with the GAP certification, maybe this is a little bit of overkill, but to be on the cautious side, we've adopted a policy of sanitizing prior to any packaging activities. Sanitizing all surfaces and harvest containers and then also doing it afterward.

Jenny: So, how do you go about doing that?

Dana: For the co-op, I'm not actually on the farm all the time with each of the farmers, but they are each using the same SaniDate solution, spraying down any tables that they're using on their own farm and then dunking their bins in a basin that has that SaniDate solution. Each farm has a pretty big basin that they use for doing that kind of sanitizing.

Jenny: Is that a basin that has to be changed daily with new solution? Or how does that work?

Dana: Yeah, we change it, so they'll sanitize everything prior to harvest and then change the water and sanitize everything post-harvest, so I guess it gets changed twice just on the harvest days.

[21:15]

Stephanie: I also just rinse everything with clean water. We harvest and process on the farm and then we take it to the cafeteria and a lot of times I don't get my crates back for weeks sometimes, so I'll sanitize them when I get them back. Before I use them again, I usually rinse them out with clean water. The produce itself we use SaniDate as well to rinse everything off and then I just rinse off all the surfaces and stuff with SaniDate and water.

Dana: Were you saying that when you dunk greens or anything like that, [do you] use SaniDate in the solution?

Stephanie: Yes, I do a three-bin sink. I rinse it to try and get as much debris off of it as possible in just clean water and then I soak it in the SaniDate. I usually try and let it sit for at least a minute and then I do a final rinse to make sure that any further debris has been removed. And then even after it gets to the cafeteria, they also go through a process of cleaning it.

Paul: Jenny, I had a question, if you want to change the topic a little bit, about your worker training going from meetings to texting. Can you talk about that process, especially the initial change? How did it go? Did people transition well and any thoughts you have about the future, either going back to meetings or just writing things down, either electronically or manually?

[23:07]

Jenny: Yeah, so we do have a handwritten list each day that's down at the farm for people to go by. The texting is really just to get folks started on what they're harvesting first thing in the morning and it's working out really well because I can usually be down there either as their starting or soon after to check in. It would not work if I were just texting them and trusting that things were happening. Because I text what each person is doing and then check in, it seems to be working really well.

Stephanie: When you were expanding on your packing shed, how were you able to determine the space you needed in the packing shed?

Jenny: Yeah, we just kind of expanded into as much space in the area as we could. Our designated wash station is about 15x20 feet, so we do the washing in the wash station, but then inside the building we've got a lot more room to pack produce and pack the boxes.

Deborah: I have a question for the group. Do any of you manage volunteers or one-time visitors to your farm where you have to do a quick-and-dirty produce safety training?

Paul: We do, if anyone's gonna try to help us with harvest. We try to not have volunteers come on harvest day, but if we do, we have a one-pager of, "Please fill this out before you come to the farm that day" where they sign it. It has the basic rules, and then my rule of thumb for either me or my students is that the volunteers should be doing one thing. Let's train them in that one thing versus having them float around the entire harvest crew.

[25:16]

Dana: The question I had was whether any of you guys have like wash/pack policies and procedures written out as SOPs or something, and how you use those and how you use your manual? Whether you found an effective way to do it or whether it's just something that's thrown aside?

Jenny: We don't have it written out. We go through it so that they can see the way we do it, and then we are just trying to be present as much as possible, especially in those first few weeks to make sure that people are doing it the right way.

Maggie: Paul, I know y'all have a lot of documentation too.

Paul: Yeah, we have a lot of SOPs. We train a lot of different individuals, anywhere from transitional jobs to apprentices, to youth farmers to volunteers. It always helps to bring out, on day one, the manual and say, "This is the manual. This is the reason why we do these kinds of things." And give to them in little bites as we go along. With the apprentices, I do mock setups. But in the height of the season that's really hard. So I'll say, "Here's 10 minutes. Why don't you flip through this? And this is what you'll be focusing on today. The manual is about 20 pages. Focus on page 9. That's what you'll be doing today. Let me know if you have any questions," and then I will help you set up for the day and then I guess I'll check on them later on. But, pictures say 1000 words on how to do something.

Stephanie: I did want to ask, as far as what he had mentioned about using pictures, since me and Deborah primarily work with children, I feel like that would be our best best. I'm just wondering what kind of resources you were able to use to get those kind of infographics put together.

[27:35]

Paul: Previous pictures of how things should look when they're clean. So, on the best day of your farm, just trying to snap a picture of how that is. For our younger volunteers, having more intangible things for harvesting. I know we've used the whole measuring cup example, like, "A beat cannot fit into this measuring cup, please do not pull it from that." That really helps with our younger participants who are definitely need things more tangible.

- Stephanie: That's probably our biggest challenges is giving the children the confidence to know that what they're pulling is meant to be pulled or harvested. So I love that idea. Thank you.
- Paul: Yeah, it's trying to make everything either a yes or no question. It's never an in between. Well, that's easier said than done.
- Maggie: Thank you so much for your participation in this focus group today. I know we talked a lot about other like processes and practices and systems, but I think that that just reflects that you have to have really solid produce safety systems in place once you're in order to bring workers on the farm and be able to train them. I think it's all connected. I think with that we really appreciate your time and I hope you have a great weekend.
- 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.

[29:48]

Transcribed by Melanie Arthur, National Farmers Union