

Title Quality assurance and safety consideration for fresh-cut produce

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Abstract

Fresh-cut produce is one of the fastest growing food categories in the United States (U.S.) with annual sales of \$12 billion in 2006 (PMA, 2006). Approximately 53 percent of the industry manufactures packaged salads and salad blends, making the quality and safety of lettuce of the utmost importance. Essential to consistent fresh-cut lettuce quality and safety is the function of the Quality Assurance program in the processing plant. Its role is provide the tools for quickly locating and correcting quality or safety issues that might arise during production. (Consumers in the U.S. perceive fresh-cut safety as an entitlement, along with quality.) They expect a fresh-cut product that has met their quality expectations to also be safe to eat. While fresh-cut sales continue to grow at a rapid pace, the biggest challenge for fresh-cut processors is assuring food safety. From 1996 to 2006, 72 foodborne illness outbreaks were associated with the consumption of fresh produce, and of these 25 percent (18 outbreaks) implicated fresh-cut produce (FDA). Thus, fresh-cut processors have made product safety their highest priority. Tremendous effort and expense have gone into developing and implementing effective sanitation and safety programs in the produce supply chain, beginning at the farm level. Vendor-certified programs such as Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are now required from all fresh produce grower/shipper groups. Fresh-cut processors have developed and follow comprehensive food safety programs, including Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs), Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures (SSOPs), and Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) programs in their operations.