

National QA project is underway

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After years of careful planning and market research, a project aimed at developing a quality assured production and marketing system for fresh potatoes is under way!

The project was developed jointly between the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Queensland Fruit and Vegetable Growers in response to a number of recent market studies which highlighted areas for improvement if the fresh potato is to compete successfully.

Most alarmingly, the Potato Market Research report (1994), commissioned by HRDC, found that 20% of consumers were not happy with the quality of the potatoes they purchased and 50% were occasionally annoyed by the quality of fresh potatoes. This report also predicted that consumption per person is likely to fall from 35 kgs per person to 28 kgs by 2023.

With increasing competition from other food products and a high level of dissatisfaction with the quality of the product

currently being presented to the market, the future of the fresh potato is under threat.

Improving grower access to quality assurance

This project has been developed to apply the principles of quality assurance (QA) to fresh potato production and improve consistency of product from the national crop (one of the problems identified by the Lewis report).

The project is focused on growers and giving them easier access to QA in a form that can be applied to fresh potato production. They will then be in a better position to produce a product to the level of quality assurance today's consumers require.

National pilot

The project is based around the participation of a group of enthusiastic potato producers from the Lockyer Valley who have given up a large amount of time and made a commitment to market a percentage of their produce through a set market chain that in some cases may be different to their current marketing arrangements. This will allow the principles of quality assurance to be applied in an everyday marketing chain, which can be closely monitored giving instant feedback to the producers.

A major retailer, Woolworths Queensland and a Queensland based merchant, Bairds Produce have also volunteered to participate to form the remainder of the marketing chain. Woolworths and Bairds are currently undertaking QA programs themselves thus providing complete QA coverage from the farm to the consumer.

The project commenced in late 1996 and is well on the way. The following is a brief summary of what has happened so far:

Errol Peiper (centre) and sons Craig (left) and Stewart (right)
The Peipers are involved in the pilot project and have implemented crop records and set up a property map for this crop



- a pilot group of growers has been formed and members are developing property maps to aid in product traceability, crop treatment records to verify traceability and prove what they are doing
- a complete marketing chain has been established all the way to the consumer where every participant is involved in the implementation of QA with an emphasis on food safety
- food safety requirements to meet current retailer demands have been established
- HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points) plans for potato production are currently being developed
- the first market trial to evaluate product when it reaches the consumer has been completed
- growers have visited and talked to the marketers and consumers to gain a better understanding of what is required
- growers have attended a number of training sessions covering the principles of QA, food safety and group dynamics
- contact has been established with a range of growers, packers, industry organisations, wholesalers and retailers who are involved in or interested in the implementation of QA and food safety systems

Food safety and potato farming

The key aspect of all QA systems that is emerging is the need for a food safety system such as HACCP. The pilot group is endeavouring to adapt HACCP to potato production simply, efficiently and effectively. This will then provide a model for other growers to work from.

The project has already highlighted a need for the potato industry to get going on QA, and in particular, food safety. The ability to be able to prove what you are doing is being increasingly demanded by retailers who are wary of the

potential damages they could incur from litigation as a result of poor levels of food safety.

The application of QA and food safety systems to fresh potato production is very new to the industry and presents a number of new challenges to growers.

Commonly asked questions

Some of the common questions asked by growers are, What is QA? What do I have to do to apply it? What will it cost? What will I get out of it and where do I start?

The pilot group of growers involved in the project are in the process of sorting out the answers to these and many other questions relating to QA.

Where do we start

To get started growers need to ascertain what is required by the market they intend to supply. In most cases, adoption of the HACCP food safety system is a good starting point.

Records of chemical applications are a must and need to show what was done, how much was used, when it was done and who did it. Some sort of paddock identification may also be needed to prove where the application has taken place and where the produce was grown.

Remember, keep it simple!

Keep your eyes on the new publication Eyes on Potatoes for updates and down to earth information about QA. Eric can provide contact details if anyone wants to talk to group members directly to obtain practical tips on how to get started.

Acknowledgements

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