

Policy Position for Horticulture on Food Standards

Background

Australian consumers demand, and are entitled to, the highest level of safety in their food. Australian horticultural producers embrace quality assurance standards second to none in the global market – e.g. Freshcare, SQF, ISO and Euregap; and are also embracing “on farm” Biosecurity plans.

It therefore follows that Australian producers, and their supply chain partners, must make every effort to ensure that the supply chain has integrity and delivers their product to consumers so that satisfaction is guaranteed.

- ❖ Australian consumers need to be made aware of the nutritional qualities of fresh Australian produce; and
- ❖ Consumers also need to be made aware of the high standards to which Australian fresh produce is produced.

To achieve this, the supply chain needs to provide the “checks and balances” required so that the product integrity is maintained.

- ❖ AQIS, the main government agency involved in the inspection and monitoring of imported food for compliance with Australian standards appears to be struggling for resources, and industry is concerned to ensure that the required resources are provided. It is of concern that very little of fresh produced imported into Australia is tested for compliance to Australian food standards.
- ❖ The fresh produce industry is generally well served by well qualified food safety auditors. Reputable schemes (such as Freshcare, Euregap) have strict criteria for auditors, and industry satisfaction is high.

Most professional fresh produce businesses now have a food safety system as an integral part of business processes. Those which do not, have limited market options.

- ❖ The processing fruit and vegetables sector is moving to 3rd party certification from a traditional 2nd party approach. This is a positive move which will reduce confusion – taking a ‘systems’ approach to requirements for different customers.
- ❖ All major retailers require 3rd party certified system for indirect supply, direct suppliers by invitation and increasingly stringent requirements. Consistent standards and communication from retailers would add significant benefit to all parties in the supply chain, including both growers and consumers.
- ❖ FSANZ primary production standards for fresh produce are now underway; FSANZ are very committed to working with industry. Horticulture supports the development of these standards, which will require all growers to meet a minimum standard.

Issues

Consumers and regulators alike are placing greater expectations on the value chain to prove the safety of the food produced and sold.

Food safety systems are risk management processes that aim to meet consumer demand and are a way of protecting the interests and reputation of growers, wholesalers and retailers, but most importantly the health of consumers.

The industry needs to be able to assure consumers that its produce is free from contamination because of:

- ❖ Customer requirements – retailers are increasingly insisting that their suppliers (wholesalers, packers, and growers) have food safety systems in place. They do this because they know what the damage to their own brand will be in the event of a food safety incident, no matter who is at fault.
- ❖ Professional liability - a basic quality system that includes some form of traceability, records of chemical use, training and equipment calibration, a basic specification and some personal hygiene, should provide enough evidence to lighten the liability on producers. Industry has to be able to demonstrate due diligence, which is to do what is fair and reasonable to avoid food borne illness and injury and have the evidence to back it up.
- ❖ Competition - fresh produce is a major part of the food industry and competes with snack foods, takeaways, confectionary, and anything else that can fulfil the same or perceived consumer needs as fruit and vegetables, dried fruit and nuts. Producers in our sector are disadvantaged if they cannot match the food safety claims made by these competitors.

Our position

Horticulture is committed to food safety policies and programs that are credible, practical, national, industry owned, cost effective and suitable for all produce.

Horticulture supports streamlined, industry driven food safety accreditation programs that:

- ❖ Avoid duplication.
- ❖ Are streamlined/integrated with options of combining all of their management
- ❖ considerations (eg production specifications and protocols, OHS and environment) into one management system - preferably that can be audited as one system.
- ❖ Do not present an administrative burden to growers.
- ❖ Have transparent accreditation and compliance processes.
- ❖ Are cost-effective.
- ❖ Are nationally/internationally recognised.

We expect that governments will work with industry to develop food safety policies that meet both consumer and industry needs. Adequate resources need to be allocated by government to ensure the integrity of the system (including on imported produce).



Regulations need to ensure that when properly adhered to, food safety programs prevent problems arising with produce, while remaining as streamlined as possible to reduce compliance costs. For example:

- ❖ Grower input into safety standards.
- ❖ Minimising the cost of compliance of food safety accreditation schemes.
- ❖ Labelling and traceability of produce through the value chain.
- ❖ Education and responsibility for food safety accepted and maintained through the chain.
- ❖ Development of post harvest manuals.