



Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy



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Private produce safety rules burden smaller-scale, diversified farms, threaten conservation, lack transparency, new report finds

A new public system could enhance food safety, benefit farmers and strengthen local food systems

Washington, D.C./Minneapolis – Private industry food safety protocols for produce farmers are not always based on independent science and are biased against smaller-scale, diversified farms and those using sustainable production methods, finds a new report issued today by Food & Water Watch and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. “Bridging the Gaps: Strategies to Improve Produce Safety, Preserve Farm Diversity and Strengthen Local Food Systems,” by Elanor Starmer and Marie Kulick, analyzes common, non-regulatory food safety protocols for produce growers including, the federal Good Agriculture Practices, the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement, industry “super metrics,” and international food safety protocols.

In the absence of federal regulations governing food safety at the farm level, a growing number of wholesale and institutional produce buyers are requiring farmers to comply with a food safety protocol and pass a third party audit in order to sell their product. Though audit requirements differ among buyers, most require documentation, testing and other added costs; many requirements conflict with those of environmental programs supported by state and federal agencies. The report finds that the proliferation of private industry food safety protocols and mandatory audits unduly burdens many produce farmers and confuses consumers without delivering clear food safety benefits.

“Many small, diversified or organic farms can’t pass these food safety audits, but that’s not because they’re unsafe,” said Elanor Starmer, researcher and policy analyst at Food & Water Watch. “It’s because the audits require them to do things that are completely inappropriate for their production systems, like remove vegetation they’ve put in to protect water quality. The safety of our food system is enhanced by diversity. The last thing we need is a one-size-fits-all approach to food safety on the farm.”

Instead, the report recommends the development of a federal on-farm food safety standard for produce production that can provide assurance to a broad range of wholesale and institutional buyers without compromising the ability of a wide range of farms to compete in the marketplace.

“Most produce-related food-borne illnesses have been traced to processors, not to the farm,” said Marie Kulick, policy analyst at IATP. “For farmers, it’s important to have transparent, inclusive standards that reflect the diversity of U.S. farm operations. A nationally supported produce safety program can benefit everyone— more farms participating, safer food for consumers.”

The report includes several recommendations for such a program:

- Broad stakeholder involvement that includes small, diversified and organic farms.
- Specific measures to improve food safety based on independent science.
- Policies that are adaptable to farms of all sizes and types.
- Significant educational and training resources to assist farmers in transitioning to a new system and to educate auditors on different farming systems, practices and programs.

This fall, the Senate will consider new food safety legislation and the U.S. Department of Agriculture is evaluating an industry proposal governing food safety on farms growing leafy greens.

You can read the full report at: www.foodandwaterwatch.org and www.iatp.org.

Food & Water Watch, a nonprofit consumer organization based in Washington, D.C., works to ensure clean water and safe food in the United States and around the world. www.foodandwaterwatch.org.

The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy works locally and globally at the intersection of policy and practice to ensure fair and sustainable food, farm and trade systems. www.iatp.org.