

Transitioning farmers to produce for wholesale markets

Abstract: Ramping up production from direct sales to providing goods for wholesale markets means farmers must acquire new skills and competencies. Working through a farmer cooperative, producers were offered education on food safety and how to expand their operations.

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Farmers need education about safe food production and handling methods/requirements, assistance with writing a farm safety plan, information on standards and expectations, and encouragement to go through some type of audit process to evaluate their operation. Experienced farmers are needed to serve as models and mentors to new farmers.



MARKETING

What was done and why?

GROWN Locally (GL) is a member-owned farmer cooperative based in northeast Iowa. The co-op has been distributing food products—primarily vegetables—since 2000. The goals of this project included educating farmers about safe food production, recruiting new producers for the cooperative, encouraging current producers to expand, and having a majority of the farms complete a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) audit. Ultimately, this would allow GL to grow as an organization and increase its marketing capabilities.

Objectives were to:

- Recruit new producers who will grow to GL standards while encouraging current producers to expand;
- Continue refining internal audits of producers' farms to ensure the safety and quality of the products GL offers;
- Assist GL producers to write a farm safety plan for their farm and train them in all areas of farm and food safety (This includes good handling practices and post-harvest handling procedures for packing product for distribution.);
- Create peer mentoring groups for producers to learn how to grow more products on a larger scale to sell to wholesale markets; and
- Encourage producers to obtain GAP certification once they have all the required elements prepared.

What did we learn?

The project benefitted GL from an educational standpoint. All of the farmers gained knowledge about safe food production and handling. The project increased the quality and uniformity of GL's products. Producers were encouraged to communicate with one another, which helped them and GL as a whole. Detailed and concise farm safety plans were written. All these things contributed to a smoother auditing process, whether it is done internally or by a third party.