Statewide Impact Statement: Enhancing the Safety of Locally Grown Produce

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Summary: UGA Cooperative Extension researchers and educators help farmers/growers and farmers market managers protect consumers from foodborne illnesses and keep local markets strong.

Situation: As produce consumption has increased, so have foodborne disease outbreaks associated with fresh produce. A 2010 study released by PEW Charitable Trusts indicated that Georgia ranks 9th in the nation in the number of estimated cases of foodborne illness annually, having more than 2.5 million cases at a cost of $4.7 billion. An estimated 600,000 of these cases are associated with produce at a total annual cost of $1.2 billion. Many consumers view organic and locally grown foods as healthier, safer alternatives than conventional produce, and organic produce sales have increased 20% annually since 1990. A report funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation has highlighted the role local food businesses play in economic development—creating jobs and bringing money into communities. Direct marketing of farm products through farmers markets continues to be an important sales outlet for agricultural producers in Georgia and nationwide with the number of farmers markets increasing 9.6 percent from 2011 to 2012. The local and/or organic small to medium farms that sell directly to consumers often do not have the personnel to develop Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) plans to address food safety concerns nor do they have resources to pay for third party audits required as part of GAP. Surveys conducted with farmers and market managers in Georgia, Virginia and South Carolina have identified current food handling practices that could present a food safety risk to consumers and could adversely affect the growing demand for locally grown produce. These findings indicate a need for food safety training to ensure the use of “best practices” on small farms and in markets to reduce liability, keep local agricultural markets strong and enhance safety of locally grown produce for families and consumers.

Response: With funding from the USDA National Integrated Food Safety Initiative, UGA Cooperative Extension Specialists and Agents from the College of Family and Consumer Sciences and the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, have developed and implemented the Enhancing the Safety of Locally Grown Produce – On the Farm Food Safety Education Program with farmers/growers and the Enhancing the Safety of Locally Grown Produce – At the Market Food Safety Education Program with Farmers Market Managers.

Impact: Statewide, 163 growers and 36 farmers market managers have been trained. Of those, 44% of growers and 89% of market managers evaluated what they learned and “best practices” they plan to implement. Percentages of growers improving their knowledge ranged from 56% to 73% for each of seven factors that affect the safety of produce. Many growers indicated they intend to make changes in practices that could improve the safety of their produce. Percentages ranged from 10% of growers for more
difficult and expensive changes (such as changes in irrigation methods) up to 60% of growers for easier, less expensive improvements (such as conducting self-inspections of facilities to identify risks, improvements in cleaning and sanitizing, providing handwashing and toilet facilities for workers and keeping better records.) The percentages of market managers improving their knowledge ranged from 56% up to 94% for each of 14 factors that affect the safety of produce at the market level. As a result of the training, managers indicated they intend to make changes in practices to improve safety. Percentages ranged from 31% up to 75% of managers for individual practices such as enforcing a “no pets” policy in markets, asking questions of farmers and vendors about production methods of products being sold, improving handwashing and toilet facilities for workers and vendors, providing more training for market vendors and workers, keeping better records, etc.

**Public Value of This Program:**
Many of the customers buying produce in local farmers markets are young mothers with young children, older adults and people with existing health conditions striving to find produce they consider to be fresher, more nutritious and safer than produce transported in from “factory” farms. These consumers are also the most vulnerable population groups for foodborne illness and severe complications. Safe production and marketing of local produce can reduce costs associated with these illnesses, can prevent devastating losses to farmers and can help local agricultural markets and businesses to flourish.