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Equitable Food Initiative Adds Labor to Farm Audits

By Tim Linden

Focus on the Work Environment

With the food safety auditing industry now entrenched in the produce industry, an effort has surfaced to expand the concept to include labor standards and to offer more than a snapshot of activity at any given time.

Peter O'Driscoll, who is executive director and CEO of the Equitable Food Initiative, says the firm emerged after various stakeholders – including producers, shippers, retailers and employee representatives – came together seeking to improve food safety efforts. He said retailers are looking for more assurances from their suppliers than the snapshot approach offered by the standard food safety audits. He claims those audits, for the most part, do an excellent job of revealing exactly what is going on at any given time, but they don't involve employees in the food safety process.

When a producer signs up with EFI, they also are signing up for employee training that is designed to improve the food safety performance of the operation with a systems approach. O'Driscoll said EFI attacks the issue from a collaborative perspective. When a company signs up, EFI works with that company to establish rigorous, certifiable standards revolving around labor, pest management and food safety. Once those standards are established, a training program is established that usually involves 15-20 representatives from the firm cutting across the entire labor force from harvest crew members to supervisors and beyond. "We offer a 40-hour training program that teaches employees what to do when they come across food safety issues," O'Driscoll said, explaining that the workforce is a very important, and previously neglected, part of the food safety program, according to EFI.

For example, he said the workers in the field need to know what to do if they come across animal waste. The EFI plan establishes these 15-20 trained workers as the conduit to the rest of the workforce. These leaders will both train other workers and be the "go-to" force in the field when issues arise.

The third facet of the program is an EFI audit and certification to make sure the standards are being adhered to, including the labor standards. O'Driscoll said it is the team approach that adds an additional element of ongoing verification that moves this firm's audit from a snapshot to a continuous certification.

For the audit weary, O'Driscoll said EFI does accept certification by other system (i.e. Global Gap) as an element of its program. In other words, if a grower-shipper has an auditing system in place already, EFI can work within that system to strengthen where there are additional needs but accept elements of it as well to reduce redundant audits. As time goes by, the EFI executive would obviously like to see an EFI program be the industry standard.

O'Driscoll does not shy away from admitting that it is the worker involvement and certification of labor standards that is driving the EFI approach. He notes that both of the major national industry associations – United Fresh Produce Association and the Produce Marketing Association – have recognized the importance of responsible labor practices with the establishment of a joint committee in late 2015. He said that idea is being driven by the retail community and its customers. "Retailers want more transparency" with regard to how their suppliers operate, he said, including how they treat their workers.

EFI currently has certified 10 farming operations and has another seven in the process. He said there are others in the pipeline or in negotiations with the organizations. While its initial effort was in California and Washington State, EFI is also working with growers in Mexico and Canada, and expanding to other regions as well. He believes the goal of having 200 certified farming organizations over the next several years is reachable. Of course operating over many different areas has its challenges. Initially, EFI was contemplating a labor standard – such as a minimum wage – that was uniform. That doesn't

work when you are certifying farm operations in diverse locations such as Mexico, California and elsewhere.

O'Driscoll acknowledges that the EFI approach has its element of controversy, which he believes is unfair. Some industry groups have charged that the organization is a backdoor effort to encourage unionization of farmworkers, which has largely been unsuccessful through the front door. Grower groups, especially in California, have also pointed to the myriad of state laws and regulators that already make sure workers are treated fairly. The EFI executive knows there is mistrust in the ag community, which he believes stems from a long history of an adversarial relationship. As a result, some grower representatives, he believes, are uncomfortable including the worker community in the collaborative approach. But it is that approach that EFI is championing.

As far as the cost of the EFI approach,

O'Driscoll says it does fall on the shoulders of the grower "who ultimately pays for the service." Producers are never excited about adding costs to their process, which EFI is well aware of. "We are currently in the middle of discussions with retailers to establish a premium for EFI certified produce."

O'Driscoll agrees that the premium needs to be transparent, and certifiable if you will, so the grower does realize an advantage to adopting this procedure. But he also believes that there will be a net gain to producers who adopt this systems approach to their food safety effort and labor standards. In the long term, he said these progressive companies will be the most successful.

While O'Driscoll is located Washington D.C., the company's workforce is spread out across the country and does not operate from a headquarters office, per se. He said the best point of contact is through the company's website. 🌻

