



Episode Thirty - Dealing with high risk emergency situations

Welcome to episode 30 of Food Safety Bites, brought to you the University of Wisconsin Madison, and funded by the USDA Food Safety Outreach Program. This is your host Harriet Behar. This episode is **dealing with high risk emergency situations**. In these podcast episodes, I will identify issues, and provide suggestions for how to reduce various fresh produce contamination risks and keep your customers safe. We will not talk in detail about what is required for a GAP audit or a FSMA inspection. If you want more information on those, please see the links on the website where you found these podcasts.

In this episode, I will discuss how to identify and respond to a food safety emergency on the farm. I provide examples of situations where you may need to implement special measures to deal with a high-risk situation.

Let's start with understanding what could be high risk. An emergency is a unique situation that poses an immediate risk to health, life, property or the environment. Most emergencies will require quick intervention to prevent the situation from worsening. These serious, unexpected and often dangerous situations require quick action. Sometimes mitigation may not be possible and the best response may be to deal with lessening the negative impacts in the emergency's aftermath.

When faced with an emergency, the first thing to do is to try and remain calm. In order to maintain focus and not be overwhelmed, having a plan in place to deal with a variety of situations is a great start.

Natural emergencies include weather related situations such as tornadoes, hurricanes, wildfires, floods, severe winter storms, severe dust storms, lightning strikes and earthquakes.

Man-made emergencies include wildfires, explosions or building fires, animal handling or escape incidents, power failures, equipment incidents that injure people, chemical and/or sewage releases or spills, and accidental poisoning.

On produce farms, any of these could damage crops and infrastructure. For example, high winds, heavy rain and snow as well as fires can tear down or damage high tunnels that are full of produce. Floods, animal escape incidents, chemical and/or sewage releases or spills, can render produce unfit for harvest. Incorrect use or volume of pesticides or sanitizers can also result in food with unsafe levels of chemicals that should not enter the marketplace. Power failures or malfunctioning coolers can ruin the quality of food in storage from temperatures that are too cold or too warm. Employees can get serious injuries from knives, pruners and other equipment, and can spread bodily fluids to produce and soil, where they can spread human pathogens. When an emergency has occurred, employees, family or visitors should leave the affected area, especially if they are not trained to deal with the dangerous situation.

Floods- Any produce that has been over-run by flood water from a rising river, lake, or stream cannot legally be sold in the marketplace, period. If the water is running across the field is from



a heavy rain and not from surface waters, you may be able to harvest some of that crop, depending on the length of time the water was present, and the quality of the produce once the water recedes. Never enter an area that is actively flooding. You do not know how deep the water is, how muddy the ground under the water is, nor how fast and powerful the water may be. Children should never be allowed to play in flood water, this could lead to drowning. If any sewage or domestic animal waste is present in the flood water, from an overturned porta-pottie or an adjoining feedlot, that produce cannot be sold into the marketplace, even if the original source was not surface water.

Chemical or sewage spills- Porta potties could leak or fall over in high wind or floods, releasing human waste directly on to a field or to an adjoining a field where a subsequent rain could cause it to reach growing produce. Tractors or other vehicles could drive over the spilled waste if there is no other way to reach fields beyond the spill and spread it around. For sewage and pesticide/herbicide or other chemical spills, the local emergency management team for your county should be called. If you don't know their number, the local fire department dispatch can help you as well. These spills must be handled by trained individuals with the correct equipment to clean up the spill. Produce that has been touched by these materials can never be sold in the marketplace. Try to avoid driving through these spills, and keep all employees, visitors, children and domestic animals away from the spill area. You may want to setup temporary fencing around this area to help you identify the produce that cannot be harvested and to protect people and animals from entering.

Incorrect usage or volume of pesticides/herbicides or sanitizers- If a pesticide has been used on produce and it was not EPA registered for that use, that produce cannot be sold on the marketplace. If this has happened, a corrective action should be taken to make sure that workers who do not know how to handle these materials, will not be allowed to perform this job function. This is the same issue if the pesticide mix was incorrect and was at a higher concentration than approved on the label, the produce cannot be sold. Sanitizers used in dunk tanks or produce wash sprays must also be mixed to the product label instructions. Only workers who are trained to do this mixing should be allowed to handle these strong chemicals. Documentation must be maintained that the sanitizer concentration was correct, either through the amount used with the volume of water or from use of test strips that determine the concentration of the sanitizer in the water. If tainted produce is accidentally sold and consumed by someone, they could experience sickness and the farmer could have a terrible financial and emotional liability caused by this incident.

Animal escape incidents- Domestic animals that have escaped are typically stressed and very skittish, only those who are familiar with working with these animals should attempt to corral them and lead them back to where they belong or try to load them on a trailer. Male animals that have not been castrated are especially dangerous, as well as female animals with their young. Contact the owner of the animals and have them work to return their animals to their home. Discuss with that owner, how to fix the fence in a permanent way, so this does not occur again. Many states have laws that address adjoining landowners who share a fence. For example in Wisconsin, when standing in the middle of the property line between the two parcels of land, and facing towards the neighbor, the half of the fence to your right is your responsibility



to maintain. If it is your fence that is weak, be prepared to spend the time and money to fix it. Any produce that has had direct contact with animal feces or urine cannot be sold, even if it occurred by an escaped animal.

Natural Disasters such as heavy snow, tornadoes, wild fires, and lightning strikes can occur anywhere. If you have a farm which welcomes the public, such as a roadside stand or a “u-pick” operation, have a plan to shelter members of the public if such a natural disaster occurs. Always be aware of weather when the public is on your farm, and do not allow them to remain in an unsafe area if there are storms headed in your direction.

Take some time to give some thought to possible risky areas on your farm, porta potties, if you have weak fences that may not contain the neighbor’s animals, proximity to streams, and use of pesticides and sanitizers. Work to lessen the risk if possible and then develop a plan so if the worst happens, you are prepared to move into action without going into a panic. I will discuss loss of power to produce storage areas in the produce storage food safety bites episode.

So that’s it for this episode of Food Safety Bites, the next episode is regulatory and market requirements FSMA GAP etc. This is your host Harriet Behar brought to you by the University of Wisconsin Madison, talk to you next time!