

- COFFS Working Group – A Model for Collaborative Success
- COFFS Report Card – The Many Successes of the OFFS Program
- Program Highlights and Achievements
- COFFS Program – A Unique Industry-Government Partnership

COFFS WG *Newsletter*



CANADIAN ON FARM FOOD SAFETY WORKING GROUP
NEWSLETTER

COFFS Working Group – A Model of Collaborative

Background

The Canadian On-Farm Food Safety (COFFS) Working Group was formed in October 1998 by the national producer organizations (NPOs) and general farm organizations. The Working Group provides a forum for research into and the collaborative development of national commodity-specific on-farm food safety programs and the Canadian approach to on-farm food safety (OFFS).

The objective of the COFFS Working Group is to work together so that farmers will have available to them a Canadian approach to on-farm food safety. This approach includes officially recognized, national, commodity-specific, auditable, HACCP-based on-farm food safety programs. It ensures these programs are consistent, affordable and



meet the requirements of both the Canadian and international marketplaces, and such other supportive elements as are required to ensure its credibility and sustainability.

Today

The COFFS Working Group has demonstrated a model of collaborative success and management capability. The members unanimously agree that the Working Group is a success of its own, and has brought the entire agriculture community closer together. As a forum, it provides a unique opportunity for very diverse commodity organizations to have one voice and one common approach to address very complex issues. This has

strengthened relationships and collaboration with various government departments and regulators. It also provides a means to address other program management issues, such as biosecurity and animal welfare.

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As NPOs are at different stages of development and have different approaches to program implementation, the Working Group members benefit from the successes or challenges of others. To sum it up, the organizations that are further ahead have helped make a ‘task that at first seemed impossible, doable’ for newer NPOs. This has saved time, money and resources for everyone, and encourages the use of the most successful strategies.

This unique approach has resulted in a cohesive team who bring to the table a wealth of knowledge and expanded networks. It has provided an excellent model that demonstrates com-

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modity organizations and producers can work together successfully. This group is helping to build the foundation for the future of agriculture in Canada.

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COFFS Report Card – The Many Successes of the COFFS Program

Since its earliest beginnings, the COFFS Program has been built on a foundation of collaboration and partnerships, resulting in many significant achievements and advancements across the entire agriculture industry. The COFFS Program is one part of a world-leading agricultural program, involving small-to-large-scale producers, the Canadian agriculture industry and all levels of government. This ensures that long-term benefits will be realized throughout the supply chain, including consumers.



As a voluntary program, the proactive approach by all NPOs to move forward

on development and implementation is outstanding. The COFFS program has recognized that most farming operations already have systems in place to ensure food safety, quality and traceability. What is unique in the COFFS program is the common documented approach that often means very little additional work for many operations.

Built in collaboration by industry and regulators, the HACCP-based program design provides for consistency across all NPOs, while allowing for flexibility in commodity-specific requirements. These resulting COFFS programs are technically sound, practical, producer friendly and auditable.

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The achievements to date are significant, with 19 NPOs developing and implementing 28 commodity-specific programs. In addition, the COFFS working group addresses auditor training, producer liability, various delivery options and models and risk management development. The COFFS model of program development and partnership with the federal, provincial and territorial governments is leading edge and an example of the profits of collaboration.

The voluntary flexible nature of the program provides for a staged approach, allowing each organization to proceed at its own pace. For those NPOs where either domestic or international markets are requiring such programs, they have stepped up their development to be ready. Other

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commodities that don't have an immediate need for the program are still moving forward on building programs that will be ready when they need them. Every commodity will end up with the right tools in their toolbox, ready for implementation when required.

Remarkable progress has been achieved by all NPOs, despite many other industry priorities and limited resources, including money, people and time. All of the groups remain committed to the program and to moving forward with development, implementation and management strategies. This voluntary national program is a proven model of success for other national program priorities and new innovations. The benefactors include the entire chain from producers

Highlights, Achievements and Program Successes

Across the agriculture industry and the COFFS program there have been many successes, at various stages and places along the chain. Here are some highlights.

Industry-Government Partnership

- voluntary HACCP-based approach and collaborative development strategy between industry and government considered leading edge internationally
- shared role with government to uphold Canada's reputation for safe food production
- federal, provincial, territorial government recognition process enables industry to develop realistic programs that can be implemented on-farm, and receive official recognition for their technical soundness and administrative effectiveness
- federal government financial support for program development benefits all commodity organizations and producers, whether large or small.

Collaboration Among National COFFS Coordinators

- opportunities to openly share strategies, challenges and solutions, making it more efficient and rewarding for all those developing program

demonstrates proactive approach and success at working together

- know-how and expertise enriches the entire group with limited resources, the sharing of tools and information is invaluable, e.g. infrastructure, legal issues, auditing, educational tool development

One Voice – Common Factors

- one cohesive voice going forward to government to collaborate on the development of recognition protocols and other details
- common language and common formula makes development and implementation easier for the NPOs and the producers, particularly those with multi-commodity operations
- one-model, recognition approach increases support and confidence by producers.

Responsible and Efficient Use of Resources

- partnership with CFA acting as a third party delivery agent for funds administration, has significantly reduced costs, increased efficiencies and moderated concerns in the producer community
- collaboration on program development, management, administration, auditing strategies and other factors has increased efficiencies for the COFFS program.



Innovative Tools – Education and Marketing

- educational tools have increased awareness for producers, but also for consumers, stakeholders and media

provide clear indication of level of measures, practices and procedures that need to take place on a farm to

give confidence to consumers, processors and other stakeholders in the chain

Voluntary Staged Program Development – Tools Are Ready When Required

- programs are developed and made ready when industry needs it

flexible model makes it easier for producers to implement and manage

Recognition of Safe On-Farm Food Production

- national OFFS programs demonstrate a proactive approach by NPOs and producers

- signal that producers are already doing a good job of producing food safely, but there are always opportunities for improvement

- increase confidence of other members of the supply chain

- built awareness of the need for OFFS programs, and the discipline and attention required by participants to reassure customers

Networks and Links to Other Programs

- the WG represents a unique team of people who bring a wealth of knowledge and expertise to the table, including their extended networks

COFFS Program - A Unique Industry-Government Partnership

The COFFS Program is a unique partnership between producers, their NPOs and government departments, in particular the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC). This collaborative approach of industry and government departments and regulators working together to develop a voluntary HACCP-based on-farm food safety program is considered unique to most other countries. Having CFIA, AAFC and others participating as observers to the COFFS Working Group table seems to be unheard of elsewhere around the world.

CFIA

“We see a strong uptake by national producer organizations (NPO) and the fact that everyone is moving forward in their commitment to the OFFS program as a significant achievement,” says Warren Smandych, National Coordinator, On-Farm Food Safety Recognition Section with CFIA. “By implementing their programs and having them recognized closes the gaps in the food safety continuum, so it truly becomes from gate to plate as much as possible.”

The one-system model is proving successful, both in

Canada and internationally. “We have had auditors from various EU countries visit some of our farms registered in an OFFS program,” says Smandych. “The auditors were surprised and very pleased that the COFFS program encompasses as much as it did.” As a voluntary program, the uptake we have at the national level speaks volumes for their genuine interest and concern with food safety.

For CFIA, the next steps are to provide a final product for producers and NPOs in a timely manner. “It is so important that NPOs continue with the implementation and ultimate recognition of their programs,” says Smandych. “We continue to provide support for the organizations to move forward at their own pace and create something that works for their producers without too much interference from a regulatory body.” Smandych adds that one challenge for producer organizations will be to make sure their membership is involved. A recognition program with more members registered and being audited has greater impact.

AAFC

There have been many accomplishments in the initial development stages of the Canadian approach to food safety. “Early in the process,



everyone recognized that the challenge was great and would require a collaborative approach involving producers, industry and all levels of government to develop and implement the vision,” explains Anita Stanger, Director, Food Safety and Quality Programs Division with AAFC. “We have worked together in a positive atmosphere to develop a vision to guide the direction of Canada’s food safety system.”

Communication has been key to the benefits of food safety systems and the significant gains that Canada has achieved. “At the producer level, the recognition that the on-farm food safety plan is part of comprehensive best farm practices which link to best management practices for biosecurity, traceability and the environment is an important achievement,” says Stan-

ger. At the industry level, ensuring that similar food safety systems are adopted beyond the farm gate is important. “Communication is also key at the consumer level to build confidence in the products sold at home and abroad.”

In moving forward, the continued development, recognition and implementation of food safety systems for all stakeholders throughout the food chain is important. “We must work with industry and CFIA to look at ways to shorten the time frame for developing systems,” says Stanger. “We must also encourage further collaboration among on-farm and post-farm organizations to reinforce linkages across the food supply chain.”

Next Steps Forward

Keeping the momentum and energy going and building on the successes are the next steps forward. As more NPOs complete their programs and receive recognition, continued communication and enrollment of producers in these voluntary programs will be key. The producer manuals are valuable education tools, encouraging more consistent practices and record keeping across the various industries. Although program implementation is very important, having producers register in an audited program is the ultimate goal.

One of the biggest challenges in moving forward is long-term sustainability of the COFFS recognition and management program across the NPOs. Continued support, both financial and in-kind, along with

other resources is critical not only for smaller organizations but also the larger commodity groups with more established infrastructures. For most producers, there is no economic return on the investments they are making into implementing these programs. Financial constraints for both producers and NPOs could impact the next steps forward.

The success of the COFFS Working Group emphasizes that they are capable of responsible and efficient use of funding and the equitable distribution across the country. Future implementation, delivery, auditing, research and building organizational capacity will require significant funding and resource support for national organizations and individual producer success. Continued programming to facilitate a common forum of all commodities to address developmental and delivery issues will be integral to the success COFFS programs.

Highlights From Around the COFFS WG Table

Dairy Farmers of Canada

- Nicole Sillett, National Program Coordinator

One of the biggest successes is getting everyone moving in the same direction and buying into the program. The Canadian Quality Milk (CQM) program has expanded beyond the industry leaders and early adopters to a much broader audience, which was a big turning point. Once producers in leadership positions begin implementing the program, then other

producers more readily get involved. Producers are realizing that the program is quite easy to implement, because they are already using many of the practices, it’s just a matter of formalizing their procedures and records. They feel good about the program once they implement it on their farm, and the industry overall is saving tanks of milk. Our next steps are to encourage more producers to register in the program.

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Canadian Broiler Hatching Egg Producers' Association/Canadian Broiler Hatching Egg Marketing Association

- Viki Sikur, Food Safety Officer

The COFFS Program is increasing the awareness of many practices that have been in place for a long time, but not necessarily fully documented. Producers are reviewing their practices and operations to improve efficiencies and to show their due diligence through records. The program is encouraging better relationships with allied industries through the supply managed infrastructure, and helping the entire industry work more efficiently and cooperatively. If industry issues should arise, there are now technically sound programs and processes in place to address them. The COFFS Program helps improve the awareness and communication with producers, processors and consumers.

Chicken Farmers of Canada

- Steve Leech, National Program Manager

The COFFS Program helps demonstrate that the industry has been proactive. There has been significant buy-in by producers, and clearly establishes minimum standards of practices and procedures that need to take place on the farm. The fact that it is a credible, HACCP-based, technically reviewed, government recognized program has increased the confidence of other members in the value chain, through to consumers. This has also created a good news story for media and public communications, increasing their confidence that efforts are being made to manage for potential disease or biosecurity issues. The COFFS Program is a very effective risk management tool.

Ontario Veal Association

- Chris Palmer, Industry Liaison

Ontario veal producers have long recognized they are part of a value chain and have been marketing a branded product as a result. This came about after the Ontario Veal Association developed their own HACCP-based version eight years ago. Today we are partnering with Quebec producers and developing a national COFFS veal program. In the future, producers will have access to a national government recognized program called "Verified Veal". This program will provide veal producers with the necessary tools in place when the demand for implementation presents itself. Through collaboration, the development process with government and other commodities has helped build closer relationships and understanding, and given in-

dustry the opportunity to provide practical input to regulatory aspects. The Program has created a dedicated network of experts across the agriculture industry and is helping to build the foundation for the future of agriculture.

Canadian Sheep Federation

- France Lanthier, National Coordinator, OFFS

The commodity groups have created good educational tools for producers, including the producer manuals, which are useful for beginning or experienced producers. The good production practices contained within the producer manual are a tool for producers to evaluate how their production matches up to industry standards. The record keeping requirements of the program help to fill in where there are gaps in regulations, such as differences or the absence of provincial legislation for certain practices. As a small industry with limited resources and information, this program is a good channel for the Canadian Sheep Federation to provide educational tools for producers. There seems to be a trend to tying in food safety as a basic requirement for branding initiatives. When the industry is ready to implement, or when customers demand it, it is our goal to assure that the program and tools are available to all Canadian sheep producers. The COFFS working group has been an invaluable resource. The experiences and knowledge shared between the commodity groups is allowing for a more uniform delivery and management of programs across commodities.

Saskatchewan Herb and Spice Association/Canadian Herb, Spice and Natural Health Products Coalition (CHSNC)

- Connie Kehler, Executive Director

This Program creates a unique opportunity of linking the whole chain from field to shelf, from production through to finished product for food and natural health products. The collaboration of non-regulatory and regulatory aspects, including CFIA, AAFC, Health Canada, Environment Canada, WHO and others, is unique for health products around the world. A Manitoba COFFS Pilot Project exemplified the collaboration, flexibility and applicability, by successfully bringing together three diverse programs: COFFS, the CHSNC International Plant Identification Practice and a Certified Organic Program. The staging and flexibility means this tool is in the toolbox, and ready for those who need it today or sometime in the future.

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Canadian Horticultural Council (CHC)

- Heather Gale, Food Safety Coordinator

The CHC OFFS Program aims to establish a national food safety standard for the production and primary packaging of fresh produce. It is divided into eight commodity-specific modules. The procedural manuals and template forms are designed to reduce the financial and time burden on producers and packers to demonstrate the effectiveness of their OFFS program.. The goal is to develop a national program that will streamline the record keeping and audit process for producers with multiple products and different customers.

Canadian Turkey Marketing Agency (CTMA)

- Colleen McElwain, Manager On-Farm Programs

The CTMA OFFS Program helps producers prove that they are meeting the increasing demands placed on them by consumers. It can also be used as an educational tool as needed by Provincial Boards.

Through the record keeping requirements of the program, producers will have a paper trail to demonstrate they are raising birds using the most current best management practices. The Program also helps to ensure that farm personnel are appropriately trained, helps producers ensure adequate flock biosecurity and simplifies the application of other programs such as the CTMA Flock Care program. Turkey producers have embraced the CTMA OFFS program and implementation is well underway across the country.

Canadian Egg Producers Council/ Canadian Egg Marketing Agency

- Walter Debicki, Food Safety Specialist

Producers are buying in to this national HACCP-based, government acknowledged program, with about 96% of egg producers enrolled in this voluntary program. Producers are starting to view the Program more as a management system, and regularly utilize their records to analyze various aspects of their business. They can use it as a footprint for the previous year, and in determining the next steps for the upcoming year. Although producers were initially concerned with what they thought would be an onerous record keeping component, they have found that once the program is set up the requirements are accomplished fairly easily.

Canadian Bison Association

- Terry Kremeniuk, Executive Director

An important component of industry success is to have resources, particularly a staff person, to focus on the COFFS program development and delivery. Producers are more willing to be involved when the industry is more buoyant. However, major industry issues such as BSE have turned producers' priorities to business survival over anything else. More recently, profitability is beginning to improve in the industry, and producers are again asking about the program. As producers address their business demands and economic cycles, it can take longer than initially planned to implement COFFS programming into their businesses.



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