

Empowering Growers and Ensuring Produce Safety Through the PSA Grower Training Course

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The purpose of this factsheet is to outline why a grower would want to take the Produce Safety Alliance (PSA) Grower Training (GT) Course, what it entails, the benefits, and modes of delivery.

Produce-associated foodborne illnesses make people sick and impact the economic viability of farms and packinghouses.

Globally, an estimated six hundred million people fall ill after eating contaminated food, and 420,000 people die each year ([World Health Organization, 2023](#))¹. In the U.S. from 2010 to 2017, 1797 foodborne outbreaks occurred, of which 12.7% (228) were attributed to fresh produce ([Carstens et. al., 2019](#))². These produce-associated foodborne illness outbreaks also impact the economy. Food safety incidents cause approximately \$7 billion of financial impacts per year throughout the U.S. ([Hussain and Dawson, 2013](#))³. These impacts extend beyond the contaminated produce and growing areas where, for instance, in 2018, an *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak linked to lettuce prevented growers outside the contaminated areas from selling their produce, despite assurances of safety ([USDA, 2020](#))⁴. This outbreak caused societal losses estimated between \$280-\$350 million ([Kiesel et al., 2021](#))⁵.

Preventing contamination is the goal.

Fresh produce does not receive a 'kill step' to reduce the presence of microbial pathogens, such as bacteria, viruses, and parasites that can make people sick. There are also physical and chemical risks associated with fresh fruit and vegetable production, but most produce safety risks are associated with pathogens. There are many ways fresh produce can be contaminated including water, soil amendments, animals (i.e., wildlife, pets, livestock), and during handling by employees. Once contamination occurs it is difficult to remove, so preventing contamination is the goal.

Taking the PSA Grower Training Course helps growers, packers, and farm employees understand and implement practices to reduce microbial risks, prevent contamination, preserve market access, and open new market channels.

Understanding microbial risks in the growing and packing environment is critical to reducing and controlling them. Once microbial risks can be identified, then growers and packers can implement practices to reduce them.

The PSA GT Course was designed to help farm personnel understand microbial risks, assess their farms and packing facilities to identify risks, and develop practices to reduce the risks they identified.

Implementing produce safety practices can also help growers and packers maintain and grow their markets. Many fresh produce buyers require their suppliers to have taken produce safety training and have produce safety practices in place. A survey showed that regardless of operation size, all operations had a positive cost/benefit ratio when they implemented produce safety practices ([Schmit et al. 2020](#))⁶. Every farm and packinghouse, irrespective of its size, location, or crops grown should learn about produce safety because it is not just good for reducing microbial risks, it is good for business.

Some growers are legally required to comply with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule (PSR).

The FSMA PSR was released on November 27, 2015, and is the first ever federal regulation governing fruit and vegetable production. Growers and packers should assess whether they are covered by the rule, eligible for an exemption, or legally excluded from the rule by reviewing the [Coverage and Exemptions/ Exclusions for 21 PART 112 Flowchart](#). The PSA GT Course satisfies the FSMA PSR requirements outlined in [§ 112.22\(c\)](#): “At least one supervisor or responsible party for your farm must have successfully completed food safety training at least equivalent to that received under standardized curriculum recognized as adequate by the Food and Drug Administration”.

Produce safety training helps to build a positive food safety culture.

A functional produce safety program requires everyone on the farm and in the packinghouse to be engaged in reducing risks. This means not only training for the farm and packinghouse owner(s), but training for everyone in the operation. This training should be the beginning of establishing a positive food safety culture that can have impacts on the farm beyond produce safety.

Produce safety knowledge plays a pivotal role in enhancing overall farm function and prepares everyone to adapt to dynamic changes occurring in agricultural settings. The lessons learned from challenges, including those experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, underscore the importance of a strong food safety culture. A robust food safety culture contributes to resilience, adaptability to change, employee retention, consumer trust, adoption of best practices, and compliance with relevant regulations.

What to expect from a PSA GT Course.

The PSA GT Course covers [seven modules](#) that focus on understanding produce safety risks during production, harvest, and post-harvest activities. It is based on a Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) while outlining the requirements of the FSMA PSR. This course helps participants understand how to implement science-based practices to reduce microbial contamination on farms and in packinghouses.

Modes of PSA GT Course delivery.

PSA GTs are delivered online (asynchronous), remote (synchronous), and in-person. Read more about these delivery options and available classes on the [PSA website](#). Further, the PSA GT Manual has been translated into several languages including Chinese, Korean, Portuguese and Spanish. Subscribing to the PSA [listserv](#) is one way to stay connected and up-to date with PSA resources, trainings, and other events. The PSA also has [guidance](#) for offering the PSA GT Course to low literacy participants and to growers that are literate in languages where there is not a PSA GT Manual translation available in their language.



References

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