

## **Food Safety regulations threaten local and regional food systems, and why dirt on your vegetables is one way to prevent that threat from materializing**

**By Steve Warshawer, New Mexico Farmer**

It was discouraging for me to read that our beloved CSA manager and maybe some members equate dirt on the Mesa Top cucumbers with poor quality produce. It was particularly ironic because one of the lessons learned through my work in the vital area of food safety relates to washing vegetables.

I have dedicated a lot of my off-farm time over the last five years to the work of addressing commercial buyer expectations around food safety and to protecting our local and regional food systems and the farms and food producers who supply them from the imminent threat of food safety regimens soon to be implemented as part of FSMA (Food Safety Modernization Act).

I have learned a lot by working with produce food safety experts. We have spent long hours discussing on-farm practices and addressing the challenge of how to handle produce so it can travel long distances, over extended periods of time, and look good on the retail shelves or in a finished meal.

I learned from them that a major point for risk of contamination in the produce that we eat comes during the cleaning process. I have countered their descriptions with experiences in our short supply chains, where few hands and little time passes between harvest and meal time.

When you think about it, common sense says that the best scenario is that produce should be moved from the field (or garden) to the kitchen with as little extra handling as possible, and cleaned once and only once, at precisely the time when it will be eaten. The combination of consumer expectation of “movie star” appearance and the long distance supply chain's need to create consistent product that travels well has led to practices of washing and waxing for many types of produce. These processes introduce one of the most significant opportunities for contamination of produce. The Jensen Farms cantaloupe nightmare was created by a cantaloupe washing system that spread lysteria monocytogenes to much of the fruit through the washing process. For that reason FSMA rules will place very stringent expectations on produce operations that wash their crops.

If the same expectations are placed on local and regional food producers, many will cease to be economically viable and will go out of business. The cost of entering the market will go up, and new farmers will be discouraged. This factor will be among many that will eventually lead to more expensive and less available fresh produce in general, except from the largest farms who have the resources and technical expertise to sanitize and ship. Eventually most of those operations will be located outside the US where enforcement will be less rigorous and low labor costs, and lesser environmental standards will allow businesses to be profitable while also spending more of their money on “food safety requirements,” some of which (movie star looks?) have no direct correlation to ACTUAL food safety! Let’s all eat our vegetables from China!!!

One of the hot topics among produce people has been whether we could get our customers to remember a bygone time when getting a little bit of the farm dirt on your veggies was a reason to smile. “It rained! So my cukes are not so clean. Well Hallelujah, praise the rain!”

In general our New Mexico produce comes clean from the field. That's because it hardly ever rains! So given the recent drought relief, there is more dirty produce out there in our NM fields than there has been in some time. When we look at our dirty cars and trucks, and muddy clothes and boots, we find ourselves saying “Thank you” for the gift of rain. Yes, it is inconvenient, but it is not unhealthy to clean the produce when it gets to your kitchen. AND sometime soon you may be saving your local farmers, who are able to avoid costly regulatory requirements by telling FDA “our customers wash their own veggies.”