

Transcript: Osman Ruiz Amador of Amador Farms: Employee Training Practices for Agricultural Product Safety in Farmers Markets

Kate Smith: [00:00:07] Hello everyone and welcome to our "Farm Walks" podcast, brought to you by Tilth Alliance and our Washington State University Food Systems Program. I am your host for this episode. We have finished the second season of our podcast and are excited to share these special episodes focused on produce safety, including this episode with Amador Farms and the episode with Host Nicole Witham and Dharma Ridge Farm. As always, you can visit our Farm Walks website to listen to all of our episodes, farmwalks.org. In this episode of Farm Walks, I'm talking to Osman Ruiz Amador, owner of Amador Farms in Yakima, Washington. We learn about the diversified farm he runs with his family, and how they ensure everyone who works on the farm receives the necessary training to take care of the safety and quality of their produce. Later in the episode, we discuss in more detail with Jacqui Gordon Nunez of the Washington State Tree Fruit Association important topics and resources available for worker training about produce safety.

Kate Smith: [00:01:49] Welcome, Osman. Good morning.

Osman Amador: [00:01:53] Yes. Good morning. Good morning. What's up? How are you?

Kate Smith: [00:01:55] Oh, all right. And how are you?

Osman Amador: [00:01:58] Very good. Very good, thank you.

Kate Smith: [00:02:00] Oh, thank you! A pleasure to have the opportunity to chat with you today on our Farm Walks podcast.

Osman Amador: [00:02:08] Thank you. The same. It is a pleasure to be here with you and share a little of our experience.

Kate Smith: [00:02:16] Thank you very much, Osman. Well, to begin with, I have some questions. First, can you give us an overview of your farm? Including: Where is it located? How many acres do you have? What crops do you produce?

Osman Amador: [00:02:37] Of course. Yes. Our farm is located in Yakima Valley. The exact address is 2715 McCullough Road. It's in Yakima, Washington. It's a place in eastern Washington. Here at this address we have 11 acres on which we produce entirely vegetables. We currently have planted cherry trees, peach fruit, nectarines, and plums, other types of fruits. But this is the first year they are ready to harvest. We have been working with all vegetables in this place. And in the Sunnyside area, we also have another 4 acres with asparagus. In all, we have 18 acres with pure fruits. There are a variety of peach apples there. It is a place where we have very nice... very, very nice fruit and very good quality fruit.

Kate Smith: [00:03:56] Wow. You have a lot of products. Yes?

Osman Amador: [00:04:00] Yes, there is a great variety. Of apples there are six kinds, and soon we will also have another one, a new variety that is the Cosmic Crisp. I think many of you know it.

Kate Smith: [00:04:15] Yes, this... Cosmic Crisp...

Osman Amador: [00:04:18] Some still don't know about it, but it's a very good apple. It is a graft between Honey Crisp and Fuji. So it's very sweet and very crispy and juicy. The apple is very good. But we are dealing with the landowner who has the patent to give us permission to have trees. You can have some trees in the place for personal use, but we want to do everything right to be able to sell in the farmers markets. And supply all customers.

Kate Smith: [00:04:55] Oh, yes, yes, yes. I've had the opportunity to try this apple, and it's very delicious. Yes, this is a variety that Washington State University, WSU, started, right?

Osman Amador: [00:05:12] Yes. They started it.

Kate Smith: [00:05:14] Wow, wow. How good. And where do you sell all your products? This variety of products.

Osman Amador: [00:05:23] We sell all the products I grow, 100% in the farmers markets. We are available at many markets for those who want to visit us. We are there to assist you. We are, I don't know if I should mention the names of the markets...?

Kate Smith: [00:05:46] Oh yeah, it would be good, for people to find you. Right?

Osman Amador: [00:05:52] Aha. Okay, I'm going to start from Tuesday to Sunday. All markets are from Tuesday to Sunday. On Tuesday we are at the Renton Farmers Market from 3 to 7. And we're also at Crossroads Farmers Market from 12 to 6. And we're going to be in Tacoma. The address I do not have exactly, but it is in east Tacoma and they are going to change location this year, from 3 to 7. And we're going to be in Lakewood from 2 to 6 in the afternoon. On Wednesday we are in Steilacoom, you can find us there, "Amador Farmer." And we're also going to be in Lake Stevens this year, I don't have the address. On Thursday we are at the Queen Anne's Farmers Market, from 3 to 7. Also in Tacoma, from 10 to 2 in the afternoon on Thursdays. And also at South Lake Union in downtown Seattle, there from 10 to 2 in the afternoon. We are also there on Tuesdays. I don't remember the address very well, but we are there Tuesdays. On Fridays we are in Juanita. And on Saturdays we have more markets in different parts. One in Issaquah and another in Shoreline, in Maple Valley, in Des Moines, Federal Way, in Puyallup and Vancouver. We are full on Saturdays. And also in Vancouver, because Saturday and Sunday is a very good market for people who live near Oregon. It is a very large market and very stocked with different varieties. There you can find us. Or also if a customer would like to come to the farm and pick their own tomatoes, they are welcome. We are here to serve them with great pleasure. It could be on Mondays or Wednesdays. We can receive them here in the house, if someone wants to come, they are welcome.

Kate Smith: [00:08:18] Wow. You sell in many farmers markets, right? In farmers markets everywhere in the state, almost.

Osman Amador: [00:08:28] Yes, we only lack the Spokane side.

Kate Smith: [00:08:30] Maybe in the years to come. Right?

Osman Amador: [00:08:36] Yes, it's a bit complicated because it's a different route. On the Seattle side, because there is only one route, we can take everything in the same vehicle for two markets and that is cheaper, and also worker can obtain a hotel for four people. It's easier.

Kate Smith: [00:09:01] Wow! Yes, a lot of details...

Osman Amador: [00:09:03] Yes.

Kate Smith: [00:09:05] ...to sell like this. And wow! You have been selling in farmers markets for years. Yes?

Osman Amador: [00:09:12] It started in 2013, practically this is our ninth year, it is nine years since we have been working in the farmers markets and it is something we like and every day we want to grow more. I started working, just me and my wife; my children were small. And so we hired a friend, another friend. Right now it is a business with pure family, my brothers work, four men and two women. And my sisters-in-law, my brothers' wives and my nephews and my children, my wife, all work. In a total we are 16 workers who are on the farm and all from the same family. So we all work with the same love and because we like to work the field.

Kate Smith: [00:10:12] And a little more of the story. How and why did you start working in agriculture initially?

Osman Amador: [00:10:25] That's a very, very good question. I'm from Honduras and my whole family is from Honduras. My wife is from Mexico, but well, in Honduras we worked in the fields, growing corn, beans, rice and coffee, which are crops that grow in Honduras. We worked the field differently than here, but we grew up up in the field, we were born in the countryside, we are from the earth, we love the land. But I arrived in Phoenix, Arizona when I arrived from Honduras, and in Phoenix it is very hot, very desert, totally. A different environment from here in Washington. And when I came to the Yakima Valley and looked at all the crops, I felt like, like I was in my land, in my habitat. And it's something that struck me. I have loved this valley since I arrived and my dream is... it was one day to be able to have the opportunity to cultivate the land here. I started working in

storage, in the rows, cutting apples, pressing, pruning, everything... all field work. But that's when I started going to help a friend sell in the farmers markets on Saturdays. I worked in storage from Monday to Friday, and on Saturdays I went to help him sell in the markets in Seattle, and I liked it, I liked it a lot, and with him, because I learned how to work and everything. The market rules and everything. I saw it as something very impossible for me, for me to be able to sell in the farmers markets, or to have what he grew, because I didn't have the knowledge to grow tomatoes here in the United States. Although I worked the field, but here it is totally different. The soil is different, the fertilizer is different, everything is different. With him I learned a lot and then I rented a piece of land, 2 acres in Sunnyside, and then I moved to Moxee, and in Moxee I also had another two acres of land. And with them I began to work and to sell little by little. And little by little we were planting more and more produce and right now we have a wide variety of produce. That's what... what led me to do this, especially because I like fresh fruits and vegetables. I love to pluck a radish and eat it there from the soil. Not with soil on it, but so fresh. But that's why I was passionate about doing this, first for our food and then we saw that it is also a way to sustain ourselves economically and we had already started as a business. We always try to give the best to have the best, the best quality and at a good price so that all those who taste our food, by the grace of God, until now we have been very successful. We always try to have quality in the markets and a fair price where we all benefit.

Kate Smith: [00:14:06] Wow! Congratulations and thank you very much for that, because then people can eat these fresh and good quality produce. Good job.

Osman Amador: [00:14:18] Thank you. And thanks also to all the managers who have had patience for us. I started going to a few farmers market conferences, thanks also to you, there I met you, you interpreted for me. Because it's been a bit difficult because of the language. I didn't know any English, nothing, nothing. And here it is pure English. And at the conferences, I learned a lot about how markets are managed, techniques to be able to attract customers, and also most of the market rules. And thanks also to Colleen. Colleen Donovan, many know her. She has helped me a lot and she has had a lot of patience. When I have worried she has scolded me, but I thank her very much because that has helped me grow. I want to be successful, so I am always willing to take in opinions or advice or whatever I have to do to improve our customer service. And to have managers happy, salespeople happy, and us happy.

Kate Smith: [00:15:38] Everyone happy. Yes. Well, you are an inspiration to everyone who wants to start their own orchards and own farms as well. And also thank you for recognizing the importance of the network, right? From the network of managers, from the farmers markets, and all those who support the people and the agricultural producers. And that's why we're here too, with our podcast, to share these stories and guide others, others in the future. Thank you very much, Osman.

Osman Amador: [00:16:28] You're welcome. That's the goal of sharing a little of our experience and encouraging others to also grow fresh vegetables and fruit to feed ourselves in Washington state. There is a lot of demand.

Kate Smith: [00:16:46] Oh yes! There is a lot of demand. Yes.

Osman Amador: [00:16:48] Yes. But we can't do it alone.

Kate Smith: [00:16:51] No, no. Well, now let's continue with some questions related to the topic. The theme of today's episode is worker training in produce safety and quality. We recognize that workers have a very important role to play in taking care of and avoiding product contamination with the Good Agricultural Practices that you practice. And also, that we never, ever want people to get sick, right? From eating your produce. I know that you and your family take care of the quality and safety of your products to sell better quality products, as you said, and also at a good price. So, speaking of training for other producers, or maybe those who are starting their businesses and are going to hire employees, whether they are from family or others outside the family, this could be a guide as well. So, for you, how do you train your workers in produce safety and produce quality?

Osman Amador: [00:18:22] Ah, good, good. That's a good question. This is a process and I believe that if we keep workers happy and satisfied, they will do a good job. That's the most... the basics. That they are happy with the work they are doing and that they love the work. Because there are workers who only want to earn their money but are not willing to learn and follow rules. So we can't work with them. So, to start training people, we must look for those who love what they are doing, who do it for love and not just for income. In my case I have every year, well, not every year, but rather two or three times

a year, I have a meeting with the workers, especially before starting the season as now, in this month of April, we have a meeting with all the workers, because they are the same as the family. And sometimes it's good and sometimes it's bad because, because we're all family, all of a sudden we want to skip the rules or we want to lower the tolerance. But here in the house we keep very, very separate what is friendship, what is family and what is work. So every year we have a formal meeting where we talk about all the requirements and all the rules that there are to be able to work at Amador Farms. And in that meeting we touch on several points and one of the most important is to maintain produce quality, to keep clean what we sell. It is food, it's not wood, it's not another kind of business. We are selling food. Our motto is that if you like to buy it, others will like it.

Osman Amador: [00:20:43] If you went to the market, what kind of fruit would you choose to eat? To buy? And how much are you willing to pay for that fruit? So that's our motto. If you like it, someone else will like it. So there we focus on equipment cleanliness and also what it is... where... The display where we accommodate things there in the market, the vehicle in which we are transporting the produce, everything, and also in the field. That is, there are four different stages or four different places where we have to ensure safety, starting from where the produce is, and then in the equipment where it is going to be transported, and also in the vehicle, also in the place where the produce is... Sorry, the word I'm looking for is, exposed, for people to see. So we focus a lot on that and thank God so far we have been successful. There have been mistakes, not everything always works as you plan, but we have been correcting errors and we are improving our technique to have produce quality in the markets. One of the techniques in my hands is that I plant a lot of tomato, for example, and from there we choose the best one to be able to take to the market. There is a lot of tomato that is thrown away and that is deformed, or too ripe, that can no longer be used, that is simply thrown away. We try to bring the best possible quality to the markets.

Kate Smith: [00:22:53] Yes, then you take care of the produce from harvest to sale, right? Until the customers, consumers, buy your produce to take home. Very important. You talked about the importance of cleaning and disinfection as well, and all the procedures that you have. So in these worker trainings you talk about these issues, right?

Osman Amador: [00:23:33] Exactly, we talked about these issues and also about... for example... this is one of the issues, specifically, what is produce care and how to keep

the produce healthy, safe, and in good condition to sell. There are several issues that we talk about, among others, following the market rules. Not all markets have the same rules, they are similar, but they change a little. So we focus a lot on that, on all of us obeying the market rules, working with the market managers, and also training workers to serve the people. There are some customers who are a bit difficult to deal with, and the customer is always right. And most of our customers, thank God, are very kind, they always thank us for the quality of the produce, but there are others who are not very kind and always want cheaper produce and for us to give them things, so we train people about that. And also how to adapt. Especially right now with the pandemic, it has been a bit difficult to survive, but thank God we have gone through the most difficult part, I think. And this was also another type of training that was most special for the workers, because customers could not self-serve; we had to serve the people the things they wanted. And before I forget, also another of the very important things: Many people ask us if they can eat the fruit or if they want to grab an apple or something, if they can eat it like this without washing. My answer is no, not because it is contaminated, but being so exposed where it is, many people touch several products as they choose, so sometimes I recommend that everyone wash the produce they are going to eat. So all this... we prepare ourselves ahead of time and thank God all workers are prepared to sell. All workers are so prepared to sell and to work in the fields.

Kate Smith: [00:26:23] Does everyone do all the work there on the farm? All the different jobs?

Osman Amador: [00:26:29] Yes, all the workers. For example, on Monday, we're all in the house, we're all working on the ranch. Some of us are picking vegetables, some of us are picking fruit, some of us are cleaning something, some of us are replanting, but everyone knows what fieldwork is. And on Tuesday a group goes to sell and returns on Tuesday and continues to work on Wednesday in the house, and the group that stayed in the house goes up on Wednesday, and so we are taking turns. So we all work the field and we all sell and everyone is trained to do what has to be done both in the field and in the market stalls.

Kate Smith: [00:27:20] Very important. And you offer the training in Spanish? Do you all speak Spanish or do you have to offer it in more than one language?

Osman Amador: [00:27:31] Yes, everyone speaks in Spanish. Nobody... in fact, most do not speak English. Just those who are in school, the little ones who are in school, and from there we all speak pure Spanish, but they get it and understand us. Just by telling them the price and they understand us or have patience, or they also sometimes teach the same workers how to write a product, maybe it is not well written, and they themselves teach them. They have been our teachers, the customers. But yes, the trainings are all in Spanish, and then everyone understands it very well. And if suddenly a worker is not complying with the rules or... or they don't put much care into the work, we talk to him and tell him that, because we have to look for another. Or maybe he focuses on another job, maybe his gift or his charisma is for another task. There are some that like the field and others that don't. So we try to have people who are happy here. And one of the things is trying to make everyone earn well, everyone... let's be happy with what we're earning. So, if they are happy with what they earn, they like the work because they know that they are doing well there. Then everyone knows the rules and also knows that if they don't follow the rules they are going to be replaced by others who want to work.

Kate Smith: [00:29:21] Sounds good. It sounds like you've started a work culture with your workers, that everyone takes care of the ranch if it were their own. Right?

Osman Amador: [00:29:36] That's right. All. Everyone works in the house as if it were their own business.

Kate Smith: [00:29:43] Oh, how good, how good. And Osman, another topic. Also in these worker trainings, do they include the topic of hand washing, too?

Osman Amador: [00:29:59] Yes, yes. That is something very important in the markets where we are serving because we are touching money constantly. And because people can self-pick their produce, it is in the bags, then we don't touch the product. When we expose it or we are... we put it on the table and everything, there we put it. And then everyone washes their hands and ready to attend. But also on the tables we have disinfectants, even if it is not the time of pandemic, we always have disinfectants at hand, nearby to be disinfecting our hands. Or we also have a faucet with water to wash our hands or sometimes someone wants to wash their produce, they want to buy an apple, for example for a child, then they say, "Where can I wash the apple?" We have water there and we wash the apple and with a napkin we give it to them so they can eat it

without any problem. And in the house, here in the house because there is a place where we are working with the produce to take to Seattle, we all try to keep it neat, to take produce such as tomatoes, pumpkins, cucumbers, melon, watermelon. That is, since we pick it, likewise we put it in a box and it also goes to ... the chemicals, not anything, not water, not anything, as it comes out of there, sometimes it even comes with a bit of soil from the field. What is onion, garlic or lettuce, cabbage, all that, if we have to wash it then... because it looks more beautiful washed. All good.

Kate Smith: [00:31:54] Ah, how good. I've seen your products in the markets and yes, they look pretty. Another question, what practices or procedures are the most difficult for workers to remember? And do they require additional reinforcement?

Osman Amador: [00:32:15] In the field or selling?

Kate Smith: [00:32:20] Whatever.

Osman Amador: [00:32:23] Okay. Well, in the field. What's a bit difficult for us is that the produce we harvest has no pesticides, no herbicides or any kind of this. So we have to clean everything by hand with a hoe and that gets quite complicated, right? But we have found a whole... well, no, no, it's not that we've found them, we just have... plastic. Under the plastic go the lines that carry the water for irrigation. And that's a plastic line, 54 feet wide and we can put it along whatever we want, it depends on how the furrow is being made. And there we plant the seedling inside. So that helps us with several things. It's a bit expensive, but it's very efficient. It helps us so that no hills happen and we don't have to clean. Other than that, the water goes to the plant, it's not wetting other areas where we want it to get wet and not much water is being used. And also we aren't pooling water. So where the water is falling, there is the plastic and the plastic does not let hills grow and that gives us an advantage. And apart from that, the same plastic helps the fruit ripen. By the heat of the plastic, it matures much better and much sweeter, more delicious and also helps to prevent diseases such as fungus or bacteria that grow on plants, this plastic prevents them from developing there. And before planting, we always sow each bush or each tray, we sow it in trays, we put the seed in a tray and there we plant it.

[00:34:34] Before being transplanted into the field, I give it a spray with... it can be with garlic, with organic products, with garlic or spicy peppers of habanero or serrano or any

type of chili that one wants to use. We use the super chili here and mix it with garlic and make an organic insecticide and spray that. And that helps so that during plant development no pests stick to it. And also on the ground, because the soil is... one looks when the soil can attract fungi or when not, if the soil is very sandy it is easier to work it and the fungi do not appear. When the soil is like mud, that suddenly tends to attract fungus. Then you have to be careful with the water, not putting on too much water so that the fungi don't develop. And if you see fungus, then you try to eliminate it. There are many ways to do it, but we, all workers are prepared for that. If they are the ones who are picking, they are looking at the bush, if it is diseased or if it needs help, everyone is looking for that, then they take care of it. If I'm not there, they do. I have two people who are trained to use spray if needed, especially with fruit trees. I took the classes to get the pesticide management license and at the same time share with them so that they know what is being done and what has to be done in each type of disease.

Kate Smith: [00:36:40] Wow! Thank you very much, Osman, for sharing all your knowledge and practices. So, very interesting to listen to and I hope also interesting to everyone listening to our podcast. Thanks a lot. Well, we have some questions to close that are a little more fun. You already answered a little bit of the first one, but maybe you can tell us again a little more about. What do you like most about agriculture?

Osman Amador: [00:37:29] What I like most about agriculture is watching seedlings grow. I love seedlings, to see how they develop, how they grow and I like to see them get healthy, strong. And when the produce is there I love to eat there in the produce field. It is the part that I like to see the most – plant development. I think I have it in my blood. I love that.

Kate Smith: [00:38:07] Yes, yes, yes. And now, in your spare time. What do you like to do outside of work?

Osman Amador: [00:38:17] In the summer I really like to go camping with the family. We go to the forest to get away. And in free time, for example, on a day that we don't work, we like to go to the park. I really like playing soccer. I have a son who likes to play soccer too, so we play in the park.

Kate Smith: [00:38:42] Oh, that's good! I love camping too and going to the parks. Oh good.

Osman Amador: [00:38:51] Almost every year, we make time to go away with family and all the workers. Sometimes in some markets we warn them that on a specific Saturday, for example, we won't be there. And in this year because July 4 is going to be a Monday, it seems to me, so the Tuesday markets this year we are not going to do, which would be on July 5, because all the vendors go with us to the mountains to camp.

Kate Smith: [00:39:26] Oh, that's great! Yes, I think that is very good and that they will enjoy it a lot.

Osman Amador: [00:39:34] Yes, to recharge.

Kate Smith: [00:39:36] Yes. Very, very important for all workers and producers during such a long summer, no? Oh, how good. Ok, the next question: If you could obtain a skill instantly, what would you choose?

Osman Amador: [00:39:57] Oh. If I could pick a skill, I would instantly choose to how grow more produce, how to grow bigger tomatoes, how to grow bigger watermelons, make the radish bigger, beets bigger. That's what it would be.

Kate Smith: [00:40:28] That would be very good.

Osman Amador: [00:40:30] I love produce.

Kate Smith: [00:40:33] Oh yeah. And you already told us at the beginning where people can find you in the markets, in the farmers markets. But also, is there a way that people could connect with you as well, with Amador Farms? On the Internet? or how could they connect?

Osman Amador: [00:40:57] Yes. There are many people who write to us in... by email, which is what I use the most, email or Instagram. I hardly use Facebook, I don't use it. I'm not very good at taking pictures and uploading them. I know I need to improve that. There are a lot of people who say to me, "Why don't you upload photos? You have very good

produce here at the ranch." And no, no, we haven't uploaded many photos. But you can find us by... sending an email to amadorfarms94@gmail.com. That's our email and yes, I'm almost always answering all the emails people send us. A lot of people maybe want to buy by boxes, by wholesale, maybe they want four or five boxes of tomatoes. Or about two boxes of chilies, or about two boxes of cherry, so wholesale, then there is a more affordable price if you buy this wholesale. You can also call us at the number 509-594-7098, that's my cell phone number. Sometimes I'm busy and can't answer or I don't hear the phone. But people can text me. Leave me your name and what the purpose of the message is. I return calls and we are here to serve people with great pleasure. If people also wanted to come to the farm it would be on Mondays or Wednesdays, as I said before. And the other days I'm not on the farm because I'm selling or working outside the ranch, or we're busier. It gets a little more complicated. And on Sundays because practically no, no, no, we do not get involved in work. Nobody but the workers selling and the others because we are resting and we do not want to know anything about the ranch.

Kate Smith: [00:43:17] No.

Osman Amador: [00:43:18] So. But we can make an exception as well. If someone says I can't on Monday, I can't on Wednesday, only on Sunday, we can make an exception. It is not a law that has to be so, but preferably...

Kate Smith: [00:43:32] Oh! But if we want to let them rest, right? Well thank you very much, Osman, for all your time and for sharing knowledge, your experience and to give inspiration to others as well. Thank you so much.

Osman Amador: [00:43:54] You're welcome. Thank you. For me this is a pleasure. It is a joy. I do it with great pleasure, with great joy. Some may not dare start their own business because they feel that they are not trained or it is very difficult. Yes you can, yes you can do it. We just need to help them to do so. Also, if someone is interested and wants to start and wants more guidance, or wants tips on where to buy seeds, where to buy fertilizer, where to buy plastic, lines or the irrigation system, all that, feel free to call me and I will help you with great pleasure. Gladly. If you don't speak Spanish, don't worry, we have interpreters. I have my son who speaks good English and Spanish, so we can try to help. We are here to help and thank you. I have learned a lot from other farmers

and I know that I can also teach many to excel and be successful in what they want to do.

Kate Smith: [00:45:10] Oh, thank you, Osman. Incredible. Thanks a lot.

Kate Smith: [00:45:18] (Music) This episode of the Farm Walks podcast has the generous support of the Food and Drug Administration, FDA, of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, as part of a financial assistance award. The content is by the authors and does not necessarily represent the official opinion or endorsement of the FDA or the U.S. government.

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:45:56] Hello everyone. My name is Jacqui Gordon Núñez. I am the Director of Training and Education with the Washington State Tree Fruit Association. I am in Yakima, Washington, and you can find information about our educational program on our website www.wstfa.org. Or on our Facebook page. When you put WSTFA on Facebook, you'll find us there.

Kate Smith: [00:46:25] Welcome Jacqui! Thank you so much for being with us today talking on our Farm Walks podcast. Welcome!

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:46:35] Thank you very much, Kate, for the invitation, very happy to be here and congratulations on this initiative. I think it helps producers a lot.

Kate Smith: [00:46:44] Yeah, okay, thank you very much. Well, I have some questions to start with. Can you tell me a little bit about your role with the WSTFA?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:46:58] Of course. I work for the Washington State Tree Fruit Association. It's basically a non-profit organization that represents all fruit tree growers, specifically apples, pears, and cherries in Washington state. My role is as Director of Education and Training with the association. So, I basically have designed the educational program for fruit tree growers here in Washington. I make training materials such as videos, posters. We also have partnerships with other organizations, with other people, to conduct trainings mainly focused on food safety, worker safety, pesticide safety. And all our programs are in English and Spanish.

Kate Smith: [00:47:57] How good that you have all these resources for all the growers there in the area and throughout Washington state.

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:48:05] Yes, yes. We really like being able to help producers with their training efforts.

Kate Smith: [00:48:12] Oh, yes, yes, yes. Well, that's why we're here. And now we continue with some questions related to today's topic, worker training on produce safety and quality. We just spoke with Osman Ruiz of Amador Farms about the importance of training their workers to avoid product contamination. And we've also just heard more about produce safety, FSMA regulations, and the new fresh produce safety standard that producers have to comply with. Jacqui, can you share a little bit about that, like what is the standard for fresh produce safety and what does safety mean?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:49:05] Sure. Well, to explain the term safety, I would first like to make a differentiation between two terms that are often used interchangeably, and these are "food safety" and "food security." The reason they are used interchangeably is because "food security" in Spanish translates directly into English as "food safety," which is wrong because the two terms are completely different. Food security refers to the availability of food for a certain population, while food safety is the production of food for... without harming or causing disease to its consumers. That's why there's a phrase that says, "There is no food security without food safety." We cannot offer food to a certain population if these foods are going to cause them harm or disease. So this is the main goal of safety, the production of food that is not going to make consumers sick. Now, with respect to the standard, the fresh produce safety standard belongs to a law that is known as the Food Safety Modernization Act or FSMA. This law was signed in 2011 by President Barack Obama and is a law about food production and focuses on preventing food contamination. And this law has seven different rules. One of its standards is the fresh produce safety standard, which is also known as PSR. This standard is the first federally mandated standard for the cultivation, harvesting, storage, and packaging of fresh produce, i.e., fruits and vegetables.

Kate Smith: [00:51:15] Wow. Very, very important all of that. And also the point of talking about the difference and the need for produce safety to maintain food security as well. Thanks for sharing all that, Jacqui. And I know it's for some producers this information is

going to be new. Or maybe our listeners already recognize the importance of that because they always take care of produce safety and are in the process of understanding how to comply with these new standards and inspections in the future and all that. So, thank you for sharing that. Also for those who are thinking that in the State we have different sizes of farms and orchards. Some that are large-scale, some smaller and some sell wholesale completely, and some sell directly through direct marketing, as well as directly to their customers in farmers markets and other examples like that. With this rule there are some qualified exemptions for small-scale farms, right? Can you explain a little bit about that? Does everyone have to comply with all parts of the standard? And for those who are small-scale or direct marketing, what do they have to do? How is it?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:53:10] Well, like any rule, FSMA has its exceptions. So, as you said earlier, Kate, this rule applies to various sizes of orchards. But there are some orchards that do not have to comply with the standard according to their characteristics. So, one of the exceptions of FSMA is precisely the qualified exemption, which is a bit confusing honestly, I have to say. Their requirements are a bit confusing, but basically a vegetable orchard that is going to qualify for this exception must meet two requirements. The first, that the orchard should have food sales on average less than \$ 500,000 per year, adjusted for inflation and the average of the last three years of sales. And on the other hand, direct sales of this orchard must be to qualified users and must exceed sales to all buyers combined during the previous three years. Now it is very important to know that a qualified user can be either the direct consumer of the food, as you had said, Kate, the markets, which are known as farmers markets here. Or a restaurant or a retail food establishment. Now, when sold directly to a restaurant, it has to be located in the same state or Indian reservation as the orchard, or no more than 275 miles away from the orchard.

Kate Smith: [00:54:48] And yes, also then, for those who have their farms, their small-scale orchards or who sell directly to these users, because I think they only have to keep records of their sales to show that, right?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:55:10] Yes.

Kate Smith: [00:55:10] And also, do you have to identify your address or some information at the place of sale?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:55:23] Yes. Even if they qualify for this exception, it doesn't mean they don't have to meet any requirements. They still have to meet certain modified requirements. So, in this case, they have to indicate the name and full business address of the orchard where the fresh agricultural product is produced, either on the label or at the place where the purchase is made. And also these orchards have to maintain documentation, the records that are necessary to comply with FSMA. Despite the fact that they are exempt from complying with the entire standard, with all the requirements, it is recommended that all orchards, no matter how small, maintain food safety, because this is something that serves them both to maintain healthy and good quality produce, and also by offering their customers a product that will not cause them diseases.

Kate Smith: [00:56:26] Yes. Thank you, Jacqui. And already many producers know these practices as Good Agricultural Practices, which are used for their GAP certification. We already recognize that these practices are what you who are listening to as producers, you are already taking care of, you are already practicing to continue taking care of everyone, no matter, how Jacqui said, no matter the size of your operation, everyone is being careful of produce safety. For many reasons, right?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:57:10] Yes, exactly. This is not a new concept. This is something that farmers have handled for a long time. The rule just makes it a little more formal.

Kate Smith: [00:57:20] Exactly. Yes. Well, to continue. Jacqui, you have supported many orchards in Washington state. As for general employee training, what have been the biggest challenges for farmers in training workers? And in this example, especially about produce safety.

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:57:48] Yes, of course. Well, we offer trainings to many farmers and their workers, and many of them, when they come to our trainings, tell us what the main challenges are that they face when training their employees. First of all, we talk about the time they have or do not have to be able to do the training. Because an orchard is in constant movement, there is a lot of work, all times of the year, of course, it is much busier when they are going to do the harvest. They work almost all day, every day, so it is very difficult to find time to carry out training. On the other hand, it is a

challenge for them to do the training in the language that their employees understand, especially here in Washington, many workers in the orchard and in the packaging are Hispanic and speak Spanish. Many of them understand English but feel much more comfortable learning in their own language. They feel comfortable asking questions, participating when the training is in Spanish. So this is a challenge for employers who do not know Spanish and who have to do the language training of their employees. We also have our state and in our industry a variation in the level of literacy. There are people who have completed only elementary school or have finished only part of school, there are others who have studied at the university, who even have more advanced certifications.

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [00:59:35] So employers have to do training that is general and understandable for all these different levels of literacy that exist in the industry. Another challenge is that there is a difference between the hygiene practices and habits of some people with respect to the requirements of the standard. I can give you an example, Kate. For example, being from Ecuador, we in Ecuador do not have a practice of putting toilet paper in the toilet after using the bathroom, because the pipes of our toilets are not strong enough to handle the paper. Here in the United States it's different. Here you put the toilet paper in the toilet. So there are some workers who don't know this because it's not their practice, it's not their culture. So very important is to know the culture and hygiene practices of employees to make them understand how the standards requirements are different and why. Having to modify your hygiene practices a little is necessary to be able to have food safety.

Kate Smith: [01:00:44] Yes. Well, many challenges, and later we can talk about some resources or materials, that could perhaps help and support producers with these trainings.

Jacqui Gordon Nunez: [01:00:59] Of course.

Kate Smith: [01:01:01] What topics should you include in health and hygiene trainings to avoid contamination? And also, how often should they train their employees?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:01:14] Well, the standard requires that trainings have principles of hygiene, food safety. So these hygiene principles are basically what we teach workers when we tell them what the contamination routes are, especially these that come

directly from the workers. That is why we teach them to wear clean clothes and shoes, to avoid contact with animals especially just before harvest, to wash their hands. How and when washing your hands is extremely important, taking off jewelry, notifying supervisors if you are sick. Specifically on the topic of illness, training should include how to recognize the symptoms of foodborne illness. Workers should know that if they have diarrhea, vomiting, fever, if they have a yellow face or hands it is a possible sign of a food illness. Then they can't harvest if they're sick. Similarly, if they have a wound, if they suffer a wound, they have to immediately go heal that wound, wash their hands, dispose of any produce that is contaminated with blood, wash and disinfect the tools they have been using to harvest, and cover their wound before harvesting again. And it is also important to do any other type of training that is relevant to the position of the workers.

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:02:47] For example, if a worker is going to drive a tractor, this worker must know tractor driving safety. And the standard calls for specific training for the people who are going to carry out the harvest. They have to know how to identify risks of contamination before and after, of... before and during harvest. They have to know that they should never harvest produce that is in the ground or produce that has animal feces and that they should always use clean harvest containers and bags. Training should be done when a worker is new. When they start working in the orchard, it is very necessary that they receive training. They need to be trained before the harvest season and we usually recommend that if you can, every day at least have a five-minute conversation before you start harvesting. You can have a poster in the bathroom, on the walls outside the bathroom and have a five-minute meeting with the supervisor and the workers, and talk very briefly about how to wash your hands, how to maintain hygiene during the harvest. It's going to help workers understand why it's so necessary to be asked for these requirements.

Kate Smith: [01:04:11] And listening to all these issues, I think more about how important everyone is, whether they are family or not. Everyone who works in the orchard, on the farm, has a lot of responsibility to be careful of produce safety. And Osman also said that it's so important to create a culture where everyone feels like the operation is theirs, that they can take care of everything and keep up with the responsibilities and know who to report problems to, the problems and everything, all of that. So yes, Wow! How important workers and employees are to produce safety.

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:05:09] Yes, and precisely, that's exactly what we've talked about for a long time, creating a culture of food safety. The training is not only for the employees, but also the food safety policies have to be complied with by the owners of the company, supervisors, visitors who go to the orchard. Everyone is responsible for complying with safety standards.

Kate Smith: [01:05:38] Okay let's continue. What recommendations do you have for farmers to do their trainings in the most effective way for workers? For example, teaching methods or as you have already spoken, facilitation in several languages. Other recommendations?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:05:59] Yes, well, it's very important for employers to know what the principles of adult education are, it's very different to educate children than to educate adults, isn't it? Adults learn best when the information is clear, when they understand why they are being trained. Why they are asked to wash their hands for 20 seconds, why they are asked not to be in contact with food or to use the bathroom correctly. So, understanding why is very important for adults to be able to do their job. On the other hand, the training must be relevant to the work and the tasks they are going to perform. That is why we talked before that training should be directed according to the tasks of the workers. If a worker does not drive a tractor, no, no, he will not be interested in learning about tractor safety. Training must have very clear expectations, the shorter and more effective and direct the training will be, the more effective and better understood by workers. And we must recognize that all people have different learning methods. There are people who are very visual, who like to watch videos, who like to see posters, drawings, graphics to learn.

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:07:21] There are other people who learn better by reading. They can be provided with technical learning sheets, they can be given books or they can even read the entire standard and thus learn better. There are other people who learn by doing and well, I think that's the case for most adults. Most of us like to practice and do things so we can learn. Then you can do things like contests, for example, painting people's hands with a marker that is washable and telling one to wash their hands only with water to another to only rub their hands for 10 seconds, another for 20 seconds with soap and water. See who washed, who could get the mark off faster. There are other materials, for example, Gol Germ. This is a lotion that is not visible to the naked eye, but

with ultraviolet light it shines and is a very useful material for practicing hand washing. So, the more workers are given the opportunity to practice and do activities, the more easily they will learn.

Kate Smith: [01:08:29] Okay. I know I learn more by doing too. That's right. Are there any resources or materials you've seen that are useful to farmers and producers in training their employees?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:08:47] Yes, well, just a moment ago I commented on Glo Germ. This is a lotion or talc that can be placed on the hands, it can even be placed on the fruit. And obviously this is more effective to do in an enclosed place. So in the orchard that is not always possible, unless you do a training, a day of training. It takes a little time, you need to turn off the lights so that you can see with the ultraviolet light as the lotion shines under the ultraviolet light. But it's excellent. It is an excellent resource for teaching not only how to wash your hands properly, but how pathogens transfer from one place to another so easily. But with the Washington State Tree Food Association we have also developed many education materials, such as videos, training videos in English and Spanish. Very short, maximum of ten minutes about food safety in orchards, in packhouses. We have training videos for people who are just starting an orchard. We have posters for visits, posters on the prevention of cross-contamination, principles of hygiene and health. Also Washington State University has fact sheets and recordings about seminars that are very useful. The Department of Agriculture also has posters, it also has summaries and graphic charts of how the standard works. So I think there are a lot of institutions here in Washington that make great educational materials.

Kate Smith: [01:10:34] Yes, and how important, yes, that producers don't feel alone in doing all that, that there are a lot of resources available to support them.

Jacqui Gordon Nunez: [01:10:47] Yes.

Kate Smith: [01:10:47] Wow, yes. Now, speaking of produce safety training, does the Washington State Tree Fruit Association offer produce safety training opportunities?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:11:05] Yes, yes. We have funding from the state to do at least one training in each language per year. We don't do more because we have already

covered almost all fruit tree farmers in Washington, yet we offer at least one per year in Yakima or Wenatchee, in each language. And Washington State University also offers this training both virtually and in person. They offer several trainings a year, if there are the resources to offer this course. Something very important for farmers to know is that the standard requires that at least one supervisor in each orchard have training recognized by the Food and Drug Administration, that is the FDA. They require this training for now. The fresh Produce Alliance course, known as PSA, is the only training recognized by the FDA. So, we recommend to farmers that now, while we have State financing, to take advantage and take the course, because when inspectors go to the orchard, the first thing they are going to ask for is the PSA certificate. It's the first thing they're going to ask of them. At least one supervisor for each ranch should have this training and take advantage now that the costs are low while we have financing, because in one or two years that we no longer have the financing they will go up a lot in price. So it is very important that they have this certificate.

Kate Smith: [01:12:52] And where can you look for the date information for these trainings from you?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:12:59] Well, if they're... If they are members of the association, we send emails almost every week with the dates of our educational programs, but you can also find this information on our website. www.wstfa.org. And also our partners like Washington State University or the Department of Agriculture publicize the training dates. Normally we only do our trainings in the off-season which is in the winter when farmers are not busy with the harvest. So February, March or maximum early April is when we have these courses. We already finished the season this year, but we will possibly have another course next year, around the winter dates.

Kate Smith: [01:13:57] Yes, and also for Washington State University trainings, everyone can visit the foodsafety.wsu.edu website and there are all the events and trainings that they are going to offer. And the Produce Safety Alliance website also has all the trainings they are going to offer in the country, right, Jacqui? There you can see them all.

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:14:39] Yes, even in other countries. They put up a list. Yes. They put a complete list of all the virtual and in-person trainings that are done throughout the United States and outside the country as well.

Kate Smith: [1:14:54] Oh, perfect. There's a lot of information there.

Jacqui Gordon Nunez: [01:14:57] Yes.

Kate Smith: [01:14:58] Well, is there anything else you want to share with producers before we're done?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:15:08] Ah no. Well, again thank you very much, thank you, Kate, for the invitation. If any producer has questions about our educational materials or our courses they can contact me at jacqui@wstfa.org. We can gladly provide USB drives with our videos, we can give them posters that are already printed. We also have an educational portal on our WSTFA website where they can access and watch all our training videos, we even have recordings of trainings we have done in the past, for example how to see water quality. We have trainings on cleaning and sanitizing packaging. All those recordings you can view on our website and you can contact me if you have any questions or need an educational resource.

Kate Smith: [01:16:06] Thank you very much, Jacqui. Thank you for sharing all that information and also to make it a good season for everyone, right?

Jacqui Gordon Núñez: [01:16:16] Yes, yes, hopefully yes. With this very rare weather we've had this week, we hope farmers can have a good harvest this year.

Kate Smith: [01:16:26] Yes. Ok. Thank you, Jacqui.

Kate Smith: [01:16:42] [Music] Please follow our guests today, Amador Farms, on Instagram and Facebook. And Washington State Tree Fruit Association on Facebook as WSTFA. Also our Farm Walks organizers, @tilthalliance and @wsufoodsystems for announcements and resources. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate it, review it and subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcast or where you listen to your favorite podcasts. You can find program notes, the evaluation form and additional links for today's topic on our website, farmwalks.org. Thanks to the entire Farm Walks podcast team, including behind-the-scenes logistics and overall organization by Teri Rakusin and Kate Smith; music by Abacus; website logo and podcast art by Riled Up Goats. And finally to our audio

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Thanks for listening and see you next time.