

Does the industry need a Fresh Produce Safety Centre?

Introduction

As part of the *Fresh Produce Safety – Building a New Paradigm* Project, a primary objective was to scope the feasibility for a dedicated body to identify research needs and provide appropriate food safety solutions for the Australian fresh produce Industry.

The Project has made strong progress towards this objective and it was decided to survey the industry to determine the level of support for the establishment of a Fresh Produce Safety Centre. The survey was sent to the entire list of individuals who have registered to receive regular newsletters. Of the 229 recipients, who represent the full cross section of the fresh produce supply chain, 48% responded to the survey (Figure 1).

Response Rate to the Survey

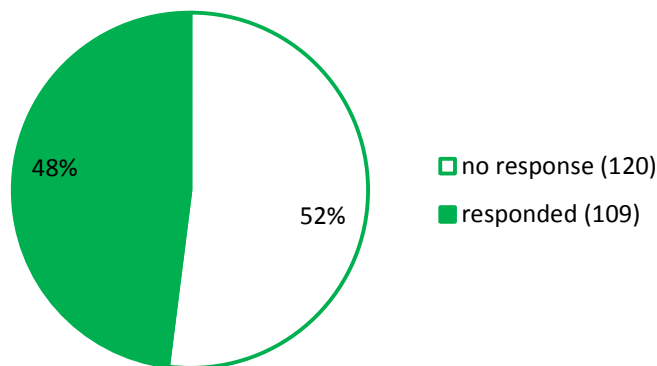


Figure 1. The number of survey responses received was almost 50% (48%).

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Survey Questions

The survey contained questions aimed at gauging industry’s in-principle support for the establishment of a Fresh Produce Safety Centre; whether the University of Sydney was an appropriate ‘base’ for the centre; what should be the overarching role of the centre; and what were the priorities for food safety research.

Survey Results

The highest response rate was received from *grower/packers* and those working in *quality assurance* (14%), with *industry organisation* and *consultancy* the second highest. As the range of categories is between 4 and 14% the overall industry is quite well represented (Figure 2). *Other* was an option provided in case the business the respondent represented fell outside the categories provided. Respondents in the *Other* category included: those that listed themselves as vertically integrated businesses – grower/supplier/wholesaler, as media or as service providers outside the categories listed.

Who Responded to the Survey?

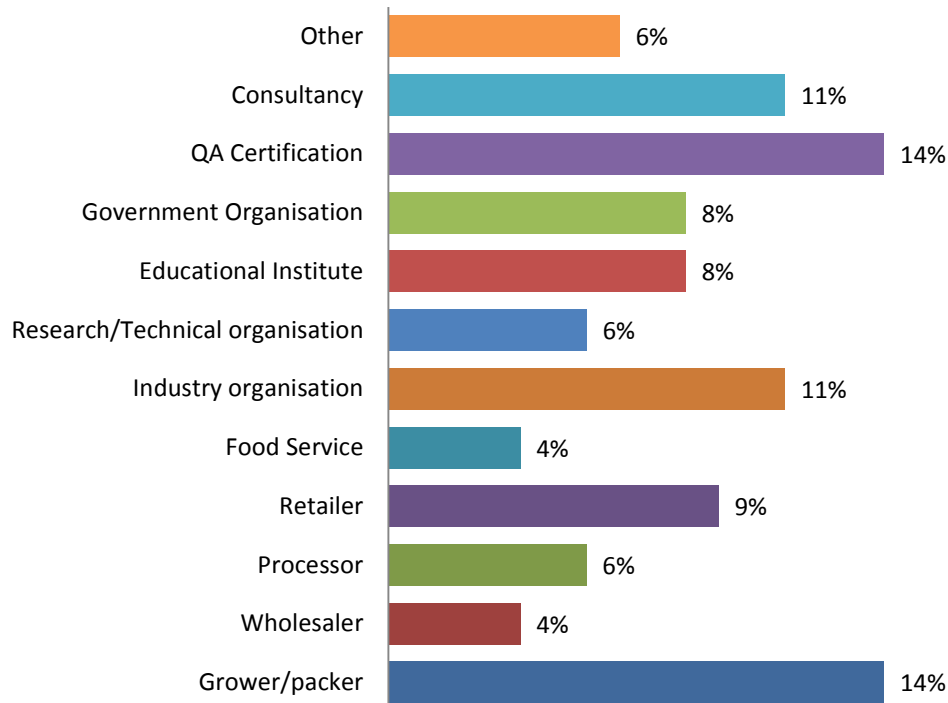


Figure 2. A graph showing the percentages of each sector who responded to the survey.

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From the survey responses, there was overwhelming support for the establishment of the Centre (98%) (Figure 3) and support for it to be housed at the University of Sydney (95%) (Figure 4).

What is the in-principle support for the establishment of a FPSC?

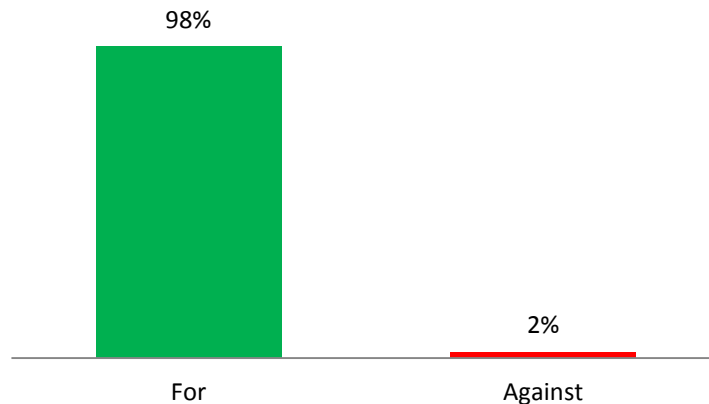


Figure 3. There is strong, in-principle support for the establishment of the Fresh Produce Safety Centre.

What is the level of support for FPSC to be housed at the University of Sydney

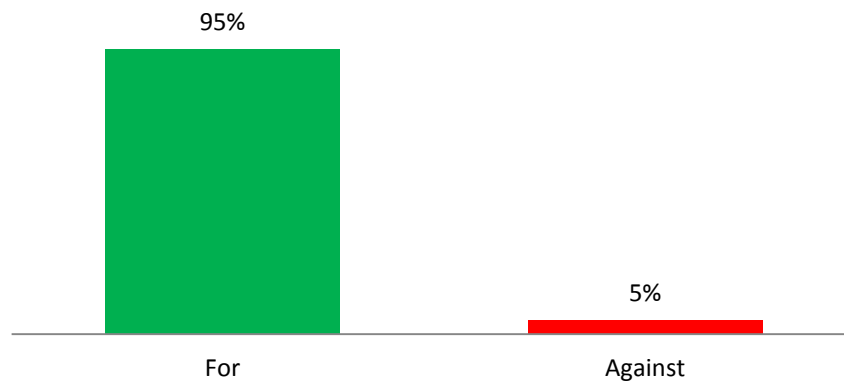


Figure 4. Support for the Fresh Produce Safety Centre to be housed at the University of Sydney.

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Calling for and managing food safety research projects received the highest ranking for the main role of the Centre, while representing the industry on regulatory food safety issues was the least appropriate. Additionally providing industry wide education and information and news on fresh produce safety was seen as an important part of the role of the FPSC, with majority of respondents ranking these outreach roles as 1st, 2nd or 3rd in priority (Figure 5).

Responses to the role of the centre question indicates that industry sees a gap in food safety for research and outreach of research, and will assist in ensuring that the roles of other organisation will not be duplicated.

Several comments from this question highlighted the importance of crisis management training, incident response planning and monitoring, emphasis on effective outreach and training to growers and staff in remote areas. It was also recommended that there is importance in liaising with other national and international food safety bodies. Finally it was recommended that an important goal of the research is to support advocacy activities for the betterment of the industry.

What is the Role for the FPSC?

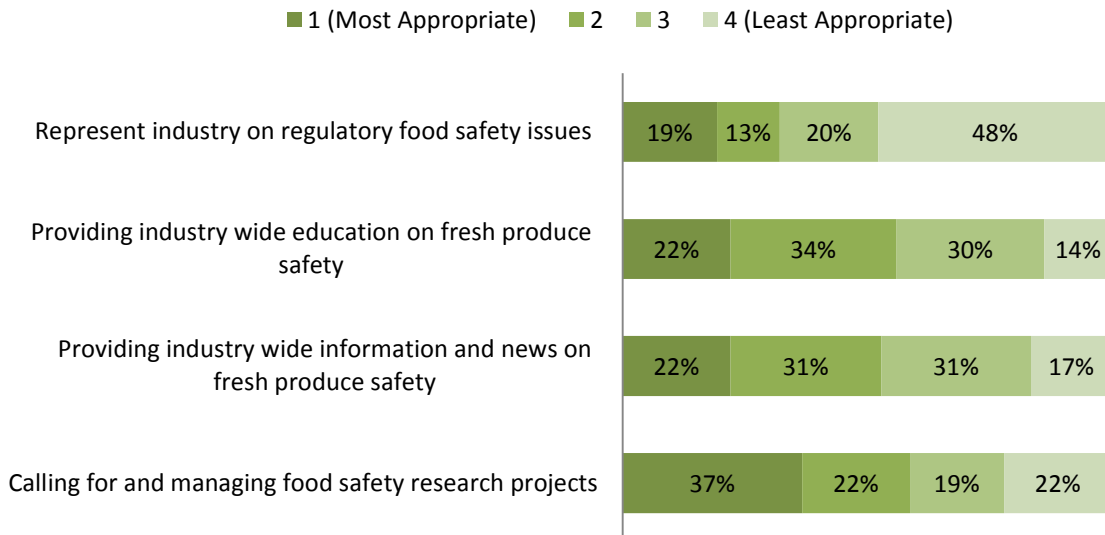


Figure 5. The role of the Fresh Produce Safety Centre is suggested by the industry, to focus on the management of food safety research projects.

Finally the survey asked what the research priorities should be to address the gaps in knowledge on food safety. There were 10 areas listed, and respondents were asked to choose their top 3 priorities. Of all the research areas, the topic most selected was *Microbial contamination on-farm* followed by topics *Pathogens in the postharvest supply chain* and *Water – Postharvest* (Figure 6).

It is vital to mention that the majority of comments given emphasized the importance of effective outreach, education and extension to improve the food safety culture. Other suggestions by respondents included postharvest pathogen ID and management, tracking and traceability products along supply chain and residues in imported foods.

Food Safety Research Priorities for the Australian Fresh Produce Industry

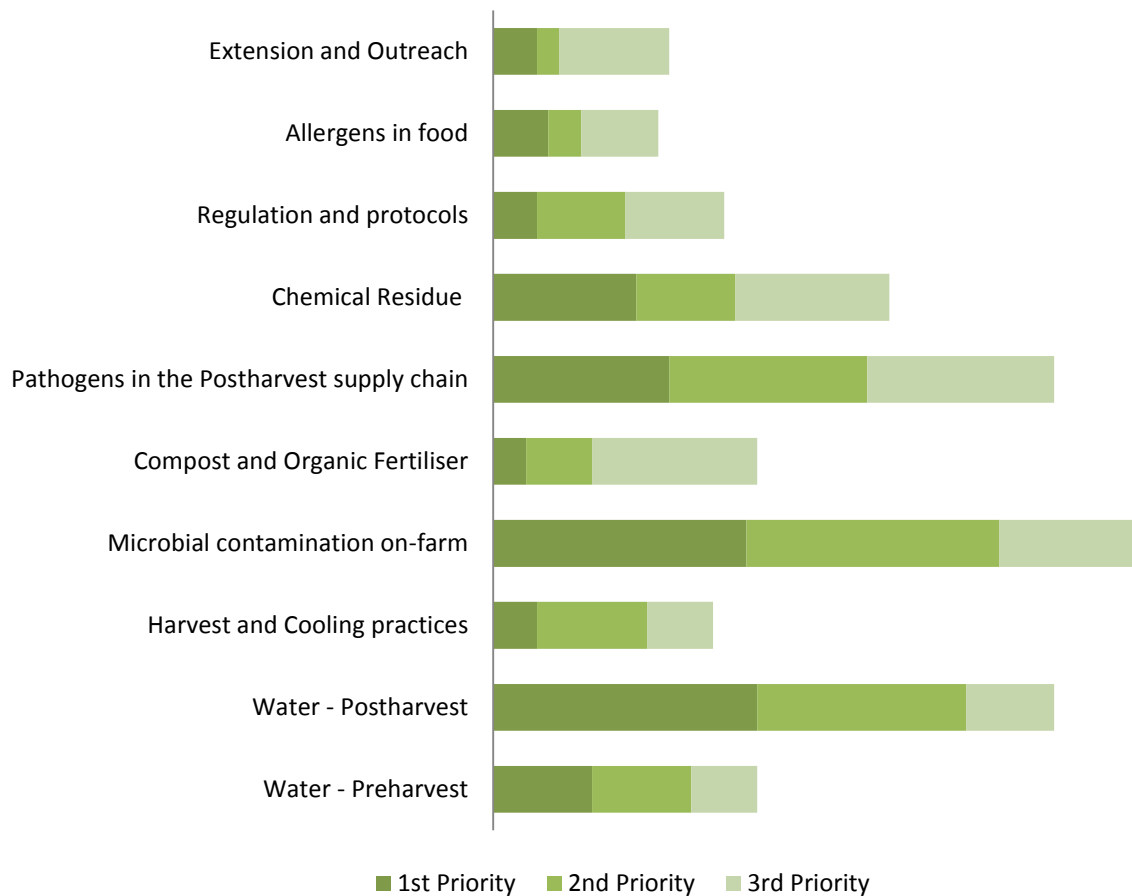


Figure 6. Food safety research priorities were identified with respondents asked to choose their top 3 research areas.

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A space was provided for respondents to leave further comments. It was made apparent that the government also wants to work with the proposed centre to remove duplication and ensure there is no overlap in function. Several comments addressed the idea of ensuring awareness and instilling a culture of responsibility in all participants in the supply chain, to provide fresh produce which is safe for consumers. Discussion around coordinating information packages through existing distribution channels such as assurance program providers and consultants should also take place to improve the spread of information to regional areas.

It was also noted that it is important to include New Zealand in this initiative and to support collaboration with research facilities and organisations in New Zealand.

Other comments included: “a great initiative as it will provide guidance to QA systems in Australia” (anon – Industry Organisation) and “any research that improves our knowledge and understanding of produce and farm safety should be conducted” (anon – Auditor).

Conclusions

The survey unequivocally indicated that there is widespread support for the establishment of a Fresh Produce Safety Centre for the whole fresh fruit and vegetable industries that will identify and conduct industry-driven research projects and provide valuable information, education and outreach on all aspects of fresh produce safety.