

FIVE KEY FOOD SAFETY MESSAGES

from the Fresh Produce Safety Conference Australia & New Zealand 2014

"You can't have a successful fresh produce business if it doesn't have and achieve food safety as it's number one priority"

~ Timothy York, President of Markon Cooperative Inc, USA




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AUSTRALIA+NEW ZEALAND

Accelerating Australian & New Zealand Food Safety Research

Nearly 130 representatives from across the Australian and New Zealand 'food safety value chain' attended the second Fresh Produce Safety Conference in Sydney. Growers, packers and marketers, wholesalers, processors and retailers, QA facilitators and auditors, academia, researchers and students, government, industry associations and input suppliers, were all well represented. The mix of formal presentations, the opportunity to put questions to speakers, the interactive outreach and research sessions and networking whenever possible were all well received.

According to the exit survey, 94% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the conference was relevant to their work, while 97% agreed or strongly agreed that the conference presentations were relevant or useful. Networking and information sharing was highlighted as one of the main benefits of the conference, with 90% indicating they had met useful contacts at the conference.

The speakers were very much a reflection of the audience, representative of the 'learning' and 'doing' of food safety in Australia, New Zealand and the USA. So, what were the key messages that participants would have left the Conference with? *Read on for my top 5 key messages...*

Richard Bennett

Technology Manager

*Produce Marketing Association Australia- New Zealand
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1. Initiate solutions to proactively address food safety problems

The first Keynote Address was from Timothy York, President of Markon Cooperative Inc, USA. Tim was quite envious of our A-NZ food safety record but was also quick to point out how an event like the 2006 spinach E. coli O157:H7 outbreak, tragic and disastrous as it was, really served to focus his mind on what is important – safe, healthy food for consumers who expect nothing less.

There is a commercial imperative to leave nothing to chance. To do that you need to ignore that it is easier to react and respond, and do the difficult thing – to initiate solutions before the event happens (again) on both individual and industry levels.

Markon has a comprehensive best-practice program to hopefully cover every possible weakness. Tim was also instrumental in the industry-wide approaches of the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement - a mandatory audit program that certifies member companies are implementing food safety practices developed by university and industry scientists, food safety experts, farmers, shippers and processors – and the creation of the Center for Produce Safety – an industry coalition focussed on identifying gaps in our food safety knowledge and commissioning research to address those gaps.

Tim's final message was to Connect, Commit and Converse – to work together and don't keep it a secret.





2. Know your pathogen enemies to understand how they persist & adapt

Our other USA Keynote speaker was Dr Bob Whitaker, Chief Science and Technology Officer with the PMA. Dr Bob focussed on what has been discovered from research and development (R&D) commissioned by the Center for Produce Safety that can be put to good use in industry.

His key message was that *we must know our pathogen enemies like Listeria monocytogenes, E. coli and Salmonella and understand how they persist and adapt. They don't 'stand still' and neither can we if we are to manage them.*

The research has shown how successful we can be if we respect 'risky animals' and apply appropriate buffer zones, keep the work environment as simple as possible to eliminate pathogen harbouring, how critical is effective composting and water quality, and how sampling and testing can be a benefit, not a burden.

Dr Bob's final message was to commit to continuous improvement – the research has shown just how clever pathogens can be and we have to keep improving to keep ahead.



3. *Work together to share vital information*

The panel session on the current state of food safety research in Australia and New Zealand highlighted that there is a significant investment in food safety research that is of necessity reactive, usually to individual and specific sector current issues, and strategic, usually to issues that are across industry.

The key message was that *In order to keep a safe distance back from Dr Martin Cole's "Food Safety Cliff", and to meet emerging domestic and international customer and regulatory requirements, we need greater cooperation and collaboration of researchers across the food safety discipline so that we can consistently validate new processes, treatments and equipment.*

We then need to keep those who have the greatest ability to interface with sources of contamination well informed through the key information and resources pathways. This session was particularly helpful as we frame the purpose and role of the Fresh Produce Safety Centre and endeavour to seek funding to revise the universally popular but now in need of revision Guidelines for On-Farm Food Safety for Fresh Produce.

The case studies that followed, which were rated as the "Most useful aspect of the conference", served to reinforce that industry is hungry for research and outreach that applies to their sector. It also highlighted that Tim York and Dr Bob's messages of creating knowledge and sharing it around were what this audience wanted to hear.

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a halved avocado. The avocado is cut in half, revealing the green flesh and the large brown pit. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting with foliage.

4. Work toward greater transparency of food safety

I've heard businesses say that they are particular and fussy about hygiene and cleanliness but when David Bradfield says that GSF Australasia has to be obsessive about it, then that's a message. When you look at the size of the business, its customers and the high risk ready-to-eat food it processes, the obsession requirement isn't so much of a surprise.

Likewise Ed Palmer from Coles, a business that uses "Legal and Safe" as the foundation for its hierarchy for customer satisfaction. They do this because their extensive consumer research knows that these are the buttons to push to develop consumer trust, and an absence of legal and safe quickly dissipates inbuilt integrity.

Both businesses are a significant shop front for our industry and are working with more direct suppliers than ever before, partly in order to see greater transparency of food safety.

5. Commit to continuous improvement on food safety communications

The research and outreach priorities sessions were full of messages, particularly for the FPSC and its Technical Committee. The highest R&D priority categories were, not surprising, around microbiological contamination, wash water, the impact of regulations, and compost and organic fertiliser usage.

The outreach session was also successful, with key messages around how participants prefer to receive information and probably more importantly, what doesn't work for them. Social media did not receive as much support from the majority but it's obvious that those who use Facebook, Twitter, etc well, use it often. There's also an art to email that needs greater adoption to increase its appeal.

Finally, there's no substitute for the face-to-face, which means the Australian and New Zealand food safety community can look forward to future workshops and conferences.

Yes, we might have guessed most of these but most food safety people know there's nothing better than verification!





Find out more

1. Fresh Produce Safety Centre Australia & New Zealand website

All presentations from the Fresh Produce Safety Conference 2014, along with the latest food safety news and information can be accessed at:

www.freshproducesafety-anz.com

2. PMA Australia - New Zealand Information Centre

To access PMA's full range of food safety, traceability and technology information and resources, visit:

www.pma-anz.com/information-centre

3. Richard Bennett's Food Safety Blog

For thoughtful insight into the latest food safety, traceability and technology trends and issues, visit Richard Bennett's blog at:

www.pma-anz.com/blog



Produce Marketing Association Australia - New Zealand

PMA Australia-New Zealand Limited (PMA A-NZ) is the first stand-alone global affiliate of the Produce Marketing Association (PMA Global) – the leading global fresh produce trade association, serving member companies around the world, and every segment of the fresh fruit, vegetable, and floral supply chain.

By working across the whole value chain, PMA A-NZ strives to assist businesses across Australia and New Zealand to increase their sales of fresh and safe produce to regional and global consumers, and develop their internal business capabilities through motivated and skilled employees. Our four key value areas of global connections, industry talent, information and resources, and food safety and traceability are aligned with your current and future needs.

www.pma-anz.com

FRESH PRODUCE SAFETY CENTRE

AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

Fresh Produce Safety Centre Australia - New Zealand

The Fresh Produce Safety Centre Ltd is an industry-led, not-for-profit company established to enhance fresh produce food safety across Australia and New Zealand through research, outreach and education.

The Centre is funded and led by the fresh produce industries in Australia and New Zealand. It has been established by PMA A-NZ through a project with the University of Sydney. This project is funded by Horticulture Australia Limited with voluntary and in-kind contributions from industry, the University and PMA A-NZ, demonstrating widespread support for the Centre.

The Centre is based at the Faculty of Agriculture & Environment at the University of Sydney and affiliated with the Center for Produce Safety in the US.

www.freshproducesafety-anz.com