

VOLUNTARY CERTIFICATIONS

GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES



Good Agricultural Practices/ Good Handling Practices (GAP/GHP) is a voluntary food safety audit program that verifies produce has been produced, handled, packed, and stored as safely as possible to minimize risks of microbial hazards. An increasing number of buyers such as grocery stores, produce distribution companies, and even some food hubs require their suppliers to be GAP/GHP certified. For many producers, the decision to undergo a GAP/GHP audit is market driven.

WSDA works to support farms interested in becoming GAP- or GHP- certified through a project called Bridging the Gaps.

This fact sheet includes information on:

- Benefits of becoming GAP-certified.
- GAP audit programs.
- What to expect with a GAP/GHP audit.
- Resources and additional information for farmers.

Benefits of Becoming GAP Certified

Being GAP certified is not required by state or federal regulations. It is a voluntary food safety audit that certifies a farm or business is following agricultural production and handling practices intended to minimize food safety risks in fruits and vegetables. The GAP/GHP audits show commitment by management and employees to follow and maintain guidelines that help minimize the potential risk for microbial contamination of the product. A farm that has passed a GAP audit is considered GAP certified.

While there are ample challenges to becoming GAP certified, especially for smaller and diversified farms, there may also be compelling reasons to consider it. One clear reason to become GAP certified is that certain buyers require it. This is especially true of produce distributors, grocery stores, and some institutional markets such as schools, corporate cafeterias, or hospitals. These buyers are motivated to manage the risk of foodborne illness and recalls.

Another benefit of a GAP audit is that it can be a production and marketing risk management strategy for the farm itself. In some cases, farms opt in to a

GAP audit in order to improve and document their production and handling practices even if their buyers don't require it. While GAP is not widely known to the general public, some farms consider a third-party food safety certification an effective way to communicate to direct market customers that they are following best practices to provide safe products. Finally, for farms that must comply with the Food Safety Modernization Act, a GAP audit can help farms prepare for that regulation.

Is GAP the same as the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)?

A GAP/GHP audit is *not* the same as FSMA. FSMA is federal law passed in 2011. It includes rules that set regulatory requirements for all parts of the food system, including the Produce Safety Rule for farms. Please see the "FAQ on the Food Safety Modernization Act" fact sheet for information.

There are differences between the FSMA Produce Safety Rule and the voluntary GAP/GHP audit, but the fundamental food safety principles are similar. For that reason, many farmers look to GAP as a good way to prepare for compliance with FSMA. In certain cases, farms may qualify for exemptions from FSMA rules (for example because of their size or the type of produce grown), but buyers may still require the voluntary GAP audit before purchasing from those farms.

GAP Audit Programs

There are a variety of GAP audit programs that have been developed by both private and public entities. They vary in their level of complexity. Examples of private industry certification programs include Global GAP, SQF, and Primus Labs. It is important for farms to understand their buyer's specific food safety requirements, and if they require a particular GAP audit program.

VOLUNTARY CERTIFICATIONS

USDA GAP/GHP Audit Program at WSDA

For Washington State fruit and vegetable producers, USDA GAP/GHP audits are conducted by WSDA. The USDA **Basic GAP/GHP Audit** is well-suited for small to mid-sized diversified farms and can be more cost-effective compared to private certifiers. Other USDA GAP/GHP audits include:

- **Group GAP** is a USDA audit program where several farms (such as a farmer co-op or food hub members) are evaluated as a group. Group GAPs can reduce the cost of GAP certification for individual farms, but it requires significant on-going collaboration and a high level of accountability between farms in the group.
- **Harmonized GAP** is more comprehensive than the Basic GAP/GHP program. The Harmonized GAP standards have been aligned to meet or exceed the FSMA Produce Safety Rule requirements.
- **Harmonized GAPs Plus+** is an internationally recognized audit standard introduced in 2018. It meets the FSMA Produce Safety Rule requirements and meets the international standard set by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), a benchmarking organization that evaluates different food safety programs for adherence to certain requirements.

For more information about GAP/GHP audits, please contact the WSDA Fruit and Vegetable Inspection program at 509-668-1285 or by searching "GAP/GHP" on the WSDA website, agr.wa.gov.

What to Expect with a GAP/GHP Audit

Because the program is *voluntary*, an audit is only performed at the request of the applicant. The audit covers manure management, harvesting practices, worker sanitation, packing house operation, storage, transportation, trace back, and other food safety topics. Farms and food businesses may request to be audited on some or all of these areas, depending on their specific business model and what their buyers require. GAP audits contain a series of questions related to each food safety topic area for which points are awarded. A farm must pass each section with a minimum of 80 percent to achieve an overall passing score. Audits are conducted when auditors can observe the growing and harvesting of the applicable products. An audit is good for one calendar year.

How long does the audit take?

It takes approximately 2 to 7 hours to complete an audit. The time necessary to complete an audit depends on many factors, including the size of the operation, the number of crops covered by the audit, and the requested audit type. A small family farm growing one crop might only take a couple of hours, but a larger diversified operation would take significantly longer.

What does an audit cost?

The cost the farm will pay includes the auditor's travel time to and from the farm, time spent on the site, and a set 1.5 hours of administrative time to review and process the audit, plus a reimbursement for mileage. In 2019, the rate for WSDA's audit services was \$115 per hour, per auditor. The mileage rate from the auditor's workstation to and from the audit site is based on the federal mileage rate (\$0.58 per mile in 2019). When possible, auditors may work with farms in the same area to coordinate on scheduling their audits in order to share the costs of auditor travel time and mileage.

Who does the audit?

A USDA-trained and certified GAP/GHP staff from WSDA's Fruit and Vegetable Inspection Program performs audits for Washington farms and food businesses.

Resources and Additional Information for Farmers

WSDA supports farms with food safety goals through their "Bridging the Gaps" programming. The publications, workshops, technical assistance, videos and other resources help farms prepare for a GAP audit, or to simply improve their on-farm food safety practices.

- "Bridging the Gaps Farm Guide; Good Agricultural Practices and On-Farm Food Safety for Mid-Sized and Diversified Fruit and Vegetable Farms" publication is a step-by-step guide to preparing for a GAP/GHP audit. It includes information about the FSMA Produce Safety Rule.
- WSDA "GAP FSMA and On-Farm Food Safety Planning" introductory video on WSDA's YouTube channel, [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), search for "WSDAgov" and click on videos.

- Bridging the GAPs on-farm workshops and trainings around the state bring together WSDA auditors and educators with farmers to identify and share best practices for produce safety on small, mid-sized and diversified fruit and vegetable farms.
- WSDA Fruit and Vegetable Inspection Program also has helpful resources including an online “Bridging the GAPs Q&A.”

Please contact the Regional Markets Program 206-256-6157, GAPedu@agr.wa.gov or call 206-256-6157, or search “Bridging the GAPs” on the WSDA website, agr.wa.gov.

Many organizations and universities provide templates, information, and resources for farms seeking to develop food safety plans, improve food safety practices, and successfully complete GAP/GHP audits. These include:

- Cornell University Online GAPs Produce Safety Course: gaps.cornell.edu
- FamilyFarmed On-Farm Food Safety Project: onfarmfoodsafety.org
- University of Minnesota Standard Operating Procedures Templates: <http://safety.cfans.umn.edu/fsp4u>



23. WSDA Food Processor License and Facilities

26. FAQ on the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)