



Photo courtesy of KES Science & Technology

## Air quality may be the next frontier of food safety.

Qualified Through Verification (QTV) audit and verification service is one way to go. "It started out as a request from the International Fresh-Cut Produce Association," says Randle Macon, assistant branch chief for the processed products branch of the USDA Ag Marketing Service. "They wanted a government program to help develop and maintain wholesomeness in their products. We put this together as an option."

"Our processing plant is a QTV-certified facility," notes Mike Davis, vice president of sales and marketing for Savage, MD-based Coastal Sunbelt Produce, processors of fresh-cut produce. "We believe it means a higher level of food safety. And our customers see that we are a company that is committed to food safety. The USDA comes in for unannounced audits, so we always have to be operating at peak food-safety standards."

Scientific Certification Systems (SCS), an Emeryville, CA, company that offers food safety audit and certification services, now combines programs that analyze each crop's level of risk with a vendor's risk-management performance. "For companies that are buying from many suppliers, this could be a very helpful and constructive tool," says Linda Brown, executive vice president.

Vigilance should not stop at the transportation door. "Many produce companies have a standard operating procedure before loading onto a truck," says UFFVA's Gorny. "I don't know of any problems with contamination during transportation. It's a low-probability event." Still, there are some things to watch out for.

"You don't want cross-contamination in transit," notes Kathy Means, spokesperson for the Produce Marketing Association

(PMA), Newark, DE. "Trucks should be cleaned, in case they carried meat before."

Gorny agrees. "One of the things you want to avoid is the potential for cross-contamination. You want to make sure they didn't transport any live animals, animal carcasses or incompatible chemicals or toxic or hazardous waste."

For fresh-cut produce, it is important that refrigeration be kept at a constant during transportation. "If you don't keep it cold, fresh-cut will spoil faster than fresh," says Gombas of the IFCPA.

According to Davis, as part of Coastal Sunbelt's food-safety plan, "We use recording devices on inbound trucks to make sure they've maintained the proper temperature."

### ALL-IN-ONE SERVICES

When choosing a third-party auditor, keep in mind that many, including SCS, offer bundled services — a kind of food-safety one-stop shopping.

"In our global marketplace, it takes an enormous amount of resources for retailers to track product and plant data from multiple suppliers, co-manufacturers, distributors and labs," says Rena Pierami, division vice president of Silliker, Inc., a Homewood, IL, company whose services include microbiology testing, chemistry testing, auditing, research, consulting and education. "Highly qualified, reputable third-party auditors can help retailers consolidate these challenges into a single point of coordination and communication. This improves safety and quality, and reduces the overall cost of operations for retailers."

"We strongly recommend an integrated

safety approach encompassing testing, environmental monitoring, auditing, employee education and other intervention strategies to enhance and protect product safety," says Pierami.

FMI has its own independent, certified audit program for suppliers, called the Safe Quality Food (SQF) program, which encompasses every part of the food chain and includes training. Thus far, the SQF Institute has issued certificates to 5,000 producers, manufacturers and processors in 20 countries.

Using just one company also makes it easier to trace a product to the source of a problem if something should go wrong. However, with good documentation, traceability should not be a problem.

PrimusLabs.com is another company that provides third-party auditing from top-to-bottom.

"We're kind of unique — our sole focus is in the fresh produce industry," says Brian Mansfield, director of business development for the Santa Maria, CA, company. It performs pesticide-residue and microbiological analyses as well as auditing services, plus data-managing services to keep track of it all.

"Our document-development program allows you to go in and create food-safety guidelines based on a series of yes-no questions. It's a great tool for someone who doesn't have a lot of food-safety documentation," says Mansfield. "We also have a self-auditing system free-of-charge on the Web."

### IN THE STORE

If you have opted for a company with bundled services, managing risk at the retail level can be a part of that. "We offer a food-safety program for employees both in a classroom and online," says FMI's Hollingsworth. "It teaches them what to do, and also why to do it." FMI also offers a safety-management guide available for purchase on the Internet.

"Food-safety training is an important part of what we do," says SCS's Brown. "And what a third-party can do is audit and verify that those in-house programs are performing at a level where you want them."

Whether you have hired a third party to help maintain good safety practices in the store or set up your own plan, "The next part is how well the employees adhere to the program in the store," according to Hollingsworth.

"Retailers really play an important part," notes UFFVA's Gorny. "Handling the