

# West Virginia Department of Agriculture

Walt Helmick, Commissioner



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**NEWS RELEASE**  
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## **AGENCIES COLLABORATE TO MEET FARM FOOD SAFETY NEEDS**

**Charleston, W.Va.** – West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick, Associate Dean for Partnerships and Initiatives at West Virginia University Extension Jennifer Williams, and Associate Vice President for Public Service and Director of Extension Dr. Ami Smith from West Virginia State University have announced a multi-agency collaboration designed to serve the West Virginia farm community as they address multiple food safety concerns at the farm and consumer level.

The newly appointed West Virginia Farm Food Safety Training Team (WV FFST) is comprised of appointed staff from each institution and include Cindy Martel-Marketing Specialist from the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA), Dr. Doolarie Singh-Knights-Assistant Professor of Agriculture and Resource Economics/Extension Specialist in Agriculture and Natural Resources from West Virginia University Extension (WVU Ext), and Melissa Stewart, Assistant Program Director with West Virginia State University Extension (WVSU Ext). The leadership team will bring resources, staff, and trainers together to deliver a consistent food safety curriculum and provide grower support at the local level.

“The recent passage of seven bills within the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) umbrella is a sweeping reform to the way we look at food safety. The focus of this team’s work with our farmers is on a ‘whole-farm’ concept, meaning food safety is entrenched from planting in the field through the consumer access level of the production chain,” said Helmick. The first produce rules were ratified in October with an emphasis on the whole-farm concept and that West Virginia farms need to be prepared for the phase in. Helmick added, “Limited federal funding to implement these mandates is problematic especially given the state’s fiscal challenges. We must leverage our existing resources, strong training expertise, and create multi-agency teams capable of delivering the new science-based curriculum in a collaborative manner to allow our farmers to be in compliance and competitive in today’s food marketplace.”

Singh-Knights explained a commitment to food safety in agriculture production is an integral part of the planning process as well as an economic opportunity given today’s consumer emphasis on safe food production as a key buying decision. “We have found that consumers are willing to pay more for food products that can demonstrate a commitment to key food safety concepts like traceability,” she said. “In order to build this relationship between food and production, our farmers and processors must implement systems that build trust. Though time consuming at the onset, a well-planned food safety initiative at the farm level, including a focus on record keeping, can yield a higher market price as well as consumer willingness to try new products.”

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Williams went on to explain the scope of agriculture practices that integrates time and money saving technologies, like applications and computer based record keeping, are important tools to be integrated into agribusiness development.

A recent Benedum Foundation grant to WVU Extension that collaborates with WVDA and WVSU Extension will provide important train-the-trainer programs as the delivery teams take shape. USDA's Specialty Crop Block Grant funding will provide resources for educators to come together to work on consistent program delivery, identify areas and agribusinesses with needs, and deliver a cooperative package of services to help farms with compliance and success. The changing workforce landscape in West Virginia means agriculture has the opportunity to create new and emerging farmers as well as the resources to transition from part-time production to revenue generating commercial production in West Virginia.

In addition to providing technical assistance with the WV FFST, WVDA provides USDA Good Handling Practices/Good Agricultural Practices (GHP/GAP) audit services, USDA grading for commodities, regulatory compliance, as well as a network of services for emerging value-added food processors. WVU Extension and its staff in all 55 counties provide resources, educational services, and training in the state's agriculture community as well as laboratory services for processed foods. WVSU Extension provides access to agribility programs for growers who need adaptive tools to farm, economic development resources through its network of extension agents, and training for urban farmers who are making significant impact in communities like Huntington.

To learn more about the WV FSTT, contact Martel ([cmartel@wvda.us](mailto:cmartel@wvda.us)), Singh-Knights ([dosingh-knights@mail.wvu.edu](mailto:dosingh-knights@mail.wvu.edu)) or Stewart ([williaml@wvstateu.edu](mailto:williaml@wvstateu.edu)).

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