

West Virginia Department of Agriculture

Walt Helmick, Commissioner



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AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT DOUBLES NUMBER OF FARMS PARTICIPATING IN FOOD SAFETY AUDITS

Charleston, W.Va. – Twice as many West Virginia farmers will be able to sell to major grocery wholesalers and retailers in the coming year, thanks to a program being championed and partially funded by the West Virginia Department of Agriculture (WVDA).

Seven new farms have passed the Good Handling Practices / Good Agricultural Practices (GHP/GAP) audit - a certification that is required by most major grocery wholesalers and retailers.

“One of my goals upon taking office was to help West Virginia farmers be more competitive and more prepared to move into commercial agriculture, not just to grow produce for the farmers’ markets,” said Commissioner of Agriculture Walt Helmick.

“By promoting and funding this program, we can leverage much of the existing food distribution infrastructure that already exists in our state, and our farmers can deal with the Walmarts and U.S. Foods of the world,” Commissioner Helmick added.

The state already had seven GHP/GAP-audited farms, primarily eastern panhandle commercial orchard and produce operations. The newly audited farms are in north-central and western West Virginia, said Derek Richard, the state’s only certified auditor. He is a WVDA employee, but is overseen by the USDA in his role as a GHP/GAP auditor.

“This is an important step forward for agriculture in West Virginia and a validation of the way WVDA is moving,” continued Commissioner Helmick. “We need to continue to add farmers of all varieties to this list so that consumers can be doubly assured of food safety and we can make agriculture a component of a diversified state economy.”

The program is purely voluntary and has been offered by WVDA for many years, and although nearly 250 have taken the one-day preparatory class, only a few have gone on to become involved in the annual audit portion of the program, which requires thorough record-keeping and the cost of an annual audit, which can cost upwards of \$1,000.

However, WVDA will pay up to 75 percent of the cost of successful audits through the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant program as long as funds are available.

The GHP/GAP program was implemented in 2002 by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS). It is offered to the fruit and vegetable industry to verify an operation’s efforts to minimize the risk of contamination of fresh fruits, vegetables and nuts by microbial pathogens. The program does not guarantee the product is free from microbial contamination, but verifies the participant has taken proactive measures to reduce the risk of contamination by adhering to generally recognized industry best practices.

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