

2022 Food Safety Summit report



Meeting our fresh produce safety challenges

Canberra, Australia
November 2022



Executive summary

The International Fresh Produce Association hosted a Food Safety Summit in Canberra on the 16 November 2022. The objective was to identify the major food safety challenges facing the Australian fresh produce sector, and to seek consensus on key strategies to address issues obstructing improvements. The goal being to drive grassroots-based improvements in produce safety.

The Summit brought together key personnel from across the fresh produce supply chain as well as regulators and researchers. The program was divided into two components: plenary addresses from food safety experts, followed by workshop sessions designed to explore challenges and strategies impacting the way forward in addressing food safety.

The plenaries were designed to set the scene and covered the following topics:

- Burden and cost of foodborne disease in Australia
- Food safety in horticulture
- Investigation of foodborne illness outbreaks linked to fresh produce
- Industry strategies for assuring the safety of fresh produce.

The speakers highlighted the total burden of foodborne illness in Australia, with around 4.68 million cases of illness per annum, at an annual cost of AU \$2.44 billion for illness and sequelae (Circa 2019). They described the regulatory approaches used to manage hazards associated with higher risk horticultural products, and provided examples of recent outbreaks, describing the challenges of tracing products and source attribution. This was followed by an example of the fresh produce sectors' journey towards improving food safety and increasing food safety culture with the goals of both growing or sourcing the freshest produce and providing safe produce for consumers.

During the workshop sessions, summit attendees addressed a series of questions designed to tease out issues and factors which are impeding the uptake of good agricultural and good hygienic practices. These included the challenge faced by small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) when seeking access to reliable and appropriate technical support; the perceived absence of any premium for investment in food safety; disjointed and disorganised information and guidance on food safety; the impact of increasing regulatory burden on SMEs; and the lack of leadership by key personnel.

Potential areas of focus to increase sector wide food safety outcomes identified by the attendees included: the ongoing development of targeted food safety resources, guidance, and tools which are accessible and practicable for all; an examination of how such materials can be more effectively disseminated; increased industry-wide conversations about organisational culture and the importance of business owners taking responsibility for their food safety programs; and the use of relevant modes of dissemination of food safety communication.

Key recommendations for the International Fresh Produce Association moving forward include:

- Seek greater engagement with peak industry bodies to promote the importance of food safety and to facilitate improved access and knowledge of food safety guidance materials across the entire fresh produce industry
- Explore ways to promote and enhance the uptake of food safety information and guidance
- Investigate ways to improve the development and audit of food safety programs to ensure their utility and accessibility for small and medium sized enterprises
- Reconvene the summit in six months to review progress in advancing food safety.



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Background

Food safety remains a key issue for the fresh produce industry globally. Rising demand for fresh produce and its importance for good nutrition have been offset by increasing outbreaks of foodborne illness, involving a broad cross section of produce.

Examples of domestic incidents of foodborne illness linked to fresh produce over the past six years are shown in Table 1. There have also been outbreaks involving *Listeria monocytogenes* in imported frozen vegetables and imported enoki mushrooms, and Hepatitis A contamination of imported dates.

Table 1: Outbreaks of foodborne illness linked to fresh produce

Year	Commodity	Pathogen	Cases	Probable Cause
2016	Bagged salads	<i>Salmonella</i> Anatum	311	Weather event
2016	Rockmelons	<i>Salmonella</i> Hvittingfoss	144	Process failure and hygiene
2018	Rockmelons	<i>Listeria monocytogenes</i>	22 (7 deaths)	Weather event
2019/20	Bagged salads	<i>Salmonella</i> Typhimurium	1,063	Unknown
2020/21	Spring onions	<i>Salmonella</i> Saintpaul	581	Contaminated water suspected

These incidents impact public health by increasing the burden of illness, negatively influence consumer confidence, and adversely affect market access, both domestic and international. They also raise the likelihood of regulatory action against food businesses and may raise the likelihood of future regulatory interventions.

The paradox is that improvements in food safety can be achieved with modest changes to the way we do things, and how we manage inputs and hygiene in our agricultural production, handling, and packing environments.

The International Fresh Produce Association is actively engaged in supporting the fresh produce sector to meet consumer, community, and regulatory expectations and requirements for safe and suitable foods. The hosting of this summit was designed to secure key stakeholder guidance on how to better address food safety issues and to meet the challenges of securing broader industry commitment to managing its food safety obligations.

Food Safety Summit

The Food Safety Summit was held at Old Parliament House, Canberra on 16 November 2022. The summit hosted leaders and key stakeholders from along the fresh produce supply chain (growers, processors, retailers), the regulatory and academia community, and other food safety professionals.

The program commenced with a series of keynote presentations, and a question-and-answer session where the attendees engaged with the speakers. This was then followed by structured workshop session designed to amplify discussion on key food safety topics.

The goal was for attendees to identify the food safety challenges going forward and to seek consensus on key strategies to address current issues obstructing improvements in food safety and to drive grassroots-based improvements in produce safety.



Plenary Session

The program commenced with four keynote addresses covering the food safety challenges facing the fresh produce sector.

Speaker	Affiliation	Topic
Professor Katie Glass	Research School of Population Health College of Health & Medicine Australian National University	Burden and cost of foodborne disease in Australia
Dr Nora Galway	Director Food Safety and Response Food Standards Australia New Zealand	Food safety in horticulture
Dr Craig Shadbolt	Principal Food Safety Scientist, NSW Department of Primary Industries Biosecurity & Food Safety	Investigation of foodborne illness outbreaks linked to fresh produce
Andrew Redman	Chief Technical Officer Perfection Fresh	Industry strategies for assuring the safety of fresh produce

The speakers highlighted the significant burden of foodborne illness in Australia. Despite the perception of a safe food supply, Australia has around 4.68 million cases of foodborne illness per annum, with an annual cost of AU \$2.44 billion for illness and sequelae (Circa 2019).¹ This burden is spread across all sectors of the food industry. The costs include estimates of lost productivity, pain and suffering, and the cost of healthcare across different food groups and for selected microbial pathogens.

This was followed by a description of the ongoing development of regulations and non-regulatory measures to manage microbiological hazards associated with higher-risk horticultural products. This underlined the situation that gaps remain in industry and/or government measures to manage the safety of fresh produce.

Investigations of recent outbreaks of foodborne illness drew attention to the challenges of tracing products and source attribution. The findings of such investigations underscore the reality that food safety is not necessarily front of mind, that there are significant pressures to cut costs, and there is the increased likelihood of contamination through flooding and severe weather events.

This was followed by an example of the fresh produce sectors' journey towards improving food safety and increasing food safety culture with the goals of both growing or sourcing the freshest produce and providing safe produce for consumers.

Following the presentations, a question-and-answer session provided a deeper dive into the issues, enabling attendees to explore some of the plenary topics in more detail.

During the conversation, attendees highlighted the importance of organisation culture in setting a hygienic operational environment and in achieving good food safety outcomes. While the challenge of effective source attribution was discussed as the reason why the identification of the food vehicle and the root cause of an incident are not always ascertained. Concerns were also expressed with the challenges faced by small and medium sized enterprises to prioritise accessing technical support, information, and resources, and to develop and implement appropriate food safety programs. This then led to a conversation about external auditing, including accessing reliable auditors, the value and quality of audits, and the prospect of a major skills shortage in the future.

¹FSANZ (2022). *The annual cost of foodborne illness in Australia*. [Final Report](#)



Workshop Session

Working in groups, the attendees were then tasked with discussing and responding to a series of questions, followed by presenting their observations to the summit. The goal was to tease out issues and factors which are impeding the uptake and implementation of good agricultural and good hygienic practices.

Topic 1: *If we all agree that food safety is a significant issue for our industry, why is there an ongoing conversation about its prioritisation and resourcing?*

While there is no doubt that food safety is an important issue for the sector, it remains an ongoing challenge to advance food safety with many small and medium sized growers unable or disinclined to address the risks associated with their products. This is both due to the inability to access reliable and appropriate technical information and support, and the day-to-day challenge of growing and getting produce to market.

A further disincentive is the significant investment and ongoing costs required to address food safety and the absence of any premium for safe products. This is despite the consumer's expectation that food for sale is safe. Other concerns include the inability to easily access information; the disjointed, disorganised, and complexity of much of the available food safety information; and the lack of leadership by key sector personnel.

Topic 2: *What is impeding the widespread uptake of food safety guidance and advice?
How can we improve the assimilation of this guidance?
What gaps are there in our knowledge?*

The lack of regulations, the low margins, and the low perception of food safety risks are all key factors that limit improvements in produce hygiene and safety. Discussion noted that there were sectors of the fresh produce supply chain who could benefit from greater education and more effective outreach to improve produce safety. During discussion, barriers identified ranged from too much, too complex information; to the failure to recognize there are risks associated with fresh produce and the use of inputs such as raw manure and irrigation water.

A further issue was the incomplete information about who was producing fresh produce and where. While the major producers were known and participate in industry schemes, it is understood that there are a significant number of small and seasonal businesses that may not be engaged in the usual industry pathways and forums. This was seen as a risk to the wider industry.

In response, peak industry bodies were identified as a potential intermediary for accessing a wider cohort of growers and producers, and to take a more proactive role in securing greater engagement in enhancing food hygiene and safety knowledge and responsibility.

Limited gaps in knowledge were identified. There was assurance that the majority of technical resources and guidance information required already exist, and it's a matter of accessibility, readability, and more effective dissemination. In terms of research, further potential work was noted on the use of sanitisers in the disinfection processes for products such as leafy vegetables and melons.



Topic 3: *What does good food safety look like for the fresh produce sector?
How can IFPA support the fresh produce sector to improve food safety?
(Approaches, delivery, resources)*

A good food safety outcome was the effective execution of food safety programs resulting in produce safety no longer being an issue. This required food safety aspirations to be embedded in businesses and considered an integral part of business culture across all strata of the industry. This means accountability for food safety was proactively entrenched in operations with business owners owning their programs..

Key recommendations for the International Fresh Produce Association included:

- Securing engagement with peak industry bodies to promote the importance of food safety and to facilitate improved access and knowledge of food safety guidance materials across the entire fresh produce industry
- Explore ways to better enhance the uptake of food safety information and guidance using alternative communication channels including podcasts, social media, and digital technologies
- Investigate ways to improve the development and audit of food safety programs to ensure their utility and accessibility for small and medium sized enterprises
- Reconvene the summit in six months to review progress in advancing food safety.



Summary

The summit brought together key industry personnel to explore ways to improve the safety of fresh produce along the supply chain. The safety of food is of paramount importance to Australian consumers and their confidence is easily damaged. Consumers expect safe and suitable food.

Keynote speakers elaborated the current state of food safety in Australia, the regulatory environment, recent outbreaks, and the work being undertaken in the fresh produce sector to enhance food safety.

The workshop sessions delved into issues facing the industry and approaches being used to manage food safety. Mitigating food safety risks involves informed and responsible food safety management by all stakeholders along the supply chain. This requires awareness of the hazards, and for each stakeholder to recognise their role and responsibilities for managing them within their sphere of influence.

The issues that need to be communicated better include the following:

- Knowledge of current and emerging threats to produce safety – including the cost of non-conformance or of an incident
- The value of food safety programs (consistent with the risk) and their implementation in order to meet the requirements of regulators, retailers, and consumers
- The importance of effective product identification and traceability
- Preparedness to respond to food safety incidents and to fully support investigations.

Ways to engage with producers and enhance message delivery include:

- Education and training that promotes the importance of food safety – as a business imperative and for employees to put food safety first
- Innovative and practical delivery tools and technologies
- The provision of appropriate information targeted at the different groups (*i.e.* commodity, region, scale) within the supply chain

Solutions identified by the attendees included: the ongoing development of targeted food safety resources, guidance, and tools which are accessible and practicable for all; an examination of how such materials can be more effectively disseminated; increased industry-wide conversations about organisational culture and the importance of business owners taking responsibility for their food safety programs; and the use of relevant modes of dissemination of food safety communication.

The summit also identified opportunities for the International Fresh Produce Association to support the fresh produce sector. This included engagement with peak industry bodies; exploring approaches to better enhance the uptake of food safety information and guidance; and considering ways to improve the development and audit of food safety programs. Consensus was also achieved to reconvene the summit in six months to review progress in advancing food safety.



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