

The Fresh Produce Safety conference delivers key learnings to the fresh produce industry

26 September 2018

The theme of this year's Fresh Produce Safety Conference, hosted by the Fresh Produce Safety Centre Australia and New Zealand in Sydney on 26 September was 'Food Safety: It's Your Responsibility'. Bringing together over 170 leading food producers, manufacturers, packers, distributors, retailers, students and researchers, the event confirmed food safety and compliance as top priorities for the industry. With a *Listeria* outbreak claiming seven lives earlier this year and the ongoing strawberry tampering crisis affecting exporters and local retailers, the issue of food safety in Australian and New Zealand fresh produce remains important.

Key learnings for the fresh produce industry are:

Suresh DeCosta, Director of Food Safety, Lipman Family Farms (USA) and member of the Technical Committee of the US Center for Produce Safety, said acceptable risk is about prevention and mitigation. New mapping tools used on the Lipman Farms allows supervisors to better understand and react to pest incursions (animal intrusions) by 'socialising' the real-time information. *Listeria* continues to be problematic in the fresh produce industry with collaborations with equipment manufacturers (equipment used in packing houses) and the meat industry being the next frontier in countering future *Listeria* outbreaks.

Professor Sylvain Charlebois, Professor in Food Distribution and Policy, Dalhousie University (Canada), highlighted food fraud and the role that blockchain technologies will play in ensuring the true provenance of food. Social media has changed the game on food safety. Consumers rely on information that could be good or 'not so good'. One solution was blockchain, which will bring a new level of transparency to the food industry. Traceability, he warned, was not enough. An open economy like Australia's made blockchain 'crucial', with Walmart currently trialling blockchain technologies in mangos.

Steve Hather, Director of the Recall Institute, has a clear message about irrational consumers and over-enthusiastic regulators turning an incident into a crisis and asking, 'Can your business survive a recall?' Social media has the power to multiply reputational damage a thousandfold, yet can be the key to managing a food safety incident. Among the crucial factors to

successful management, Mr Hather said, are preparation, decisive action and creating a single source of truth to explain the incident, preferably online and regularly updated.

Catherine Richardson, Market and Quality Assurance Manager, Zespri International, talked about how our reputation is always at risk, and that it takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it. The only way to maintain a culture of food safety is to live and breathe it. "Certification is not enough to ensure food safety," she said. "People have to GET IT!"

The Fresh Produce Safety Centre is hosted by and affiliated with the University of Sydney and the Sydney Institute of Agriculture. Special thanks to conference partners: Fresh Markets Australia/FreshTest and Hort Innovation and to conference sponsors: Aus-Qual, Zespri and Perfection Fresh.

