



Food & Agricultural Products Center

NEWS RELEASE

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FAPC holds Crisis Management Seminar

By Mandy Gross, FAPC Communications Services Manager

STILLWATER, Okla. – With the recent incidences of recalls and foodborne illness outbreaks, it is imperative for food companies to have a plan in place if a crisis occurs.

The Robert M. Kerr Food & Agricultural Products Center, located on the Oklahoma State University – Stillwater campus, recently held a Crisis Management Seminar for industry leaders. J-M Farms, Oklahoma Grocers Association, Vaughan Foods, Thomas Brothers Produce and Oklahoma Vegetable Growers Association sponsored the event.

“Food processing establishments face dozens of possible crises or unexpected events that can cause the public to lose its trust in the company and the products produced,” said Jason Young, FAPC quality management specialist. “By preparing for a crisis in advance, companies can contain and minimize losses.”

The seminar featured Will Daniels of Natural Selection Foods/Earthbound Farm, headquartered in San Juan Bautista, Calif. Daniels experienced a crisis in fall of 2006 when an *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 outbreak was linked to Natural Selection Foods fresh spinach sold under the Dole brand.

“If your company has something to lose from a crisis, you should have a crisis management plan in place,” Daniels said.

Daniels recommends that companies install a crisis management team to help prepare a crisis management plan and meet at least annually to review the plan and train the company’s employees.

The plan should include a list of team members and their contact information, crisis level definitions and actions, media policy, crisis procedures, and critical documents or templates for communications. Examples of the critical documents are position statements, talking points, questions and answers, media monitoring, letter to key audiences, news releases and notification matrix.

Daniels suggested the crisis management team incorporate a variety of areas: team leader; historian who documents everything that happens; experts in areas such as finance, quality assurance, supply, logistics, etc.; legal adviser; and public relations representatives, internally and externally.

A procedure of actions should be set if a crisis was to occur, Daniels said. He recommends the following actions: the team leader decides to convene; state the problem; notify senior management; gather information and identify gaps; verify key facts; assess media interest; develop position; update management; take action; assign tasks to various department; review position and determine next steps;

and follow up, critique and follow up again.

Daniels also said it is important to identify the key stakeholders. In Earthbound Farm's situation, it determined the key stakeholders were customers, media, employees, growers, vendors and government.

During his presentation, Daniels outlined the five Rs Natural Selection Foods/Earthbound Farm adopted in proactively facing a crisis: *Regret* – expressing empathy to the victims; *Responsibility* – tracing back to the source; *Restitution* – taking care of immediate needs; *Resolution* – raising the standards; and *Reform* – defining the pathway forward.

“Food safety has always been an integral part of our business,” Daniels said. “Our systems have consistently been at the top of the industry. But, we believe that even the best food safety standards require continuous improvement.”

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