Market demand for local and regionally-produced food is stronger than ever. Small to mid-sized farmers are scaling up their businesses and entering larger markets. Producers that can demonstrate compliance with an audited food safety standard provide more confidence to buyers. While many small to mid-size farms are committed to safe production practices, it is cumbersome for them to comply with food safety requirements designed with large-scale agriculture in mind.

In partnership with the Wallace Center, the USDA is piloting a cooperative approach for farms of all sizes to demonstrate compliance with industry-accepted food safety standards.

In GroupGAP, a food hub, support organization, or central business entity collaborates with producers to establish site-specific best practices for complying with a food safety standard. The group develops and implements a quality management system (QMS) built to an international standard that can be measured, analyzed, reviewed, and continually improved.

After establishing the QMS, the central entity coordinates training and on-farm implementation of farm food safety procedures, monitors their ongoing usage, and manages their recording and reporting. The central entity internally audits each farm’s compliance with the food safety standard, while USDA externally audits the group’s adherence to their management system.

GroupGAP provides agricultural producers of all sizes with the means to demonstrate their commitment to food safety, build buyer confidence, and increase the value of their products in larger markets.
The traditional GAP approach is to audit individual farms. This makes each farm responsible for the full administrative and financial burden of compliance. The GroupGAP approach provides an umbrella of support, with the central entity and participating producers addressing food safety compliance cooperatively.

**GroupGAP:**

- Distributes the administrative load by clearly defining food safety roles and responsibilities
- Supports the development, communication, and constant improvement of best practices within the system
- Allows producers to access a high level of food safety training and expertise
- Improves product traceability, facilitating faster corrective action
- Provides a trusted framework for articulating compliance to buyers
- Creates transparency in every level of the operation, building confidence in customers, managers, and producers
GroupGAP Roles & Responsibilities

**What are the responsibilities of the central entity?**

- Identify site-specific best practices for production and management
- Develop a quality management system that allows for external verification of best practices
- Provide farmer training and capacity building to implement food safety procedures at the farm level that meet the requirements of their chosen food safety standard
- Coordinate producer’s record-keeping and reporting to ensure compliance, increase transparency and allow for quick feedback and continual improvement
- Provide auditing for farms within the group to ensure that producers are fulfilling their responsibilities as defined by the QMS

**What are the responsibilities of the USDA?**

- Provide a directory of approved training curricula for food safety standards and internal auditor technique
- Review the central entity’s QMS to verify that it meets the requirements of the GroupGAP program
- Perform an annual audit of the central entity’s management practices, including record review and staff interviews
- Visit a selection of the producers within the group to verify that practices at the farm level meet the requirements of the group’s chosen food safety standard
GroupGAP’s QMS approach to food safety can be applied to businesses or organizations of any size. Early adopters are geographically diverse, employ varied business models, and access a number of different markets.

**Early adopters include:**

- An organic farmer cooperative working to bring fruit and vegetable producers under inspection to extend QMS practices throughout their supply chain.
- A food enterprise center providing business development and operational improvement assistance to food and agricultural cooperatives and implementing GroupGAP to support farm to school initiatives.
- A coalition of Amish and Mennonite family farms selling products direct to consumer.
- A farm advocacy group promoting food safety policy and providing training programs for sustainable farms.
- A business development organization supporting market opportunities for local farms.
- A rural food hub operating within a cooperative of highly-diversified small farms in a remote region.
- An aggregation and distribution center providing local producers with market access to regional institutions.
- A farm incubator organization providing sustainable production education to primarily non-English speaking farmers.
The International Organization for Standardization (ISO), founded in 1947, is the world’s largest developer of voluntary international standards. An independent, non-governmental membership organization, ISO is made up of 163 member countries around the world, with over 1.2 million organizations choosing to certify their practices to ISO standards worldwide.

The ISO 9001 standard creates a framework for quality management systems (QMS), sets of policies, processes and procedures that enable an organization to best meet customer requirements. The performance of each of the established processes can be measured, analyzed, reviewed, and continually improved.

Informed by over sixty years of best business practices, ISO 9001 can be used by any organization, large or small, regardless of its field of activity, and is currently implemented by over one million companies and organizations in over 170 countries.

In GroupGAP, central entities develop a QMS to ensure best practices for production, management, and transparency that provide feedback and confidence to all parties and the means for continual improvement.

The ISO 9001 framework helps small and mid-sized producers create a culture of food safety quality that buyers will understand, respect, and rely upon.
Currently, the GroupGAP certification program audits to one of two food safety standards: the USDA GAP/GHP Standard, and the Produce GAPs Harmonized Food Safety Standard. Grower groups and their central organizing hub work together to determine the standard best suited to the particular needs of their region’s growing and buying communities.

**What is the USDA GAP/GHP Food Safety Standard?**

In January 2002, the US Department of Agriculture-Agricultural Marketing Services (USDA-AMS) formally implemented the USDA Good Agricultural Practices & Good Handling Practices (GAP&GHP) audit verification program.

This voluntary program is offered to businesses in the fruit and vegetable industry in order to verify an operation’s efforts to minimize the risk of contamination by microbial pathogens. The program verifies that the participant has taken proactive measures to reduce the risk of contamination by adhering to generally recognized industry best practices.

Though audits are administered by the USDA, GAP and GHP are not federal regulations; they’re market-driven certification programs aimed at building buyer confidence while protecting the public health.

**What is the Produce GAPs Harmonized Food Safety Standard?**

Since 2002, a wide range of standards and auditing practices have emerged in response to diverse buyer concerns and requirements.

In 2009, the United Fresh Food Safety & Technology Council endorsed a plan to drive harmonization of GAP standards, to reduce audit fatigue and allow operations to focus their food safety resources on achieving food safety, rather than passing audits.

This plan evolved into the Produce GAPs Harmonization Initiative, an all-industry effort including growers, shippers, produce buyers, government agencies, audit organizations and other stakeholders. The goal of the Initiative is “one audit by any credible third party, acceptable to all buyers.”

To achieve this goal, the Initiative developed food safety Good Agricultural Practices standards and audit checklists for pre- and post-harvest operations, applicable to all fresh produce commodities, all sizes of on-farm operations and all regions in the U.S., and has made them available for use by any operation or audit organization at no cost.
**Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q** Are there food safety professionals/consultants available that can help us through this process?

**A** Yes. Contact the Wallace Center for more information about technical assistance providers for QMS design, farmer training, or food safety implementation.

**Q** How many audits take place in total and how often do they occur?

**A** Each participating producer is trained and audited internally. Their continued compliance is monitored according to the methods outlined in the group’s QMS.

The QMS and its implementation are externally audited by the USDA, along with annual on-farm GAP audits. Additional auditing and monitoring by the USDA depends on the outcomes of prior interactions.

**Q** How much does a QMS cost? Do I need to hire a new staff person to create a QMS and conduct internal audits?

**A** QMS development costs vary according to the scope and nature of each organization. Depending on your internal capacity, you may need to hire additional staff to serve as farm trainers, internal inspectors, and QMS managers.

**Q** If one farmer fails an audit, does the whole system fail?

**A** No. Producer/product noncompliance falls within the scope of a GroupGAP QMS, and so each group can determine how they are best equipped to manage a failed audit.
Q Is there minimum and maximum number of farms for which GGAP will be effective?

A No. GroupGAP’s QMS-driven approach to food safety systems can be applied to any organization of any size.

Q If we are certified through GGAP, does that mean that we are exempt from FSMA requirements?

A No. While no standard currently available provides exemption from the new FSMA requirements, GroupGAP provides a robust framework for compliance by taking a system-level view of risk management, being highly adaptable to changing requirements, and providing mechanisms for constant improvement.

Q Are there samples QMS templates available, or training for QMS design and implementation?

A Yes. Contact the Wallace Center for more information about templates for QMS and on-farm food safety manuals and training resources available in your area.

Q Will this increase USDA presence on our farms/at our businesses?

A While the GroupGAP certification, like any audited certificate, may or may not increase USDA presence at both the central hub and participating farms (depending on the level of oversight currently experienced), it’s more important to recognize that the GroupGAP certification clearly and transparently communicates the responsibility of all parties in involved. This results in better auditing experiences and a more sustainable culture of food safety awareness.