

2024 Produce Safety Annual Report

01/08/2025





Minnesota Department of Agriculture
Produce Safety Program
625 Robert Street North
Saint Paul, MN 55155
Phone: 651-539-3648
ProduceSafety.MDA@state.mn.us
www.mda.state.mn.us

As requested by MINN. STAT. 3.197: This report cost approximately \$500 to prepare, including staff time, printing and mailing expenses.

Upon request, this material will be made available in an alternative format such as large print, Braille or audio recording. Printed on recycled paper.

In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, this information is available in alternative forms of communication upon request by calling 651-201-6000. TTY users can call the Minnesota Relay Service at 711. The MDA is an equal opportunity employer and provider.

Acknowledgements

We continue to appreciate the produce farmers across the state who responded to the 2024 Grower Questionnaire, attended grower trainings, field days, or provided feedback. We also thank the many partners within and outside of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) who contributed knowledge, stories, and data that are included in this report.

The Impact of Our Produce Safety Program

Established in 2016 as part of a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the MDA Produce Safety Program works to help produce farms follow the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Produce Safety Rule (PSR). The Produce Safety Program's mission is to ensure:

All Minnesota produce farmers receive the food safety resources, training, and support necessary to grow safe food and meet applicable regulatory requirements.

Since its implementation, the PSR has required farms, particularly larger operations, to upgrade equipment and modify practices to improve food safety. While some farmers see the PSR as costly, confusing, and disruptive, it has led to improvements in food safety, many low-cost and more efficient for farms.

Key progress for Minnesota farmers

- **Training & Education:** 95% of inspected farms have had at least one person complete the Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training, expanding their understanding of food safety. Even farms not required to participate attended grower trainings, with 51% of Minnesota farms growing covered produce taking part.
- **Improved Hygiene:** 84% of farms with handwashing sink requirements have taken action to enhance worker hygiene. These improvements ensure that handwashing facilities are readily accessible and effective, allowing workers to wash their hands properly and reducing the risk of contamination.
- **Food Safety Improvements:** 100% of farms that received inspections have implemented changes to reduce risks to food safety. These proactive measures are contributing to a safer, more reliable food supply by improving food safety practices across Minnesota's farms.

Why the Produce Safety Rule matters for consumers

Consumers expect the food they buy to be safe. The PSR helps meet this expectation by establishing the first-ever standards for growing and handling produce, including guidelines for worker hygiene, water use, and sanitation practices for equipment and facilities. This helps reduce the risk of foodborne illness and boost consumer confidence in the produce they buy. However, recent large scale produce outbreaks have shaken consumer confidence and impacted farms.

In Minnesota, both PSR-inspected farms and other farms utilizing available resources and trainings are actively improving their food safety practices, maintaining consumer trust in fresh, safe produce. Whether or not a farm is subject to the PSR, investments in food safety benefit both the farm and consumer. Ultimately, the PSR plays a vital role in building a safer food system and reducing vulnerabilities across the industry.

Goal 1: Provide Timely Risk-Based Regulatory Services

In 2024, a total of 44 inspections were conducted, as outlined in Table 1. The most cited observations from the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), as shown in Figure 1, were related to practices including: Ensuring effective cleaning and sanitizing of food contact surfaces, equipment, and tools (21 CFR 123.123), providing accessible handwashing stations for workers (21 CFR 112.130), implementing measures to prevent pests from becoming established in buildings (21 CFR 112.128) and inspecting and maintaining agricultural water systems to prevent contamination risks (21 CFR 112.42). With the recent finalization of the water-related provisions by FDA, the Produce Safety Program will continue to prioritize educational efforts to strengthen food safety practices specific to pre-harvest and post-harvest water.

Most frequently cited observations on covered farms in 2024

Figure 1: The most frequently cited observations from all inspections completed in 2024.



Table 1: Types of inspections completed in 2024.

Type of Inspections	Inspection Description	Total Number in 2024
Routine Inspections	On-farm annual visit to review all food safety components under PSR	30
Initial Inspections	Initial on-farm inspection to review all food safety components under PSR mainly for educational purposes	3
Follow-up	To determine if previously issued observations have been corrected	4
Complaint	Conducted in response to a complaint from outside the Produce Safety Program which may involve sampling	3
Investigation	Targeted inspection to assess a specific possible concern	1
On Farm Readiness Reviews	Non-regulatory, confidential visit to a farm to assess a farm’s readiness for compliance with the Produce Safety Rule	3
Total Inspections Completed	All inspections from 2024 growing season	44

Goal 2: Provide Services to Improve On-farm Food Safety for Produce Farms

The Produce Safety Program offers services aimed at strengthening food safety practices, including training, educational field days, a program newsletter for farms, and financial support through a mini-grant.

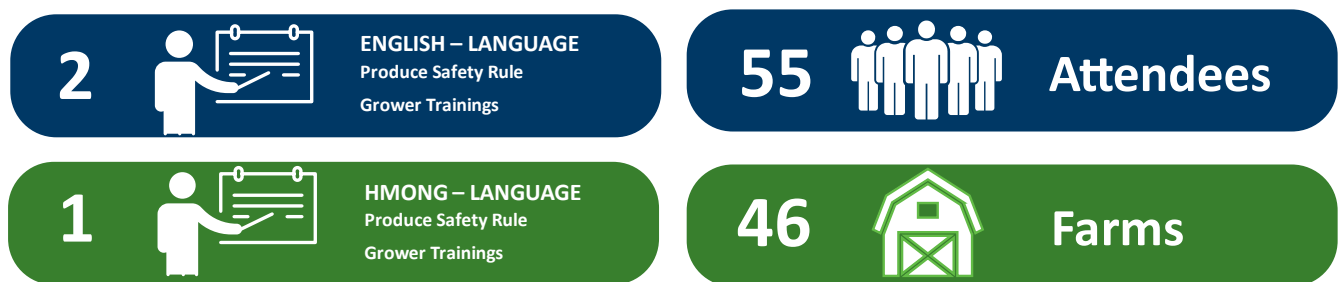
FSMA Produce Safety Rule grower trainings

Building on insights gained from previous inspection years, the program tailors its education to address the common and current challenges faced by growers. In 2024, as shown in Figure 2, the program completed two FSMA PSR Grower Trainings in English and one in Hmong. These three sessions engaged 55 attendees from 46 different farms, helping to further build the capacity of local growers to meet food safety standards.

Grower training attendee

“The FSMA training was great. It was super helpful to speak with other people in similar situations, experiencing similar issues. You folks did an amazing job hosting!” Ben Fontana, Apple Jack Orchards, Delano, MN

Figure 2: Produce Safety Rule Grower Trainings by the numbers in 2024.



Produce safety newsletter impact

Four newsletters were shared in 2024 with over 3,500 recipients for each newsletter. Of those that opened the newsletter, 22% clicked on the links for further learning on food safety and grant opportunities. The newsletter offers timely content to maintain communication with growers throughout the year, including rule updates, understanding the rule with real-life case studies, and food safety strategies proven to work on other farms.



On-farm field day experience

In June 2024, the University of Minnesota (UMN) Extension and the MDA teamed up to host a field day at Apple Jack Orchards in Delano, MN, focused on practical food safety strategies for produce farms. The event covered topics such as effective hygienic practices for harvesting and the safe use of manure-based compost.

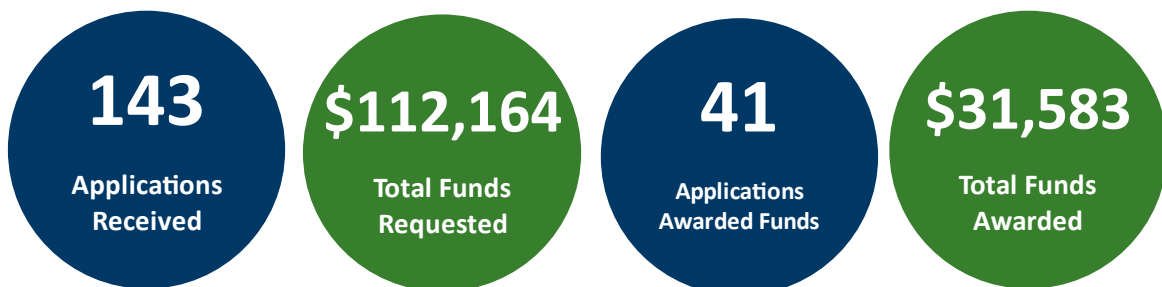
Attendees also received hands-on demonstrations in areas like washing and handling produce, pack shed design, and sanitizer application. This interactive learning experience allowed growers to observe real-life food safety practices in action, providing valuable insights and tools to implement on their own farms.



Produce Safety Mini-Grant: Financially supporting farms in risk reduction practices

The Produce Safety Program mini-grant, funded through the USDA Specialty Crop Block Grant, uses a lottery selection process to reimburse award recipients for eligible expenses that improve on-farm food safety. The expenses most submitted for reimbursement in 2024 included harvest totes and market containers. As described in Figure 3, 143 applications were received totaling \$112,164 funds requested. Of those, 41 were awarded, totaling \$31,583. There were 81 new farms that applied for the mini-grant, with 78 of them excluded from the PSR due to sales, supporting the idea that many new farmers are starting out with diversified produce farms.

Figure 3: Produce Safety Mini-Grant by the numbers in 2024.



Mini-grant recipient

“Thank you so much! This grant really helped me get my farm started on the right foot and be more efficient during produce harvesting. Much appreciated!” Scott Merth, Owner, Kaleidoscope Market Garden, Minneapolis, MN



Statewide study: Engaging produce growers to identify food safety priorities

Approximately 3.7% of produce farms in Minnesota are regulated under the Federal FSMA PSR with an additional 39 farms requesting a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) audit. This leaves approximately 968 farms growing higher risk produce without any food safety support or verification. In 2024, the MDA conducted a series of engagement activities—including surveys, one-on-one phone calls, and a focus group discussion—to better understand the needs of produce growers and buyers across the state regarding food safety services. These efforts involved farms of all sizes, including those with limited English proficiency, as well as produce associations, organizations, and buyers. The organizations included the Minnesota Grocers Association, Minnesota Farmer’s Market Association, Latino Economic Development Center, Minnesota Farmers Union, Minnesota Apple Growers Association, Sustainable Farming Association, Minnesota Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association, and more.

Feedback obtained highlighted the need for greater training and technical support for farms to improve food safety practices as shown in Figure 4. Growers indicated a desire for more virtual training opportunities in short digestible formats. Other key themes included the desire for non-regulatory inspections, as voiced by multiple associations, to help farms enhance food safety with on-farm technical support without the risk of enforcement. Other suggestions included a tiered food safety system to build smaller farms up and free consultative assessments for growers. Buyers, including school districts in the farm-to-school program, expressed the need for more support in evaluating farm food safety to increase local produce sourcing. Efforts are underway by the Produce Safety Program to utilize this valuable feedback into meaningful outcomes for produce growers focusing on the resources that will be more useful.

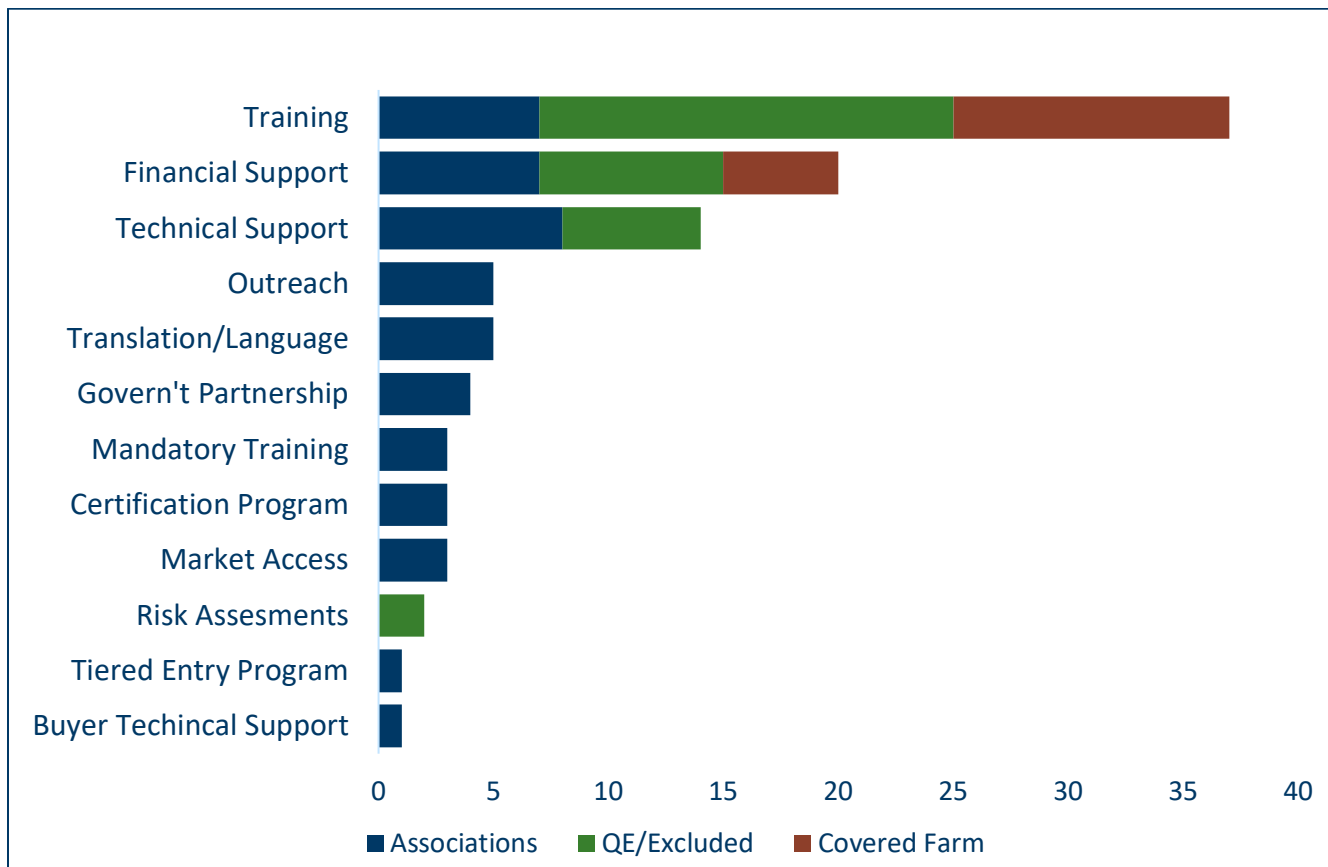
Farmer feedback

"The training classes should consider breaking the subjects down into bite-sized parts. The subject seems straightforward, but we (farmers) need to be able to focus on the many systems required for our post-harvest processes."

"We need easy and accessible education that we can all remember, reteach, and apply."

"Free in-person training at a farm in my area with examples of GAPs and other food safety practices is needed."

Figure 4: Bar graph depicting the overall responses of what produce growers need to improve food safety. Results indicated that more food safety training, financial support, and technical support are more necessary.



Goal 3: Delivering Accurate Farm Status with Improved Inventory Data

The Produce Safety Program Grower Questionnaire is a tool developed to help farms identify their status under the PSR and assist the Produce Safety Program in building and maintaining the Produce Farm Inventory. As shown in Figure 5, in 2024 there were 248 responses as farms are now being asked every three years to complete the grower questionnaire. A pre-populated form is now used for farms that previously submitted information, taking approximately five minutes to complete. This saved growers on average seven minutes compared to new farms completing the survey for the first time. Streamlining the process to be less intrusive on growers continues to be a priority in 2025.

Figure 5: Produce Safety Grower Questionnaire by the numbers in 2024.



Farm status

A farm’s status determines their requirements under the PSR and can change from year to year based on markets and sales data. For 2024, significant progress was made updating and improving farm status information. Targeted outreach, including phone calls and farm visits, helped ensure that farms are accurately assigned. This effort strengthens the Produce Safety Program’s ability to provide tailored education and support. The following data provides an overview of farm statuses for 2023 compared to 2024.

Table 2: Total Produce Farms: 2023 MDA Data vs. 2024 MDA Data

PSR Farm Status	Status Requirements	MDA Produce Farm Inventory 2023	MDA Produce Farm Inventory 2024
Covered	Must follow full standards of the rule, farms are subject to a routine inspection	42	45
Eligible for Exemptions	Must keep certain records, farms are not subject to a routine inspection	179	207
Excluded	Rule doesn’t apply, farms are not subject to routine inspection	770	791

Future Priorities

In 2025, the Produce Safety Program will focus on expanding training opportunities for farms not covered by the FSMA Produce Safety Rule and improving farm status data through a streamlined Grower Questionnaire. Additionally, the program will work to establish a uniform foundation for its design and management through participation in the Produce Regulatory Program Standards Pilot Program with FDA.

