

# On-Farm Food Processing Course in Maryland: A Multi-Agency Approach



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# Background

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- Farmers' markets becoming more popular
  - Types of foods sold expanding
  - Broad consumer appeal
- Farms are disappearing
  - Valuable land
  - Agricultural preservation important to MDA
- Farms need to be profitable to remain viable
  - On-farm processing of value-added foods can help profitability

# Revised state regulations (Feb. 2005)

- Overall purpose
  - Expand economic opportunities for Maryland farmers
- Key points
  - Allowed individual who owns farm to process foods at home for commercial sale
  - Expanded allowable foods
  - Greatly expanded marketing opportunities
    - Farmers' markets, retail stores, restaurants
    - Out of state

# Foods allowed: Limited selection of non-potentially hazardous foods

- Baked breads, biscuits, cakes, muffins, cookies ( $A_w < 0.85$ ) without potentially hazardous toppings, glazes, icings, fillings
- Fruit pies, turnovers, tarts ( $pH < 4.6$ )
- Canned acid foods ( $pH < 4.6$ )
  - Fruit jelly, jams, and preserves
  - Fruit butter from apple, apricot, grape, peach, plum, prune, quince
- Herbs in vinegar ( $pH < 4.6$ )
- Honey
- Dried fruit and vegetables
- Peanut butter
- Some fish

# Foods not allowed

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- Low-acid canned foods
- Cured or fermented foods
- Apple cider or other juices
- Grade A milk products
- Frozen desserts

# Animal and seafood products

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- Limited processing of raw meat from animals raised on the farm
- Animal (beef, lamb, pork) must be slaughtered and chilled at facility inspected and regulated by USDA
- Seafood finfish allowed, except those associated with histamine intoxication, such as tuna, mackerel, and mahi mahi

# Key provisions of regulations

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- Food must be produced in kitchen located on the farm
- Must allow inspections
  - Limited to areas and equipment used for processing
  - Samples may be taken
- Keep ingredients and finished products in separate areas for commercial and domestic use
- License required

# Strategies for risk reduction

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- Limit permissible foods
- Limit production to \$40,000/year
- Yearly inspection
- Before approval
  - Provide consultation
  - Conduct process review
  - On-site visit to kitchen
- Train farmers in safe food processing



# Training course

- Must be completed prior to applying for license
- Minimum 8 hours of training in
  - Applied microbiology
  - Sanitation
  - Good manufacturing practices
  - HACCP principles
  - Cross-contamination controls
  - Food security/food defense
- 4 regional one-day workshops in March 2005
- Optional acidified food course
- Agencies involved: DHMH, MDA, MCE, USDA

# Training course (contd.)

- Widely publicized
  - Governor's office
  - Participating agencies
  - News releases, websites
- Provided notebooks
  - Written resources
  - Applicable regulations
- Evaluations
- Certificate



# **Certificate of Attendance**

*This certifies that*

***JOHN DOE***

*has attended the*

**ON-FARM PROCESSING COURSE**

March 7, 2005

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# Key points made to farmers

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- You assume a large responsibility when processing foods for the public
- You must differentiate between home cooking and on-farm food processing: Different mindset
- You may not transfer the risk you may be willing to accept onto those who will consume your product
- You need a proper process
- You need to follow proper sanitation
  - Clean food contact surfaces
  - How pets and children contribute to contamination

# Challenges

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- Collecting registration fees
- Communicating with all stakeholders
  - County offices of economic development and agricultural marketing professionals initially omitted in planning
- Roadblocks
  - Coordination/turf issues
  - Resistance of certain groups

# Outcomes

- Approximately 250 farmers attended the course
- Quantitative evaluations: Knowledge gained
  - 20 questions
  - Pre test: mid-60s
  - Post test: high-70s
- Qualitative evaluations: Impressions
  - Highly favorable
- Low attendance (n=9) at acidified food course
- 3 on-farm home food processing licenses granted

# Possible stumbling blocks

- Suspicion of government agencies
- Perception of too many hurdles
  - Inconvenience of training locations
  - Course offered one time per region
- Fear of on-site inspection
  - Concerns that violations will be found
  - Well water, septic system, potable water
- Local ordinances for zoning, water, and sewage
- Liability issues
- Timing of training sessions (March too late?)
- License fees

# Where do we go from here?

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- Survey participants to learn reasons for low license applications
- Understand reasons for continuing violations at farmers' markets
- Consider providing assistance to farmers to upgrade water and sewage systems



# Conclusions

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- Starting point: A practical first step
- Issue will not go away
  - Interest is high
  - Political realities
- Lessons learned
  - Involve all stakeholders
  - Address farmers' concerns

# Thank you!

