

Transcript: Hilario Alvarez of Alvarez Organic Farms: Managing Employees and Direct Marketing Outlets During COVID-19

Music

[00:00:14] Malaquías Flores: Hello everyone, and welcome to the Farm Walks podcast brought by Tilth Alliance and Washington State University's Food Systems Program. I am Malaquías Flores and I will be your host for this episode.

We are moving forward in the second season and continue to bring together a great team of organic and sustainable farmers, and some fantastic food systems innovators. As always, you can head over to the Farm Walks website to stay up-to-date on new episodes and resources, so check it out at FarmWalks.org. If you haven't already, check out the first season and complete an evaluation of the episodes you've heard. Attention! There's a drawing underway, so complete those assessments.

[00:01:21] In this episode of the Farm Walks podcast, I'm speaking with Hilario Alvarez of Alvarez Organic Farms in Mabton, Washington. We will learn about the impacts the pandemic has had on markets and employee management and how procedures have been adapted to comply with food safety regulations since COVID. Later in the episode, we'll dive into more detail about food safety regulations with Davis Blasini of the Produce Safety Alliance.

[00:02:13] Hilario: I am Hilario Álvarez. I am the owner of Alvarez Farm. We produce many, two hundred, varieties of chili peppers and then we also produce different kinds of vegetables.

Malaquías: What is the name of your operation?

Hilario: - Álvarez Organic Farm.

Malaquías: -Very good. Can you tell us or give us an overview of what your farm is, where it is located, how many hectares you have, what crops you have, where you sell, etcetera, etc.?

Hilario: -It's 82 acres and it's located at 300 Murray Road, in Mabton, Washington 98935.

Malaquías: -What crops do you have?

Hilario: -We have like 40 kinds of vegetables including... like 230 varieties of vegetables, including chiles. Because we planted 51 kinds of eggplants and then we also planted this peanut. We also sow okra, and then also cucumbers of different kinds, to garlic, onion, potatoes, 15 varieties of potatoes. And we also plant many varieties of zucchini, 15 varieties we have of zucchini. Then also pork rinds, green beans of many varieties, beans, corn. There are many varieties to remember all of them very well.

Malaquías: And of all these products, which one do you like? And which one sells the most?

Hilario: Oh, the chilies! Well, I'm going to tell you that almost the majority, because chili peppers are what we most focus on here on the ranch, but also the varieties of potatoes are sold a lot, because of this sun, almost nobody sows them here. This also, the one that sells a lot is the peanut, because nobody grows it here and it is fresh, and that is why it is very good. It is a variety that is always sold, never left over. Chilies yes, because there are some varieties that sell very well and are needed, and other varieties that are left over, because it also kills it when you have pests.

[00:05:16] Malaquías: -What do you do with the chiles you have left?

Hilario: -We dry most of one part, and others, well, we make them in vinegar like these Pico Peppers, and we also save the rest for the family. But most are sold fresh, and the other part we dry. I have a large dehydrator to dry and so we sell them dry, because they can last two or three years.

Malaquías: -And with red chilies, what else do you do, what do you also sell?

Hilario: -With the red chilies we make braids and crowns and we sell more because the small chilies are almost not sold by the pound, because they are very small. It's a lot of work to pick them, it takes more than an hour to pick a five-gallon bucket, and then we can do this in decorations like little trains and you know, like the ones I took you the other time there.

Malaquías: -Yes.

Hilario: -And this, the others are the crowns that we make also and that are sold, as the saying goes, "like hot bread. "

Malaquías: (laughs) That's right. And where do you sell all this, all your products?

Hilario: -All goes to Seattle, to the farmers markets is where everything is sold the most.

Malaquías: -And in how many markets do you sell?

Hilario: -It's like ten farmers markets that we have in Seattle, that we sell.

Malaquías: -Ten.

Hilario: -Uh huh.

Malaquías: -And there you sell everything?

Hilario: -Everything is sold there.

Malaquías: -Do you sell at Pike Place?

[00:07:13] Hilario: The one who knows is my son, it is he who sells there, but it is like more than 10 markets that we have, some on the same day, some are on different days of the week.

Malaquías: -But the Pike Place?

Hilario: Yes, Pike Place is one.

Malaquías: -Very good.

Hilario: -There are the Columbia City Farmers Market, Ballard Market, and Tacoma Farmers Market, yes there are many. Proctor Farmers Market and there are several that I don't remember anymore.

Malaquías: Now let's talk a little about your background. How did you get started in agriculture?

[00:08:03] *Hilario:* -I started farming in 1976. I came, I worked with a Filipino in Wapato, and there I learned, he taught me very well how they did things and everything. And I learned how it was planted, how long it was planted and how it was harvested and everything. I learned like in five or six years. And then in 1981, I rented a little place there on the Indian reservation and I planted there on my own in 1981. [00:08:44]

[00:08:46] *Hilario:* And in 1988, I bought my own land here in the Mabton, Washington area. And so we were learning and we were practicing, and I'll tell you that I still do not learn well.

Malaquías: -You're still practicing.

Hilario: -I'm still practicing.

Malaquías: -And how did you get to having your own land?

Hilario: -Well... I had some properties there in Mexico, and I here, I found some good friends, very good, who sold... as they say, real estate, like...

Malaquías: -Land.

Hilario: -They sell land, houses, everything from real estate, you know? And then, I borrowed money from them and they lent it to me, and I saw the entity, but they told me that I had to pay them soon. So, I went to Mexico, I had some properties there and I went, I sold and I brought the money and I paid them first, and I was paying until I finished paying for that land, and the same person came and told me, "I have more land for you", and I told him "let's see it", and he showed me the other land.

Malaquías: -And you bought it?

[00:10:23] *Hilario:* -Yes. Then we bought another one, in 2004. That one I found, I saw a sign, I got inside, and there was the little road that was going... And there in the little place, I went and asked, I talked to the real estate agent and they said "yes, it is for sale". I asked for money to buy that land and asked for more.

Malaquías: Yes, I remember that one. Yes, yes, yes. So, in total, how much land do you have?

Hilario: -It's 82 acres.

Malaquías: -82 acres. And in those 82 acres, how much time have you been cultivating it?

Hilario: -Approximately... in 1988 I bought here. [00:11:21]

[00:11:23] *Hilario*: -Then in '89 we planted. And from then to now, until this time, it has been like more than 31 years, 35 years.

Malaquías: -Well, you're already an expert in all this.

Hilario: -Well, we are already 35 years old, so planting our own.

Malaquías: -Yes, yes, yes.

Hilario: -But before 1981, I started renting there with the Filipinos in the Wapato area, and there we planted is as leased, right? I didn't own it.

Malaquías: -But they count as years of farming.

Hilario: -50 years of agriculture.

[00:12:11] *Malaquías*: -All right, then, since you cultivate so much land, you must have help.

Hilario: -Yes.

Malaquías: -How many people do you employ?

Hilario: -Like more than 20 people because, including the family, the whole family also helps us here. It is a family business and here we all eat, and here we all work. The whole family helped us, why would we say no more, alone.

Malaquías: -Awhile ago you told me that your son is the one in charge of the markets.

Hilario: -Eduardo.

Malaquías: -Eduardo. You don't take care of it anymore.

Hilario: -No.

Malaquías: -He takes care of everything?

Hilario: -I am in charge of the farm, I take care of the labor.

Malaquías: -And he in in charge of selling.

Hilario: -And he sells.

Malaquías: -And of course, your daughters also go to the markets, and your sons.

Hilario: -Yes, them too.

Malaquías: -So, in total, like 20 people. Now, during this time, did you have trouble finding people to work with you?

Hilario: Yes, last year we were very much in need of people and more than 20 acres were lost due to lack of labor.

Malaquías: -So you were affected by the pandemic.

Hilario: -Yes, it affected me a lot. The previous year as well. But not as much, not the same as this year.

Malaquías: -This year was difficult?

Hilario: -This year was terrible as soon as we took out to pay the expenses. [00:13:57]

[00:13:59] *Malaquías:* -And what did you do?

Hilario: -What?

Malaquías: -What did you do?

Hilario: -Well, the good thing is that the bank lent us money and then we got a little help from the government. And this way we survived well.

Malaquías: -How good! And this year, how does it look?

Hilario: -This year I don't know yet, but I look good. I plan to continue working.

Malaquías: -Now with this pandemic, did you have any problems or did you have to make certain changes in the way your employees work in your farm operation to comply with COVID regulations?

Hilario: -Yes, we had to put on the workers well, because if while I gave them masks, they didn't want to put them on and we had to make those arrangements, that if they didn't wear masks, they couldn't work, and all the regulations that the government wanted, we complied.

Malaquías: -Very good. Do you wash some of your products?

Hilario: -Yes, almost all.

Malaquías: -Did you have to make changes to the way your washing and packing area worked, because of COVID?

Hilario: -Yes, we had to make changes.

Malaquías: -Tell us a little bit about what you had to do.

Hilario: -Well, first of all, with potatoes, when you pick them, because they come little with dirt, they are washed well in a pan with clean water and packed, and everything we had to sanitize and have well cleaned so that it cannot contaminate the vegetables. We've done... for a long time, we have been doing that and nothing has never come out contaminated.

Malaquías: -Very good, and since you sell in many markets in the Seattle area, how did COVID affect the sales in these markets?

Hilario: - Oh, a lot, you saw that in many it was different because we did not sell the same as before the pandemic. [00:16:48]

[00:16:50] *Hilario:* Another thing is that we had to work harder so that the vegetables were not contaminated, washing them very well, everything well arranged, because this is actually, people did not leave their homes and for that reason it did not sell well. I think one of the reasons that we didn't go bankrupt is that people didn't leave their homes to buy.

Malaquías: -What changes did you have to make?

Hilario: -Like what?

Malaquías: -To be able to comply with the rules for COVID.

Hilario: -Oh, the change we had to make is that many ordered by phone because they didn't want to go out to the Farmers Markets, because there were a lot of people and the market rules were very strict as well. You had to wear a mask, and then wear gloves and I had to... Today we hire more people for delivery.

Malaquías: -Ok. Very good. And did you have to adapt the booth where you sell the products because of COVID?

Hilario: -Yes.

Malaquías: -What did you do?

Hilario: -We had to do as they say, keep the distance.

Malaquías: -Yes.

Hilario: -And sometimes...

Malaquías: -The mask?

Hilario: -Masks, the Department of Health said, we had to do that and because if not, also the people who were going to buy from you had to wear their mask too. And all this is because the law came, that is, people did what the law said.

Malaquías: -A bit ago you mentioned that sometimes... people call you on the phone to order products.

Hilary: -Uh huh.

Malaquías: - Have you added any new marketing channels, as well as this?

Hilario: -I don't understand.

Malaquías: -Yes, you say that now people don't go out to buy from you, but instead order by telephone.

Hilario: - Ah, yes!

[00:19:24] *Malaquías* - It's a new form of marketing.

Hilario: Yes, there were a lot of people who ordered on the phone or on the Internet, as they say.

Malaquías - Yes, yes, yes.

Hilario: -And we have to take stuff to the restaurants, too.

Malaquías - Very good.

Hilario: -We also have to knock on their doors.

Malaquías – And are you going to continue to use this?

Hilario: -As you can. If you have to use it as... What it is now about is selling the product and we have to engage, do it as right now also in stores: you order something, and go there, and they knock on the door of your car. What we're going to do, we're going to try to sell as we can with orders over the phone. We also want to do, to see if we can, as they say, the "Basket Program".

Malaquías - Yes, yes, yes, yes. The boxes or baskets.

Hilario: -Yes, the boxes.

Malaquías -The CSA?

Hilario: -Yes, this one too.

Malaquías – And are you working on that, too?

Hilario: -Yes, we want to do that, we haven't planned it well. But I'm also thinking that there's one thing we're going to do if we continue to suffer from a lack of manpower. And if the sales are not good, I don't think we will plant more this year. Or we might focus on things that need fewer employees like sowing corn and alfalfa. Because I no longer want to continue losing seed in the field if there is no labor.

Malaquías - That's it.

Hilario: -And sow, my son is telling me to plant little, take what one can do among the whole family and no more for the farmers market, because that's the plan. If the workforce is still lacking. Another is that workers are wanting to earn more and now they put in place the law this that you have to pay them overtime, and that will also affect a lot.

[00:21:59] *Malaquías* -Yes.

Hilario: -Because I have many years selling vegetables at the same price and I can't raise it, but the labor is going up and the overtime, insurance, and everything, all the gas. Gasoline, it's one thing that we use a lot here for tractors, diesel, all that. As I told you, it is a fortune that goes into that product to buy diesel and gasoline.

Malaquías -So, if you're using new marketing methods, are you going to continue using them even after the COVID thing is over? Because what to do is sell?

Hilario: -I'll sell.

Malaquías - And the other, that labor is affecting and you plan to lower the production of what the family can grow.

Hilario: -Yes, that's the change we want to make.

Malaquías – So, don't grow the 88 acres? Yes, well, grow them, but with other crops.

Hilario: -Yes. The boys already do as they want, because we rent the land. The family decides.

Malaquías -Very good. All of this gradually heading toward your retirement.

Hilario: -Yes, exactly.

Malaquías - Very good.

Hilario: -But I like agriculture, I love watching vegetables grow and seeing people enjoy what you produce, because right now we feed more than 10,000 people in Seattle with organic vegetables, everything. I like all of that. But if there is no way to keep going with people, and there are workers, very well, and I also like that people benefit here working, but this is really getting very... [00:24:19]

[00:24:19] *Hilario:* I don't blame the workers, they have to earn, and they may want to make \$20 an hour and... It is that the other way around too, you have to charge more for vegetables because you just exceed the costs and don't earn anything.

Malaquías - All right, what do you expect in this 2022? Are there any interesting changes in your business? Or in production?

Hilario: -No, I don't think so, because what I hope is that there will be enough manpower to continue working on the land, but this year we are going to see many changes. I think it's going to be, instead of telling you better, it's going to be worse.

Malaquías – That's right, yes.

Hilario: -If you look you will see that I give you a couple between now and November. And you will see that it is going to be a big change, but not for the better, for the worse.

Malaquías -Depending?

Hilario: -Yes, depending, especially if this pandemic is not controlled, because that it is going to go, it is not going to go, here it will remain, but we have to take care of ourselves, because if there are many changes that people get very sick, it will be sad for all people even more.

Malaquías - That's right.

Hilario: -So we are going to see, due to the pandemic what the changes are going to be, and the money, to see how it goes.

[00:26:02] *Malaquías:* -That's right. In other words, we have to adapt.

Hilario: -We have to adapt to what you see, whatever, you have to adapt. For example, from now on, you have to pay close attention to the workforce. And if you see that you are going to lack people, then you have to... Last year, I had 10 to 3 that were not planted at all.

Malaquías: -Last year?

Hilario: -Last year and they were not planted because there were no people set to sow the seed and nothing to leave there without... [00:26:41]

[00:26:42] *Hilario:* That is, without cultivating, because the seed needs a lot. What also affected us was the strong heat wave, because the vegetables were burned and then also from the heat wave, soon the grass grew. So the heat affected us a lot. It had never been hot like that before as last year.

Malaquías: - So, do you see a negative impact on what you do?

Hilario: -Yes.

Malaquías: -And this 2022 is going to be decisive to see what you are going to do? Lower production...

Hilario: -Lower production or rent out the land, or sow little because of lack of labor. Ah, sow food for the cows.

Malaquías: -All right, then, changes are coming.

Hilario: -Yes, changes are coming, but we are going to see this year. And depending on how well everything goes this year, we will continue. But if not, changes must be made.

Malaquías: You have to adapt. There is no other way.

Hilario: I tell you, between now and November, we'll know.

Malaquías: -We're going to have to be in continuous contact with check in on how it's going.

Hilario: -Yes, Malaquías.

Malaquías: -Now I'm going to ask you some questions and I want you to answer me with one word or a little phrase.

Hilario: -Okay.

Malaquías: -This is the first one. What do you like about agriculture?

Hilario: -I like to see when plants grow and when they produce.

Malaquías: -Ok. What don't you like?

Hilario: -That I lack labor because then I don't have products to sell. I've never had a problem with selling, but that I have lacked labor to harvest.

Malaquías: - What do you like to do most in the off-season?

Hilario: -Season? Working the land, ploughing and disking, I love that.

Malaquías: -No, when you are not farming, the off-season, when it is over. [00:29:21]

[00:29:23] *Hilario:* -Spend time with family.

Malaquías: -Very good.

Hilario: -Also, go to Mexico.

Malaquías: -Ah, yes.

Hilario: -For the holidays, because after a lot of work you have to chill out.

Malaquías: -Yes. If you could acquire a skill instantly. What would it be?

Hilario: "I don't quite understand that, let's see, ask me again?"

Malaquías: -A skill, to be able to do something easily. What would you like?

Hilario: -Ah so plant the vegetables inside the greenhouse shade. How do you say, "silvastart". I love that too, planting the little seeds in...

Malaquías: -All right, now a commercial. Where can people find you if they want to buy your products or connect with you?

Hilario: -Seattle is where all the business is.

Malaquías: Yes, but where? I mean, is there a phone number, is there an address? Is there a Facebook account, is there an Instagram? What do you have for people to find you?

Hilario: -All that you mention, that's everything.

Malaquías: -And anything else you would like to say?

Hilario: -Only that you help us get more people to continue planting, because if not, this is going to be my last year.

Malaquías: -Yes, that would be a very big loss.

Hilario: -Yes because there are many people...there are some in Seattle who say, "Where are we going to buy the vegetables?" Now they've told us we're like water thrown to the sea because we plant everything, we have a bit of everything.

Malaquías: -That's right. Yes, yes, yes.

Hilario: -It's something that makes sales better, because there they find booths of all fresh peanuts.

Malaquías: -Yes.

Hilario: -Freshly picked.

Malaquías: -(Music) This episode is generously funded by the National Farmers' Union Local Food Safety Collaborative, a network of agricultural and livestock organizations that provide education and training to local food producers. Have you completed an evaluation of this episode? [00:32:22]

[00:32:23] *Malaquías:* Your feedback helps us adapt and update future programming, and communicate needs and impacts to our sponsors. Each evaluation submitted for Season 1 episodes counts as an entry drawing for a prize from Osborne Quality Seeds and Chelsea

Green Publishing and Green Horn, and there's more to come for Season 2. Evaluations can be found in Farmwalks.org.

Malaquías: -Okay, continuing with the Farm Walks podcast of Hilario Álvarez Organic Farms, we now have an interview with two people who know a lot about food safety, the topic that was discussed with Álvarez a few days ago. So, to start, this is episode number 9 "Alvarez Organic Farms."

The topic, as I already mentioned, was training, employee management, direct marketing outlets during COVID, and this podcast was funded by the National Farmers Union's Local Food Safety Collaborative.

So we're going to kick this off and we're going to ask our guests to introduce themselves and tell us where they're from and what they're doing. Go ahead.

David Blasini: Thank you Malaquias. My name is David Blasini I am a Spanish-speaking Extension associate of the PSA Alliance, or as it is called in English, Product Safety Alliance, which is located at Cornell University, in New York. However, I live in Phoenix, Arizona.

Ricardo Orellana: Thank you Malaquias, for the invitation. In this important space of communication with producers and people interested in food safety, food in general, I am Ricardo Orellana, David Blasini's partner. I am also a Spanish-speaking Extension associate in the PSA Alliance, and our job is basically to provide technical assistance, training to producers in the United States and also to Extension workers, to educators about this issue of food safety. [00:35:21]

[00:35:23] *Malaquías:* -Perfect, because we are going to be in good hands with lots of information to follow up on this podcast about Álvarez Farms. So I'm Malaquias Flores, I live in Washington state and I worked for Washington State University, from which I retired about five or six years ago. And now I am here with you to present this information.

So, now let's talk a little bit about what Alvarez told us in his interview. There was talk of different changes they had to make when it came to training employees during COVID. Could you explain some of these recommendations and guidelines, now as we see the mask mandate and other regulations lifting, are there changes being made in the rules for farms?

David Blasini: -Ok, as the CDC has mentioned, it is now recommended that you follow the guidelines that are made in each of the counties of the U.S. So, it is important that the producer take into account the number that the CDC has specified - the number of hospitalizations and the number of infections in their localities - and in that way, they will be able to determine the best practices to take when training their workers.

Ricardo Orellana: -And this is an interesting topic, Malaquias, because I live here in a town, in Hammers, Massachusetts, and basically what we have to follow on farms, gardens, and ranches, are certain policies that are defined by the workers, , in this case all , that have to do with health and hygiene. And also, that means training workers to avoid contamination. In this case, COVID, for example, always as food cannot stop, [00:37:36]

[00:37:37] We need to eat and that is why we have to establish certain biosecurity protocols that allow producers to harvest products that are really safe for people, and not... because as David already said, it is important to follow the guidance of the authorities on these issues, but also that producers define certain policies and in this specific case, given that often consumer customers come to the orchards to buy, it is also important to keep them informed of the policies and the specific care that must be followed on the ranches or in the garden, or on the farm.

Malaquías: -That's right, with this COVID thing that came to change all the rules in terms of food production and in terms of food safety as well, it is important to follow, as you mention, the guidelines that are in each county where those foods are produced and that producers and people who consume these foods follow those guidelines to really have a food that is safe and of benefit to people. So, that's the way it should be, we have to follow the rules.

All right, so we're going to leave the topic of COVID, and we're going to dig a little bit deeper into what food safety is. So, in general, employee trainings. What are some of the duties when training your employees in hygiene issues to prevent contamination?

David Blasini: Ok, thank you Malaquías, for that question. One thing I would like to add onto what we talked about regarding COVID to end that point, is the fact that producers are the first interested in keeping their staff healthy. So, just that is one of the most important things to ensure the production of these fresh agricultural products.

[00:40:05] It's having staff who are healthy because that way, the work will go better. So, that's another thing that is also important to mention here, that it's most beneficial for the producer to use the best possible practices to reduce the risks of COVID contagion. And now, talking about food safety, first it would be good to mention in the translation of the word "seguridad", because we were just talking a little bit about that. The word "seguridad" in English is sometimes translated as "security", when in fact the translation is "safety". Safety means that it is harmless, that it does no harm. And that is precisely what we pursue when we talk about stopping having products that are harmless, that do not cause any kind of harm to consumers, because that is the way the producer can ensure that his product is going to be sold, obviously. Speaking of which, in 2011, the federal government, rightly concerned about outbreaks of foodborne illness, published a new law at the time called the Food Safety Modernization Act.

That law is designed through seven different rules. One of those rules is called Produce Safety Rule, or law of safety of food or fresh agricultural products, and precisely emphasizes fresh agricultural products because these products are consumed raw, and precisely the importance of the safety of fresh agricultural products, because, as we know, they arrive raw to the consumer, and the consumer does not cook them, does not do any kind of treatment, and those pathogens that are in those products reach people and obviously cause problems, diseases and even death. [00:42:18]

[00:42:19] And that's why the federal government determined the need to create this new law back then. Since 2015, there have been groups of educators working throughout the

United States, training coaches and producers so that we are all in it, we have the same understanding about this very important concept that is safety, and especially as I mentioned, when we talk about fresh agricultural products.

Mentioning that, this safety standard for fresh agricultural products has many sections, which determine that workers have to be trained, they have to have an understanding about how their daily activities can affect the safety of these products. So here I can expand more, but that is precisely the reason why this rule came to light and has been implemented since 2015. I don't know if Ricardo, do you want to add something else?

Ricardo Orellana: -Yes, basically, a kind of conclusion is that the safety standard for fresh agricultural products, the FSMA law, in this case, focuses on microorganisms. Basically, we talk about viruses, bacteria and parasites, that is, how to protect the consumer from them in the future. When a product harvested, when it was handled, contaminated with this type of microorganisms, to prevent disease in the consumer. That is one of the main objectives of the standard, to basically prevent the spread of foodborne illness. One way to achieve that is by training the workers, by training the producers and as David already mentioned, also by educating. And that's where health and hygiene are fundamental, because people can serve as a source of cross-contamination. That is, we can touch a material that is contaminated with these microorganisms and transmit it to a surface where there will be contact with food or contaminate the food itself. [00:44:43]

[00:44:45] *Malaquías:* -Excellent information, Ricardo and David. So, the producer must ensure that their workers are healthy and that using the cleanest methods to be able to produce those foods, and of course related to COVID, because they must be healthy and free of COVID to be able to work in the field as a first requirement. The second thing then is more about how to produce those foods as clean as possible. David, you mentioned something that the rule or the program in general is good, but specifically, what factors or in which part of the production should be more careful?

David Blasini: Thank you very much again, very good that question. First of all it is good to emphasize that we have a large variety of produce in this country. As we know, the climates, the types, the regions that we have in the United States are very, very different from each other. And that's why this standard wasn't designed as specific to a product or a region in general. It has a certain kind of generalization, in order to be applicable both in Arizona, where it is as hot, as in Washington, where it rains more and is not as hot, and in New York, where it is colder. We see that this rule has that kind of generality, it is not so specific to products or regions, precisely to leave it open be able to apply to everyone equally. However, when we are speaking in Spanish, I would like to emphasize, since we are talking in this interview in Spanish, that the standard indicates how important it is for producers providing training to their workers, to provide it in the language that these workers speak, order for it to be understandable. [00:47:02]

[00:47:03] Very important also that the standard emphasizes the idea of doing the training in a way that is more understandable not only with the language. We also have issues with people sometimes not knowing how to read and write. So, the standard takes into account

that part and says that it is very good to do audiovisual trainings, to do demonstrative trainings. I have long emphasized what hand washing practice is, and precisely when talking about practice, the best way is to teach or train workers by doing these practices and with posters. If someone does not know how to read and write well, or more or less, with posters, with drawings in an audiovisual way, it is a more effective way to reach all workers, regardless of the language or the level of understanding of what it is to read and write.

Malaquías: -Very good. So, it must be that the training for this kind of thing that you want to prevent, should be done in Spanish, although there are many places and many farms that do not have people who speak Spanish and do it in English, but it is difficult for a Hispanic worker who does not speak English and who does not know how to read English, to be able to understand all these things and be able to apply them in the field. So it is very important that this training is in Spanish, so that it is clear and precise about what should be done, and even more important for those people who do not know how to read and write, to have those posters like you mention, David. It's essential, it's very important. And Ricardo, you mention some other risk factors such as the water that is used, such as this worker hygiene. [00:49:13]

[00:49:15] These are very important issues to be able to apply and implement to have a safe production that is ready for family consumption. All right, so what other factors could we consider in all of this, apart from what David already talked about?

David Blasini: -Here, to also continue with this idea of safety and training of producers and workers, which, by the way, I consider the most important thing -- to train the workers, because they are the ones who are day by day, from morning to night, working in the fields. They are the ones who can really monitor and can carry out these actions to reduce the risks of contamination. Another thing that I would also like to say about this safety standard for fresh agricultural products, which was published in 2015 by our institution, PSA Alliance, in Spanish, is that the Alliance was commissioned with the task of developing a course, a curriculum, to precisely teach the most important parts of this standard that were new in 2015. In this curriculum, many many producers do not know in the train-the-trainer course. It has been divided into certain areas and I believe that here we can emphasize those different areas, and that is what Ricardo started to say.

Ricardo began by talking about pathogens. They are these pathogens - viruses, parasites, bacteria - which we cannot see, and that is precisely the problem. By not being able to detect when they are there, we can transmit those pathogens from our hands, from our tools to the products. Pathogens is the origin of the safety problem. [00:51:25]

[00:51:26] We have divided that curriculum, or that course, into different sections and one, as Ricardo mentioned, is workers. Precisely, in the role of the workers, preventing this type of pollution. And Ricardo also mentioned this idea that is very important: cross-contamination. Precisely, our hands, our phones, tools that are contaminated, we can pass that contamination there from our hands to the products. And that's why we divide into modules, a module precisely emphasizing what workers can do to reduce pollution risks. Soil amendments are also another important part of an agricultural activity, especially

because these amendments come from biological remains of feces or compost, because obviously, here there may be a pathogen.

We also talk about domestic animals and wild animals. When wild animals are introduced into orchards, they can carry pathogens through their feces or fur.

The water. Water is very important because water can transmit pathogens from one part of a river to the orchard. And that is precisely a very important part. We have seen quite a few problems related to cross-contamination by means of water. And finally, the post-harvest activities. All these activities that once we have all our products together, where there may be some type of contamination in packaging or storage areas. That has been the way in which these trainings have been developed is of the different sections of a training related to this safety standard of fresh agricultural products. I don't know, Ricardo, if there's anything else you could add about it.

Ricardo Orellana- Only that within all those components that the producer or the manager in the garden, or on the ranch or on the farm must consider, there is an important factor.
[00:53:45]

[00:53:46] And it's the factor of communication. And you, Malaquias, already said communication. If workers speak Spanish, well, communication should be in Spanish, because these are critical issues. Pathogens, a contaminated product can lead a farm to have, for example, an outbreak related to these specific pathogens, i.e. sick people, and that can cause a problem in the public interest when many people consume these contaminated foods and get sick. And David already said pathogens cannot be seen with the naked eye to the human eye. It takes a special microbiology team to see them and that's why we have to make them aware, the people who work in handling these animals, that have once been contaminated. It is easy to reproduce because these microorganisms reproduce at a very high rate, very fast, very and generally the conditions of the garden with the condition of humidity, high temperatures, facilitate reproduction and that is why communication is important both with workers and with visitors to the places of production.

Malaquías: -Very good. Here our experts have actually explained to us what all this food safety is, in itself, and we have had enough information, very important, to be able to carry out an excellent job producing our food. And this is a good thing so that Alvarez Organic Farm can also follow these procedures and they can implement them on their farm and they can do a better job with food safety.

[00:55:43] Now David and Ricardo, do you have any advice to make these rules and procedures more understandable and easy for employees to follow?

David Blasini: -Ok, as we talk about about what training is, and each person or each group of people is different, it is very important to determine how you can introduce or train your workers. And as managers, as owners of orchards, the main advice is just to know your employees well, how they understand better, how all this kind of material or training can be made much more effective towards them, and the best way is to get to know their audience. And this is something we always mention in our trainings. That's it, know your

audience. Once you know your audience, you can determine by far, with a more critical and more effective way, how can this type of material be instructed to your workers. I think this is the primary advice that we are always repeating all the time: know your audience and in that way determine if you are going to do it in an audiovisual way, if you are going to do it in writing, through practices, and then in that way this type of training will be more effective.

It is another thing to be constant, because this safety is something that requires perseverance. This is not a thing that is done one day and we forget and we don't do it anymore. This is something that requires constant monitoring and follow-up, because otherwise there is no... with no follow-up, things will be forgotten and lost. So I think those are the two main points that I would like to mention. I don't know, Ricardo, if there's anything you'd like to add about your perspective on it?

Ricardo Orellana: -Well, yes, you had a very complete explanation, what I could add here is that people who work in the field, we usually learn by doing. That is, we like to see, for example, if I am a harvester of leafy greens, green leafy products, or pumpkins, or apples, it is important that the training, that the teaching or training is done in a practical way.

[00:58:25]

[00:58:26] That is, the producer can define one day a week to talk five or ten minutes about a topic of interest. For example, in an organic farm like this one that we are talking about, Don Hilario Álvarez. In these types of orchards, many organic fertilizers or organic fields are used. Well, take the time when the person who is preparing the furrows, the beds, the camellones where the product goes, where the crop is going to be planted, understand that there is a way to handle these types of products and take about 5 minutes, 10 minutes each day, until that concept and that skill is developed by the person. Remember that people, depending on schooling and a number of other factors, can learn easier by listening or seeing or doing.

Another useful tip is to invite a producer. A producer who speaks the perfect language to tell you. Even though we all speak Spanish, I'm from El Salvador. You may not understand another Spaniard, you may have trouble understanding some regionalism and it is important then to invite farms or orchards to do this kind of thing, or to have a picnic, and at that picnic, to have certain workstations. So, we're going to show here how water is handled for packaging facilities, for packaging products, or we're going to have a picnic to see how vehicles are handled for transporting these crops, from the orchard or farm to the packing facilities. Storage is important. We're going to show you how you should handle a cold storage room, a cooler, and that kind of thing where you have to be careful that there is no dripping, that there is no condensation, that the temperature is adequate and that the thermostat is working to control temperature, etc. [01:00:28]

[01:00:29] Or, for example, in the packing house, is there access for mice or birds. How can I handle the seals of the windows, of the doors? A number of things that are important to consider. That's why this is this is a life, as Don Hilario told you, 30 years of making, of planting, of sowing 200 varieties of chilies. Well, it's daily learning, isn't it? Because precisely

depending on the crop, some have more sensitivity to risk than others. And it's very nice because of that.

Malaquías: -That's right, that's right. Very good, friends, because you already heard it from the experts. Training and more training to be able to learn everything that is related to food safety. Now, what if when these workers or those working in the fields who are harvesting whatever, they see something or suspect some contamination? What recommendations would you give to farm owners and managers so that this process is easily reported?

David Blasini: Well, first it's good to mention that the rule here is specific. Here the standard has a section that clearly says that if anyone sees a product that may be contaminated or sees some kind of sign that it is already contaminated, it should not be harvested. It's very, very, very clear in the standard. Like products that drop, products that fall to the ground should not be used as food here. This is very specific in the standard, therefore, it is very important that these type of practices are understood by all workers in the orchard. I don't know if there is anything more, Ricardo, that can be added to this part?

Ricardo Orellana: -Just to highlight something in the curriculum that the PSA Alliance has developed to apply the safety standard of fresh agricultural products, and it is a phrase that says that workers are our first line of defense. [01:02:53]

[01:02:54] But what does that mean? Well, it means that the workers are the people who are touching all the product that goes from the orchard or farm, to the market. And the great concern of touching the product, is what we have already said: pathogens and the main route for cross-contamination. And it's a thing called the fecal oral route. David just mentioned it. We are concerned that there may be human or animal feces in the products. Those products cannot be harvested. So how can the orchard owner or orchard manager communicate with workers?

It's basically doing a couple of things. First communicating, building trust. Because a person, for example, our curriculum has an example: If a worker sees a problem in the field with a product that fell and someone picked it up, put it in the harvest container and reports it, and the owner of the orchard does not take any action, in the future this person will not feel confidence to report that problem, because there is no trust, because it was not acted upon, because nothing was done. But let's look at the other case: The worker reported a problem that was not a problem and the orchard owner did nothing either. In both cases, the producer should approach this worker and say, "Look how good you told me that this problem was happening, but I didn't do anything for this and this reason, it really wasn't a problem." And if he detects that, he will retrain or train this person so that in the future they will continue to report the problems they saw in the orchard. The other thing that the curriculum calls attention to in the training module, they call it monitoring. [01:04:47]

[01:04:48] In the orchard we must do those supervisions, those inspections, so that things happen. For example, let's take a simple example: if in the handwashing station or in the bathroom we see that the soap is always at the same level, that means that people are only getting their hands wet and are not washing their hands. And handwashing is critical, it's critical in this matter. But if I don't monitor those things, I'm not going to notice. Monitor

the paper, monitor the crop containers, for example, I must inspect those that are in a safe place where they will not be contaminated by dust or water spillage.

Basically, in conclusion, it is a good close communication, doing monitoring and having an incentive system for the worker, at least a system of verbal incentive if there is no compensation system, for example, giving some symbol of the orchard, a shirt or something like that to be able to build what the director of the Alliance, Doctor Excidil, called the culture of food safety. And that is a process of development over the years as well. It doesn't happen overnight and requires commitment from everyone. Because a person who is not working in the orchard, but who is working in the administrative facilities, who did not wash his hands in the bathroom and then touched the sheet metal, the doorknob, and then the worker who did wash his hands, who is going to harvest the cucumbers in the field, who leaves contaminated and he does not know it. So this does require commitment from everyone. [01:06:39]

[01:06:40] *Malaquías*: -That's right, that's right, that's right folks. Well, here you have all the information to have a good food safety program on your farm. We thank David and Ricardo for this excellent information. And as a final question, is it if there is anything else that should be highlighted in terms of food safety on the farm?

David Blasini: -Yes, I would like to add a few more details. Food safety in an agricultural operation is very important, and not only because it is in a law, which is called the fresh agricultural product safety law, but here as producers we have to think about the financial viability of our agricultural operations by having products that are safe, of high quality. We're going to have better sales. That's a very important thing. We have seen that in certain regions and in certain products what has happened when those products are associated with foodborne illnesses. The consumer consumes them less, and that harms both the farmer, the producer and the workers. So, we all lose out with the product, but also sometimes in the region. When they say that a certain product from a certain region has caused certain outbreaks, people consume them less. And that's not good for business. That is a very important part, even though it is in the standard. Safety is important, for that reason it is paramount.

The other thing that I would like here, taking advantage of the window that you are giving us and that we thank you very much, is precisely that it is not only the food safety standard by the federal government, there are also certain producers need to comply with certain regulations or certain third-party audits, precisely to be able to access certain customers. [01:08:52]

[01:08:53] This is also important that safety apart from that it is good for the business, for the reasons I already mentioned, also gives them access to other customers, customers who pay better for the product and who are more reliable when we follow certain food safety practices. So it is very important to know that, that third-party audits and that regulation is are not the same, but they cause a producer to first comply with the standard, with regulation, and to access better markets, better customers. Don Hilario Alvarez he was also an organic producer. He is an organic producer and that is also another way that we can talk

here, that there are also regulations or practices that are related precisely to access organic certification. So, as we see, safety helps the producer open many other doors to his business. And I don't know if Ricardo has anything else here that he would like to close.

Ricardo Orellana-Yes, apart from thanking you for the opportunity you have given us to reach more producers in the United States in Spanish, I would like to mention two or three things. The first thing is that the farm food safety plan can be a guiding document for producers to start by writing on a sheet of paper or two sheets those risks that producers consider they may have on their farm, and to focus on the three main risks that they might consider. As David already said, this can help them to have a greater viability of the farm, because the markets are increasingly demanding in these issues. The second point that I would like to take advantage of mentioning is that the Alliance, our Alliance for the Safety of Fresh Agricultural Products, has information for producers.

[01:11:06] It has posters, it has files. It has, for example, videos. One of the videos developed by David, with the support of our colleague Donna Clement, is how to select a disinfectant. Disinfectants are important products for maintaining safety, and if a producer were interested in topics as specific as this, the Alliance's YouTube channel has these resources. That is, there are different types of topics they can use. That is the second thing I would like to say. The third thing is that COVID has shown us every time that local food production, including organic production and conventional production, is important, because people, even in pandemic, must continue to eat. Fortunately, COVID is not a virus that has so far been shown to be caused by food, it is not transmitted through food, according to the data we have. But it does make the work crew sick and that decreases the workforce in the field, hence it is very important. And, in conclusion, the hygiene of people, the cleanliness of people, training and teaching and communication are very important for that, and congratulations on this interesting podcast about the Don Hilario Álvarez farm. Very, very interesting and very inspiring for other producers as well.

Malaquias:-Very good, friends, because here you have the information of our experts and you have to follow them. There is no doubt that this is specific information to have safe foods, and that we can sell them in different markets, and also contribute to these foods being of benefit to the people who are consuming them.

Well, friends, we say goodbye now. We thank David Blasini and Ricardo Orellana who have left us with experience with this subject. And with this we say goodbye until the next podcat. [01:13:41]

[01:13:42] Here are your friends, Malaquías Flores, David Blasini and Ricardo Orellana. See you soon!

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to Spotify, Apple podcast, or wherever you access your favorite podcasts. A shout-out to the Farm Walks podcast production team: Behind-the-scenes logistics and overall handling by Teri Rakusin and Kate Smith, the theme song is by Aba Kiser, and the Farm Walks logo website by Riled Up Goats. And last but not least, our audio engineer Aaron Mason, who is great at making us sound good. I'm your host of the Farm Walks podcast, Malaquías Flores. Thank you so much for listening. Until next time! *[01:13:42]*