



## Statement to Consumers Regarding the Safety of Maine Food March 19, 2020

In recent days much information has been shared regarding staying healthy in the face of risks posed by the COVID-19 virus. *COVID-19 is not a food-borne illness.* However, procuring food during the pandemic can be stressful, and Maine consumers have justifiable concerns about the safe handling of their food.

Fortunately, Maine's farmers, food producers, and distributors have long paid close attention to food safety. The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry (DACF) plays an integral role in ensuring a healthy and safe food supply in the state. In fact, licensed food businesses in Maine *are required* to implement an extensive list of food safety and food sanitation precautions. The Department has an entire Division of Quality Assurance and Regulations (QAR) dedicated to the safety of Maine produce, dairy, eggs, meat, value-added, and processed foods. QAR staff works closely with food producers to provide education, certification, and answers to question whenever they arise. Consumers can feel good about foods produced by Maine's agricultural community.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, the Department is open and continues the critical job of overseeing food safety while being a resource for farmers, producers, and consumers. We encourage consumers to shop at local farm stands and farmers' markets, sign up for a CSA, and buy local at your neighborhood retailer. Practice safe social distancing and good personal hygiene while at these locations, call ahead to confirm that they are open, and shop for a neighbor while you are at it. Together we can continue to support local businesses and each other.

### **Maine's Agricultural Food Safety Program**

The Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry's Division of Quality Assurance & Regulations (QAR) inspect and educate more than 1,150 licensed commercial food processors and 1,390 licensed home food processors. Value-added producers, processors, dairy, egg, and meat producers must meet all the relevant State and federal regulations for their sector, including important practices such as:

- Having a sanitation program for their food contact surfaces and food production space;
- Having to clean and sanitize all food contact surfaces before use and following any interruption during which utensils and contact surfaces may have become contaminated;
- Having to clean *non*-food contact surfaces, like steering wheels, coolers, and door handles, and places that might cross-contaminate worker hands without directly touching the food;

- Following proper hygiene procedures, including a strict emphasis on hand-washing before work, after breaks, after using toilets, and any other time workers might have contaminated their hands;
- Using soap and potable water for hand-washing and not allowing sanitizer to be used as a substitute for soap;
- Following worker health procedures, such as not allowing anyone with contagious health symptoms to handle food or food contact surfaces;and
- Training workers to recognize infectious health symptoms and requiring them to report to their supervisor if they have or have reason to think they have them.

While Maine produce farms are not required to be licensed, many are subject to and inspected for compliance with the federal Food Safety Modernization Act. QAR has an entire team focused on food safety education, voluntary audits, and inspection for the produce sector. Food safety programs on produce farms require all of the same health and sanitation practices listed here for other types of food businesses.

There are over 280 produce farmers and farm supporters in the state of Maine alone who have attended nationally recognized food safety trainings for produce growers in the last 3 years, and more that have attended other independent food safety trainings. There are over 120 farms in Maine that are GAP audited for their food safety programs by our team directly, and more that are audited by other 3<sup>rd</sup> party certifiers. Currently there are 140 licensed dairy facilities and whose products are regularly tested at the DACF's dairy lab in Augusta, and 201 licensed dairy farms that also participate in regular testing.

Maine's food system has mature food safety and public health programmatic oversight, and a strong commitment to deepening its food safety culture. These efforts ensure that Maine's food producers are well versed in food safety procedures, and local food is handled with safety front of mind. That's a strength for Maine and should inspire confidence in Maine consumers.