

2019

Brown Family Farm Case Study



NC STATE
College of Agriculture
and Life Sciences

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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Management

Executive Farm Management Program

BFF Challenge

Challenge 1: Food Safety Crisis

Part 1: The Crisis

The TV was tuned to CNN while John ate his breakfast. One of the stories being aired caught his attention – there was a salmonella outbreak in the Southeast, and it seemed to be associated with cucumbers being sold at Wal-Mart stores.

Salmonella is a nasty bacterium, which, when ingested, leads to illness and possibly death. It is carried in animal feces and is easily transferred to fruits and vegetables by workers with poor hygiene, or contact with feces and then produce in the field. Another leading source of contamination is irrigation water.

“Hmmm, “ said John. “I think our cucumbers go to a packer that sells to Wal-Mart. I hope they don’t have a contamination problem.” He went back to his Honey Nut Cheerios and checking the commodity prices on his iPad.

Later that day, an SUV drove down the road to the farm. As it got closer, John could see it had “USDA” on the side. That was strange.

Two people got out of the vehicle. The driver introduced herself as Jane Smith, the area food safety agent for the USDA. She introduced the passenger as Bill Wilson, the regional VP for Food Safety at Wal-Mart.

“What can I do for you today?” asked John.

“Well,” Jane began. “It seems that you have a problem with salmonella contamination on your cucumbers. Wal-Mart has been using a blockchain-based system called ‘Food Trust’ from IBM throughout its supply chain, and we were able to trace the contaminated product back to this farm.”

John felt like he had been punched in the gut. He asked a few questions; Bill Wilson showed him the transaction records for the crates shipped from the Brown Family Farm, to the packer, and on to the several hundred Wal-Mart stores throughout the Southeast. It was true – his cucumbers were contaminated.

How could this be? They trained their workers thoroughly in proper handling and hygiene. They tested their irrigation water daily.

“It’s too late for a traditional product recall,” said Jane.

“But because we know exactly where each of the contaminated products was shipped, they’re being taken out of the produce aisle and destroyed,” said Bill. “I hope you have good insurance.”

After they departed, John called an emergency meeting with Ann, Kent, and Vicky. He filled them in on what had happened and waited to see what they had to say.

Anne is concerned about the media rodeo that is likely to come and needs to plan for the communication. Her parents in the past would wait for any repercussions and not proactively communicate anything that was of concern unless they were confronted with a question.

In today's social media age, and traceability of the product back to the farm, Anne knows they need to get out in front of this potential firestorm and keep it under control. The reputation of the Brown Family Farm – and the Brown Family itself – is at stake.

Who should take the lead in communication with the outside world? Is it John, or the new Marketing Manager? Ann is not sure how Kent and Vicky are going to respond to someone else speaking for the farm but knows she doesn't want her dad in front of the camera or tweeting about anything!

They have been discussing the need for a crisis plan and never got around to creating one.

The farm also needs to investigate what went wrong in their food safety procedures but she needs to stay focused on getting ahead of the message. The investigation will come next.

Anne knows she needs to get started so she calls a meeting with her brother and the new Marketing Manager.

Part 2: (Set up for policy manual/handbook, goal setting and performance evaluations)

After investigating the situation, it was uncovered that there are several deficiencies in the training offered, the follow up process and the policies and procedures in place. Anne calls another meeting with the team.

She starts the meeting with the details. Several workers had come down with a stomach bug a few days before the cucumbers in question were harvested and had to make frequent trips to the latrine, carrying their harvesting knife with them. It was also unbearably hot during the harvest, so it turns out that the workers didn't wear the sterile disposable gloves when handling the cucumbers, in violation of company policy.

She says, "So...you've seen the info. What do we do about it? We can't have this happen again."