

PRODUCING VALUE-ADDED PRODUCTS FOR MARKET: *START WITH FOOD SAFETY*

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Food safety: It's good for business, legally enforced, and people expect it when they purchase food for their families in Washington State. Food safety has changed in the last three decades. What used to be isn't any longer. Along with advances in science and technology, emerging pathogens are shaping new food safety practices. These practices are a necessary part of producing value-added products for market.

Emerging pathogens like *E. coli* O157:H7 and *Listeria monocytogenes* pose serious health risks. Successfully processing and marketing value-added products necessitates attention to detail that includes food safety on the farm through the production process to the consumers' table. This also requires complying with regulations that protect public health.

The purpose of this publication is to describe important food safety considerations and guidelines, agencies that regulate small, value-added food processors and community resources available to you.

Challenges of Processing Value-Added Products

Many farmers and growers consider making food products for the public from the things they grow. This adds value to the product. Consumers may be willing to pay more for food products than they would for a raw product.



Washington State laws require that products manufactured for sale to the public be produced in a certified or commercial kitchen.

For instance, growing raspberries and making them into jam is an example of a “value-added” product. If you are thinking about manufacturing and selling value-added products, there is some good news and some bad news about food processing. The **good news** is that assistance and resources are available to help you make reasonable decisions about producing and marketing products. The **bad news** is that producing a value-added product may be more complicated than you think. It may take extra time and work depending on the product you choose to manufacture, the production facilities you need and the exploration of the market or consumer need for the product itself.

As you consider producing value-added products, you must consider food safety. It is your obligation to protect the consumer. Outbreaks of foodborne illness are big news and big money in the United States. In a 1994 Task Force Report “Foodborne Pathogens: Risks and Consequences,” the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology estimated that foodborne illness cost \$5 billion to \$10 billion annually. According to the Washington State Department of Agriculture, at least 250,000 and possibly as many as 1,500,000 cases of foodborne illness occur in Washington State each year. Whatever the cost, no one who grows or processes food wants to cause illness in others, and no one wants to see his or her farm or business on the front page of the newspaper or as a sound bite on a major television network. Safe food is vital for you, your peace of mind, and your responsibility to consumers.

Processing food safely has many positive outcomes for you and your business:

- Builds customer loyalty and contributes to a better business environment.
- Improves product quality.
- Reduces liability risk.
- Increases your confidence in your product.
- Protects against outbreaks of foodborne illness, investigations, and recall of your product that can cost you money and damage your reputation.
- Minimizes insurance costs.
- Allows you to meet regulatory requirements.
- Is your obligation and responsibility to consumers.

HOW TO BEGIN IN WASHINGTON STATE

Literally hundreds of laws regulate food handling, preparation, and processing in the United States at the federal, state, and local levels. At federal level, congress passes laws. Next, the Food and Drug Administration develops regulations that assure compliance with the law. These regulations apply to all sizes of processing units, even small ones that produce products for sale through wholesale and retail outlets. Washington State then adopts federal regulations based on the food code, so the food industry complies with states’ laws.

Getting started in small-scale food processing differs slightly from state to state. Washington State has established procedures for application, issuing licenses for food manufacturing, and inspections. For example, in some states, food processors may be allowed to produce products like jams, jellies, and baked products in home kitchens that have been inspected. However in Washington, food processing must be conducted only in commercial kitchens. There may also be differences in getting started related to wholesale and retail sales of value-added food products.

Retail or Direct Sales of Value-Added Products: *Contact the Environmental Health Specialist in your County Health Department*

In Washington, county or district offices of the health department regulate food sales at farmers’ markets, grocery stores, direct sales, and temporary events like fairs and festivals. If you are planning to sell value-added products at retail outlets, call your health department before you start production. The phone number is listed in the blue pages of your phone book. Ask for the Environmental Health Specialist or the Food Safety Program. They have information about the regulations and will help you take the necessary steps to comply with them.

Washington State laws require that products manufactured for sale to the public be produced in a separate preparation kitchen. These separate kitchens are often referred to as *certified* or *commercial kitchens*. Simply put, the preparation kitchen used to produce any commercial food product must be separate from a kitchen

used for home food preparation. Commercial kitchens do not have to be large, but they must be separate, and they must meet a number of guidelines specified by counties, districts, and the state. While the use of commercial kitchens for processing value-added products has not always been uniformly enforced, more health departments are enforcing specific guidelines for selling processed food products at farmers' markets and public events. This is true for urban and rural areas alike.

Health departments will help guide you through the process of establishing a food processing business. Most will require you to submit a variety of information, including an application and the floor plans of your processing area. Requirements vary. For instance, proposed plans for the separate commercial kitchen need to be drawn to scale. In most cases, plans do not need to be professionally drawn, but they do need to be accurate. Plans may also include specifications for equipment and utensils, proposed layout for equipment and work areas, recipes for food items you want to produce, and a completed application. There are usually charges for plan reviews and permits. Charges are generally based on the size and type of food processing operation.

For some products, the health department might also ask you to develop a HACCP system. HACCP stands for Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point system. HACCP is a process that uses a combination of proper food handling procedures, monitoring techniques, and record keeping to help ensure the production and delivery of safe food. Health departments and the Washington Department of Agriculture may provide additional information about HACCP systems.

After you submit the completed plans, the health department reviews and approves them. Only then can you begin construction. After construction, a pre-opening inspection will be conducted 5 to 7 days before opening. Again, health departments may vary. Talk with officials so you clearly know what is expected of you and your processing operation.

Wholesale Sales of Value-Added Food Products: *Contact the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA)*

If you are considering wholesale sales of volumes of 5% or more of your product now or in the future, contact the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA). Generally, if wholesale sales will account for 5% or more of your processed food products (unless not licensed and inspected by any other agencies), you must be licensed by the WSDA. The Washington State Department of Agriculture can provide appropriate direction for production and safety of your value-added food product. The WSDA protects consumer health by safeguarding the food supply through education, technical assistance, and enforcement. They provide information as well as descriptions of steps necessary in the development and operation of food processing facilities. The WSDA is responsible for licensing and inspecting wholesale food operations including food processors. Regulations may vary with the type of food product produced.

To learn more about the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), call or visit their website <http://www.wa.gov/agr>. The website contains information necessary to obtain a license, describes the WSDA Food Safety Program, and includes the *Washington*

ALTERNATIVES TO SETTING UP YOUR OWN COMMERCIAL KITCHEN

Getting started producing food products is a major undertaking. If you are committed to starting a new business and are unable to have a separate preparation facility, there are options. One of the best is to establish a relationship with a commercial processor. Have them co-pack your product.

Another alternative is to rent a commercial kitchen. For example, Thurston, Pacific, and Chelan/Douglas counties in Washington State have commercial kitchens available for small-scale food processing operations to rent that are reasonably priced. It may also be possible for you to use a commercial kitchen in a church or community setting. Community based commercial kitchens are regularly inspected by health departments. Call your health department for availability of local facilities.

State Food Processor's Handbook. The handbook has information about operating a food processing business in Washington State, the licensing process, processing facility, and packaging and labeling. It is an outstanding resource for anyone considering getting started in food processing.

Thoroughly Understand Regulations

Federal, state, and county or city agencies regulate food-processing operations. Get copies of the regulations that apply to your operation. Read them, understand the differences between wholesale and retail operations, and ask questions. A good place to start is by visiting websites for more information.

Washington State Department of Agriculture
<http://www.wa.gov/agr/>

There are many publications available with regulations and information regarding food preparation, temperature controls, personal hygiene, sanitary design, construction, installation of equipment, utensils, equipment and utensil cleaning and sanitizing, sanitary facilities and controls, pest control, permits, inspections, and enforcement of food safety regulations.

Understand Water and Wastewater Treatment Systems

If you have a community water system, know your identification (ID) number. Water from private wells

cannot be used in commercial kitchens without frequent, regular testing and treatment when necessary. When the health department or the Department of Agriculture reviews your plans and application, they will also review your existing wastewater treatment system for adequacy. If the system is inadequate, improvements will be necessary and perhaps costly. Sometimes the health department grants exceptions or variances. You might be able to manufacture an alternative product that may not require the improvements.

Training and Education Programs

In Washington, as a minimum for processing food for retail sales, you must attend training and successfully complete an examination with the county health department to acquire a Food and Beverage Worker card. Additionally, if you are the business owner and operator, you will want to participate in continuing education about food safety. Washington State University offers several programs: Better Process School and HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point Program) Training. The programs include basic information about safe food processing, standard operating procedures; biological, chemical, and physical hazards in food; cleaning and sanitizing; and many other important topics. Call Washington State University Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition, the local Washington State University Cooperative Extension office, the Department of Agriculture in Washington, and your county or district health department for information about courses offered in your area.



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