
Working with Your Food Safety Inspector

Jenifer Buckley
PhD Candidate, Michigan State University, Department of Community Sustainability
June 2013

Guidelines for Michigan's small- and medium-scale food processors, based on research conducted from 2011 to 2013 on the food safety regulation of small-scale and artisan food processors in Michigan.

https://www.msu.edu/~jbuckley/research/Working_w_Inspector.pdf

Your MDARD inspector is one of the most important people you will contact as you form a food business. Contact your inspector very early in the planning process. Phone MDARD's Customer Service Center, 800-292-3939, to be connected with the inspector who serves your area.

Inspectors help identify the laws that apply to your business. They may conduct a review of your plans, and they may help identify ways in which can meet your own production objectives while also meeting regulatory requirements. As your business grows and you add products, purchase equipment, or make other changes, your inspector will need—and want—to stay up to date. These changes may affect your licensing requirements.

Developing a positive rapport with your inspector is as important as educating yourself about licensing and regulations. This section features the insights of processors and inspectors on that rapport.

See your inspector as a resource and ally.

Many Michigan processors see their inspectors as valuable resources and allies. Think of your inspector as someone who is there to help ensure that you make a safe product and operate a successful business.

Be “up front” with your inspector.

Help your inspector help you.

Don't be afraid to ask questions. Develop a list of all of the questions that you have before you contact him or her, and be as specific as you can.

Tell your inspector just as much as you can about what you intend to do. Details that seem insignificant to you may have implications for licensing requirements. Even if you are only *thinking* about adding a product or making other changes several years in the future, talk about those ideas.

It's been a wonderful thing every time [my inspector] has been in my kitchen, because she saves me either money or time or effort. And I honestly don't think we'd be where we are as a business, as successful as we are, as efficient as we are, without that.

Baker

We do our best to make what you currently do fit into what you need to do. The last answer we are going to give you is “no.”

Food inspector

Don't be afraid of your inspector... You want to talk, you want to be able to ask questions... and ask “why,” and see if there are different ways of doing things.

Cheesemaker

Be patient and persistent.

Take the time to help your inspector understand what you want to do.

Inspectors may not be familiar with the types of products that you want to produce or with the techniques that you plan to use. The geographic areas that they cover include many different kinds of food businesses, from processing facilities to grocery stores and warehouses. You may be the first producer of your type in your inspector's area.

Work with your inspector to explore different ways of doing what you want to do while meeting regulatory requirements. This may require many conversations over a period of time. Approach this as an opportunity to demonstrate that you are serious about developing a food business and realistic about the challenges that it involves. It is also an opportunity to demonstrate that you will maintain a positive working relationship with someone with whom you may not always agree.

Keep in mind, too, that inspectors speak with many prospective business owners who are not able to follow through with their plans—or who open businesses, only to close after a short time.

Inspectors want to see clients succeed, and your inspector will be proud when you do.

Talk to the inspector early. Find out anything you have questions about before you commit a lot of money to doing something.

Baker

Originally, we were just kind of a bother to [our inspector]. Asking him things he doesn't know, making him do research. He wasn't too happy about it.

But now, he's one of our biggest champions.

Cheesemaker

“Working with Your Food Safety Inspector” was initially developed, in a slightly different format, for the Upper Peninsula Food Exchange to include in a limited printing of Growing Michigan's Future: A Guide to Marketing Your Michigan Food and Agriculture Products. Growing Michigan's Future is produced by the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

This information is based on research supported by

- The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture – National Institute of Food and Agriculture (USDA-NIFA), under Project Number GNC10-134.
- The National Science Foundation under Grant No. SES-1230878.
- Funds from a grant to Michigan State University from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation to establish a pasture-based dairy program at the Kellogg Biological Station.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed within do not necessarily reflect the views of the SARE program, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, or the National Science Foundation. USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

- The research was made possible by the participation and support of small-scale and artisan processors throughout Michigan, MDARD Food and Dairy Inspectors, and MDARD's Food and Dairy Division.