

Crisis Management

Any number of events could be classified as a crisis. These events almost always have negative consequences for farm operations and experience suggests that a crisis usually occurs with very little warning. A crisis requires an immediate response and may involve interacting with local, state and/or federal government agencies, the media and possibly a prolonged interruption of normal operations on your farm. The best time to deal with a crisis is before one occurs, through careful planning and preparation. The best way to prepare is to develop a crisis management plan. Having a plan in advance of a crisis allows a more immediate response and an immediate response allows you to more effectively manage the crisis as well as government agencies, media and public perception of your operations.

As with all GAPs the primary focus is on preventing problems to avoid a crisis. A comprehensive food safety plan should include how to deal with a crisis. A crisis management plan should include comprehensive lists of your support staff and organizations, trade organization contacts, farm experts at land grant institutions, cooperative extension educators and others who can provide assistance on scientific issues, media contacts, and strategies to address the emergency without compromising your total business. Your leadership and time will be needed in the event of a crisis. Be sure that all employees know about the plan and know who to contact in the event of an emergency or crisis.

This worksheet will highlight these and other considerations to help you be prepared for a crisis.

- A description of the crisis management team
- Emergency service phone numbers
- The designated spokesperson for the farm
- Name and phone number of priority contacts (e.g. lawyers, owners, brokers, consultants, scientific experts)
- List of supporting industry and grower organizations
- List of farm operations that can be suspended to allow time to deal with a crisis
- Crisis management training for employees

Management Area	Best Practice
Employee Training	Standard employee training includes discussion of the crisis management plan and employee responsibilities in the event of a crisis
Farm Operations Priority List	The crisis management plan outlines which operations must continue and those which can be temporarily halted during a crisis
Priority Contacts	The crisis management plan includes a list of all priority contacts that support or provide services to the farm in the event of a crisis, including lawyers, grower organizations, state health officials and vendors
Testing Crisis Management Plan	A mock crisis has been conducted to insure the plan is effective
Crisis Management Training and Planning	Farm owner/operator has received crisis management training and a written crisis management plan is in place
Media Training	The farm has several individuals who have media training and who are familiar with farming operations to be able to answer questions from the media. These individuals are familiar with all farm food safety protocols that are in place to prevent problems
Crisis Management Team	The farm has a crisis management team designated and a plan to assign employees to different tasks should a crisis occur. Each critical person has a backup

No commodity wants to face a food safety crisis, but every commodity needs to be prepared. The National Watermelon Promotion Board is prepared to serve as the central resource for any communications-related industry crisis response activities.

In response to the increasing incidence of food borne illness in the produce industry, the National Watermelon Promotion Board (NWPB) has enhanced and expanded their crisis communications program. While the program is in place to assist staff and the industry to deal with virtually any crisis the industry might face, food borne illness is a very possible scenario.

Crisis Plan

The crisis management plan maps out tactics of a multi-faceted program. The plan contains details of how to deal with a crisis, ranging from determining if a situation actually is a crisis to how to respond to the media, the appropriate authorities and the public. The plan also defines the potential scope of responsibility of NWPB in case of an industry crisis. NWPB is responsible for assessment, positioning, reaction and tracking and responding to media inquiries and coverage. While NWPB is not an investigative body, it will provide full cooperation to any authorities and the media, and will encourage industry members to do the same. While NWPB would represent the entire industry in a crisis, not an individual business, staff can serve as advisors and make crisis response recommendations to individual businesses.

The Crisis Team

A crisis team has been designated that includes industry members, staff, and third-party experts. The team is directed by NWPB's executive director with the directors of communications and marketing serving as consultants and advisors. In case of crisis the team would convene via teleconference to perform functions from determining the scope of the crisis to considering possible positions and an appropriate course of action.

In addition to the core team, NWPB consults with the NWA executive director and produce industry executives from PMA and UFPA, as well as key experts in various areas of the industry. A full contact database has been created for key industry members, media and third-party resources. NWPB also utilizes the services of the Alliance for Food and Farming and a professional crisis media manager for preparedness and to serve as consultants in case of crisis.

Crisis Checklist

A comprehensive checklist has been developed that will take staff through the process of dealing with a crisis in a comprehensive and orderly fashion. During a crisis, it is very easy to forget a tactic or neglect to follow-up on an item if a detailed list isn't in place to serve as a reminder.

A checklist ensures virtually every potential issue is being addressed.

Issue Positions and Key Messages

Issue positions and messages have been developed based on hypothetical situations, providing an understanding of what the industry's position would be in a crisis. Staff has determined the most likely scenarios the industry would face and what the industry's position would be on the issue. Once the position was determined, first-response messages were developed that will be provided to both media and to key constituencies. While no two crises are the same, first-response messaging offers the industry's initial position on the issue, while key crisis team members further investigate the issue and determine more detailed, situation-specific responses.

Additional Tactics for Industry Preparedness

The program is continually updated to keep current with issues and to ensure preparedness for the industry. Additional NWPB plan tactics include:

- An 800# telephone number for 24/7 contact with NWPB staff in case of crisis. The contact number has been distributed to the industry.
- A crisis readiness page for the NWPB watermelon.org web site that can go live if necessary. The web site is an excellent tool for providing information and messages to busy reporters and consumers who want information immediately, but can't quickly access a spokesperson. Information can be delivered more thoroughly and accurately.
- Food safety resource links in the industry portion of the NWPB web site. NWPB is supporting NWA's efforts to help the industry avoid crisis through good agricultural practices by having information on GAPs and other programs on the web site.
- All NWPB Board Members and staff attend media training sessions on an on-going basis. Each fall board meeting includes a crisis communications workshop for board members. Possible scenarios and responses are reviewed, and on-camera interviews are conducted.
- Safe food handling information is included in the NWPB press and retail kits. In addition to delivering safety information about watermelon, NWPB shares information of safe food handling from the Partnership for Food Safety education.
- Safe food handling flyers have been developed and distributed to consumers at events throughout the country.
- All NWPB collateral material includes safe food handling messages, taking every opportunity to educate consumers about food safety.

- Safe food handling training sessions are conducted during the queen training seminar and NWPB merchandising representative seminar to ensure these watermelon representatives understand and can convey the basics of safe watermelon handling.
- NWPB has added food safety questions to consumer research program to check on consumer attitudes about food safety.
- NWPB attends food safety seminars and industry meetings, and works cooperatively with NWA's food safety efforts.
- NWPB developed crisis information tip cards and informational brochures and distributed to industry members.