

# Eurepgap: What's the buzz all about?

by Bernard Frampton

The voices of familiar cultural icons, Fish and Boots, crank a jingle that interrupts the local television news. They are warning farmers to comply with Eurepgap. For farmers, the message is simply a rehash, but to others, it is another topical issue to which they draw little association.



Fifteen year old Joshua, who lies astride the couch, settled in the family ritual of the evening news bonding, has never been on a banana farm. Riveted by the message, he hypnotically hums the background music that thumbs a bouyon rhythm. As the final bar fades, he turns to his dad inquiringly, "What is Eurepgap?" The answer he receives typifies the public's knowledge on the subject. He is told that Eurepgap is

a set of rules that the UK Supermarkets have laid down for farmers to follow. Not a bad summary, but a brush over a complex and detailed subject.

So what exactly is Eurepgap, which has been buzzing in the media, community halls, rum shops, and street corners throughout the Windward Islands? Eurepgap is an acronym that joins two ideas. Eurep represents the Euro-Retailer Produce Working Group and GAP stands for Good Agricultural Practices. GAP is set of guidelines used by the international community to ensure safe working environments for agricultural workers, protection of the environment from agrochemicals, and guarantees on the production of healthy foods.

Governments, NGO's, and commercial institutions all develop various forms of GAP standards and polices, which could be voluntary, regulatory, or private. The Euro-Retailer Produce Working Group, a technical committee of retailers from the major markets in Europe, began working on its GAP in October 1997. At the time the Working

Group conceived of Eurepgap, public debate over Mad Cow Disease and Genetically Modified Foods were rife. It is no wonder that food safety features as the single most important component of the protocol. Eurepgap, like many of its other GAP relatives, did not focus on organic cultiva-

tion; rather it encouraged the use of limited and prescribed chemicals in food production. The protocol insists on accurate and timely recording of farm activities, which allows supermarkets to trace every product to the farm on which it was produced. It also stipulates requirements on pesticide and fertilizer storage, waste management, and worker health and safety. Eurepgap presents a seemingly infinite list of guidelines, amounting to some 255 questions, which it calls Control Points, for suppliers seeking its certification.

Aware that suppliers could attempt to usurp such rigid rules, Eurepgap incorporates some monitoring and punitive measures that insure the credibility of the system. Eurepgap certified farms are required to undergo at least one annual inspection, by a Eurepgap certified auditor. The protocol also has other checks and balances depending on the certification option chosen by the supplier.

Fresh produce suppliers could choose one of four options to become Eurepgap certified. Under Option 1, each grower could apply individual registration. Option 2 allows for the establishment of a Produce Marketing Organization for Eurepgap certification. In Option 3, an individual grower could apply for certification under a separate set of regional standards approved by Eurepgap. The final choice, Option 4, permits a Produce Marketing Organization or any similar institution, to seek registration under Eurepgap approved regional standards.

In 2003, officials of the regional banana industry met at WIBDECO to decide on a Eurepgap option. The Windward Islands chose option 2, because it was the least



costly route to Eurepgap certification. In this scheme, WIBDECO will serve as the Produce Marketing Organisation, which will seek registration from an approved EUREPGAP certification body. As the PMO, WIBDECO is required to have documented control systems that promote the Eurepgap protocol.

The PMO must also ensure that a self-audit and an internal audit are conducted on each of its farms before the external auditor performs the annual audit. A self-audit is a documented check by the farmer that all the necessary systems are in place on his farm. The Internal Audit is an assessment by the PMO of the farms preparedness for an external audit. All farms would need to be directed by a central management under the same control system. The PMO inspectors and auditors would need to meet the minimum training and qualifications laid down by the Eurepgap certification body. These officers will be investigating matters identified in any of the following 15 chapters.

1. Traceability: Are farmers putting their unique numbers on the box so that their fruit can be traced?
2. Record Keeping: Are farmers documenting their farm activities, i.e. farm plans and input delivery slip?
3. Varieties and Rootstocks: Do tissue culture nurseries have certificates of their plantlets?
4. Site History: Do farmers have separate documents for each of their holdings?
5. Soil Management: Do banana fields have proper drainage, mulching, and trash placement on slope?
6. Fertilizer Use: Are farmers following WIBDECO's advice and recommended procedures on soil analysis and plant needs?
7. Irrigation: Not Applicable
8. Crop Protection: Are farmers us-

ing the approved list of chemicals supplied by WIBDECO? Are the persons applying these chemicals trained? Are workers using the recommended protective equipment? Are chemicals stored safely? Are the necessary emergency systems in place, including access to First Aid kits?

9. Harvesting: Are there clean toilets with soap and water available to workers within a 5-10 minutes walk? Have workers been trained on basic hygiene?

10. Post-Harvest Treatments: Are park houses and their surroundings clean. Are farm records accurate and updated? Are farmers using potable water for harvest?

11. Waste Pollution/Management:

12. Worker Health, Safety & Welfare: Are Farmers and farm workers exercising proper hygiene? Do workers receive basic employment benefits? Are workers aware of an accessible and practical emergency plan?

13. Environmental Issues: Are farmers familiar with the national conservation plan of the Ministry of Agriculture?

14. Complaint Form: Do farmers have copies of complaint documents provided by WIBDECO?

15. Internal Audits: Have self-assessment and internal audits been conducted before the external inspection?

These control points summarise the 255 questions that form part of the 4-hour-long annual audit. The audit is divided into three categories; the MAJOR MUSTS, MINOR MUSTS and SHOULD'S. There are 41 MAJOR MUST questions. Farmers cannot fail any of these questions. The other section is known as MINOR MUST, of which there are 122 questions. Farmers are only allowed to fail 6 of these questions, meaning they must achieve a score of 95% or above. The third category of questions is called SHOULD'S. Farmers are allowed some flexibility on complying with these 92 questions; however they are required to show a written plan of action for addressing the failures identified by the auditor in this section.

While these standards are unquestionably quite rigid, they reflect the international trend in the trade of fresh produce. Every supplier trading in Europe must adhere to Eurepgap; the Windward Islands are no exception.

Farmers wishing to continue selling fruit to the UK must follow these rules.

Eurepgap does not only protect the European consumer, it also protects farmers from unsafe exposure to chemicals. It does not only insure food safety but also protects our environment from improper waste disposal and hazardous materials.

Eurepgap encourages producers to focus on preserving the natural environment. Undoubtedly, it challenges farmers in the region to rearrange their agricultural practices. Of course, for some farmers this may not be easy, since the transition is likely to require some financial and cultural sacrifices. ■

