

Submission

P1052 – Primary Production and Processing requirements for Horticulture (Berries, Leafy Vegetables & Melons)

2nd Call for submissions

14 February 2022



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Costa Group overview

Costa Group is Australia's leading grower, packer and marketer of fresh fruit & vegetables and operates principally in five core categories: berries, mushrooms, glasshouse tomatoes, citrus and avocados.

Operations include approximately 7,000+ planted hectares of farmland, 40 hectares of glasshouse facilities and three mushroom growing facilities across Australia. Costa also has strategic foreign interests, with majority owned joint ventures covering six blueberry farms in Morocco and four berry farms in China, covering approximately 740 planted hectares.

Costa also operates a wholesale fresh produce and logistics business. We specialise in distribution centre operations, particularly temperature-controlled environments for cold storage and ambient storage solutions.

Costa is the country's leading berry producer with multiple sites across Australia growing blueberries, raspberries, strawberries and blackberries. In all that we grow, we are committed to sustainable commercial farming, and food safety is paramount to this. We have more than 730 planted hectares of farmland dedicated to berry production across Far North Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania and Western Australia. An increasing proportion of Costa's berries are grown under protective tunnels and in substrate to mitigate the risk from weather and climate impacts and to improve yield. Our berries are marketed under the Driscoll's brand in Australia.

While Costa's food production, supply chain, and food safety are constantly developing and evolving, Costa draws on international best practice to maintain our position as a market leader. Australia must continue to strive for world leading systems, processes and regulation to maintain our high-quality produce for consumers in Australia and overseas.

Executive Summary

As the leading Australian grower and marketer of fresh produce, Costa Group (Costa) is committed to delivering high quality, nutritious and safe food for consumers in Australia and overseas. Costa strongly supports the FSANZ objectives of maintaining a high safety standard for fresh food.

While Australian grown berries have not been associated with foodborne illness outbreaks, Costa supports the introduction of a combination of regulatory and non-regulatory measures (Risk Management Option 3). This option introduces minimal but important food safety measures for the supply of product, addresses key food safety and category risks, while allowing berry businesses already certified to a Food Safety Scheme to achieve regulatory compliance through existing certification. The proposed supporting non-regulatory measures, by means of fact sheets, animations, webinars etc. are vital to help minimise key food safety risks, especially for those businesses not currently certified to a Food Safety Scheme. Consultation with industry in development and delivery of non-regulatory measures will be imperative to achieve the desired outcomes.

Effective tools or mechanisms to (self-) assess business practices for compliance with the requirements in Standard 4.2.7. also play a critical role in achieving the desired food safety improvements. The non-mandatory Proposed Guidance document - Berries, in its current format, provides insufficient guidance and is not considered an effective tool to demonstrate or verify compliance.

This submission includes recommendations for amendments of the proposed Standard 4.2.7., the Proposed Guidance Document - Berries and provides further information in relation to Questions for stakeholders included in the Consultation Regulation Impact Statement.

Introduction

This submission is in response to FSANZ second call for submissions to inform FSANZ's decision as to whether the proposed regulatory (and non-regulatory) approach, and the related proposed Standards should be approved, amended, or rejected.

Effective food safety management is critical to ensure consumer confidence and the commercial success of the fresh produce industry. Outbreaks of foodborne illness can have a significant impact on the general public and the reputation and profitability of the industry. Appropriate regulatory and non-regulatory measures are therefore important to all consumers, and for businesses operating in the fresh produce industry.

Risk Management Option 3, a combination of regulatory and non-regulatory measures, introduces minimal food safety measures for the Berry industry and addresses key food safety and category risks, while allowing berry businesses already certified to a Food Safety Scheme to achieve regulatory compliance through existing certification. The proposed supporting non-regulatory measures will provide guidance on safe food production and help businesses, especially those not certified to a Food Safety Scheme, meet the requirements of the proposed Standard.

This submission includes recommendations for amendments of the proposed Standard 4.2.7., the Proposed Guidance Document - Berries and provides further information in relation to Questions for stakeholders included in the Consultation Regulation Impact Statement.

Standard 4.2.7. Primary production and processing standard for Berries

4.2.7. - 2 Definitions

The proposed Standard **4.2.7. Primary production and processing standard for Berries** includes definitions for a Primary horticulture producer and Primary horticulture processor:

Primary horticulture producer means a business, enterprise or activity that involves the growing and/or harvesting of berries.

Primary horticulture processor means a business, enterprise or activity that involves one or more of the following activities in relation to berries that have been harvested: (a) washing; (b) trimming; (c) chopping; (d) sorting; (e) sanitising; (f) combining products; (g) packing; and (h) transport between primary processing premises.

Comment: (Refrigerated) storage or Modified Atmosphere storage are not covered as part of the listed activities for Primary horticulture processors. These activities are however an important part of post-harvest processes.

The Consultation Regulation Impact Statement (CRIS), as part of section 2.2. 'Activities' covers a wider range of activities under Primary production, including 'storing', however it excludes 'packing or packaging in final packaging for retail sale'. Packing, in final packaging for retail sale, in field or in a packing facility, is a core activity of Primary horticulture producers or Primary horticulture processors. Adjustment and alignment of activities included in the definitions is recommended. Consideration should also be given to the relevance of listed activities for berry Primary processing, for example 'chopping'.

4.2.7. - 4 Notification

(1) A primary horticulture producer and a primary horticulture processor must provide the specified information to the relevant authority before engaging in a relevant activity.

Comment: When designing mechanisms for notification / registration relevant authorities should consult with industry to ensure the system and process that is put in place, is nationally consistent, efficient and easy to follow/apply. In this process consideration should be given to businesses with multiple sites across different states, and multiple growing sites within a region that are covered by one Food Safety & Quality certification. For berry businesses there will be no (mandatory) system in place to demonstrate or verify compliance to the requirements in Standard 4.2.7. Consideration should be given to inclusion of an effective and efficient mechanism to verify or demonstrate compliance through the notification process. This could include sharing evidence of certification to a (GFSI benchmarked) Food Safety Scheme or a completed self-assessment, in approved format, for businesses without certification to a Food Safety Scheme.

4.2.7 - 5 Traceability

A primary horticulture producer and a primary horticulture processor must have in place system that can identify:

- (a) From whom berries were received; and*
- (b) To whom berries were supplied.*

Comment: Primary horticulture producers grow the produce (they do not 'receive' berries) and it is important that traceability is applied from the actual point of production/harvest (growing site) to the storage/packing destination (one step forward). It is recommended to consider changing the requirement to include traceability to the growing site:

A primary horticulture producer and a primary horticulture processor must have in place system that can identify:

- (a) The growing site of the berries or from whom berries were received; and*
- (b) To whom berries were supplied.*

Comment: Traceability is currently limited to traceability at the tray level, not punnet level.

It is important that initiatives to improve horticulture supply chain traceability, including developing and trialling technologies that digitise information flow, continue to be explored and trialled. Traceability technologies should focus on practical application, cost effectiveness, have the support of the industry and align with retailer requirements.

4.2.7. – 7 Premises and equipment

(2) A primary horticulture producer and a primary horticulture processor must ensure that premises and equipment are kept clean, sanitised and in good repair to the extent required that berries are not made unacceptable.

Comment: While the addition of 'to the extent required that berries are not made unacceptable' may cover the suggested change to this requirement, it is recommended to consider a change to the wording 'kept sanitised'. The wording causes confusion in relation to the extent and frequency of sanitation required of all equipment, infrastructure, structures and vehicles. Consider instead:

(2) A primary horticulture producer and a primary horticulture processor must ensure that premises and equipment are maintained, cleaned and if necessary sanitised to the extent required that berries are not made unacceptable.

Supporting document 4 – Proposed guidance document – Berries

The purpose of the *non- mandatory* 'Proposed Guidance Document – Berries' is to assist berry producers and processors to demonstrate how their business meets the requirements of Standard 4.2.7. The second call for submissions also refers to this document as a self-assessment tool (section 5.4.).

Comment: The structure of the document is similar to a questionnaire and offers little guidance (i.e. advice, direction, practical examples or references to guidance documents) to help business assess if they meet the obligations of Standard. 4.2.7, especially for those businesses without certification to a Food Safety Scheme. Completion of the 'self – assessment' is not mandatory and as such an effective mechanism to demonstrate or verify compliance to the requirements of standard 4.2.7. has not been proposed, potentially reducing the effectiveness of the proposed regulatory requirements. Consideration should be given to inclusion of an effective and efficient mechanism to verify or demonstrate compliance through the notification process. This could include sharing evidence of certification to a (GFSI benchmarked) Food Safety Scheme or a completed self-assessment, in approved format.

Further development and improvement of the Guidance Document Berries, in collaboration with industry is recommended to ensure it is an effective mechanism to demonstrate or verify compliance to the requirements of standard 4.2.7., provide appropriate guidance, and improve food safety outcomes.

Consultation regulation impact statement (CRIS)

FSANZ proposes non-regulatory measures in the form of the development of fact sheets (two per commodity), animations (one per commodity), links to useful resources, webinars and face to face meetings.

Comment: A timeline should be developed for delivery of these non-regulatory measures to allow berry businesses sufficient time to familiarise themselves with the requirements and implement changes where required. Consultation with industry in development and delivery of non-regulatory measures will be imperative to achieve the desired outcomes.

CRIS - Questions for stakeholders

FSANZ is seeking additional information to inform the consideration of costs and benefits. FSANZ is seeking additional information from stakeholders to test the assumptions.

Question 5: We have estimated the average length of the harvest and packing seasons. Is there alternative information you would like us to consider?

Costa harvest and packing season by region:

FNQ	225 days (Blueberries only)
WA	210 days (Blueberries only)
TAS	210 days (Raspberries, blueberries, blackberries, and strawberries)
Tumbarumba	60 days (Blueberries only)
Corindi	360 days (Raspberries, blueberries, blackberries)

Question 18. Berries: Do you think that the berries standard should also include the regulation of soils and fertilisers?

If soil and fertiliser were included, the input clause in the proposed standard would be updated as follows:

Inputs – soil, fertiliser and water

A primary horticulture producer and a primary horticulture processor must take all reasonable measures to ensure that any of the following inputs do not make the berries unacceptable:

- (a) soil;
- (b) soil amendments (including manure, human biosolids, compost, and plant bio-waste);
- (c) fertiliser; and
- (d) water.

Comment: Appropriate management of soils and fertilisers is important to minimise food safety risks, with higher risk associated with product eaten uncooked and grown in contact with or in close proximity to the ground. As such, requirements in relation to management of soils and fertilisers are covered in existing Food Safety Standards and should be included in Standard 4.2.7. supported by non-regulatory guidance on management of soil, soil additives and fertilisers, including links to existing guidelines and standards.

END.