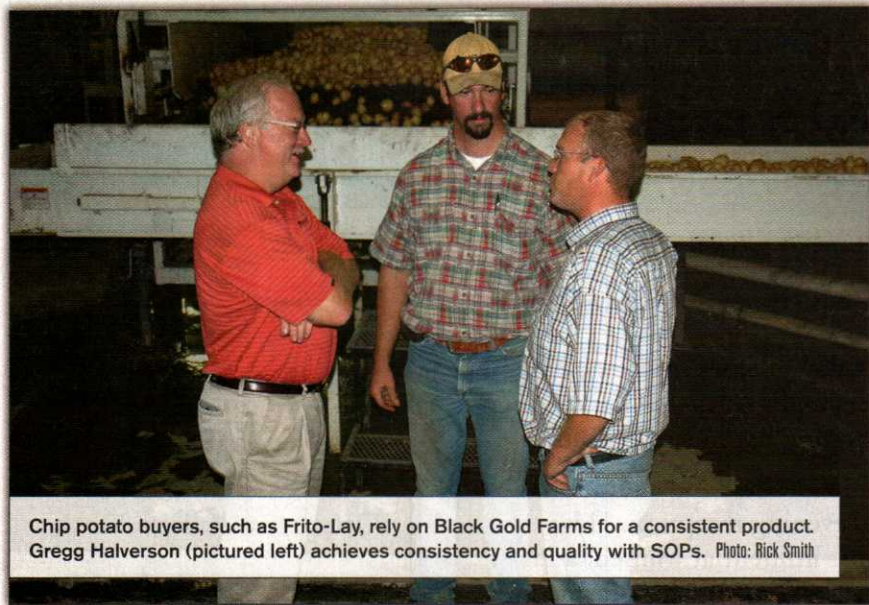


SOPs to the RESCUE

*Standard Operating Procedures
help get rules in writing*



Chip potato buyers, such as Frito-Lay, rely on Black Gold Farms for a consistent product. Gregg Halverson (pictured left) achieves consistency and quality with SOPs. Photo: Rick Smith

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No matter what kind of farm you run, writing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) can help you avoid and manage risk while improving efficiency.

SOPs also make everyone's work more consistent, provide tips to make things work and help you comply with Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs).

In general, SOPs are helpful in identifying jobs that are repetitive, documenting how a job is supposed to be performed and evaluating how to do it better, says Dick Wittman, a farmer in Culesac, Idaho, and farm financial consultant. Wittman has instituted many SOPs on his farm, which includes ranching, grain production and timber.

"Where would your business be tomorrow if you were hit by a bus?" Wittman asks. "SOPs provide written documentation of all the information you keep in your brain."

For larger farms, SOPs also help maintain consistency. Black Gold Farms, one of the biggest chip potato producers in the world, operates 11 farms in 11 states. It would be impossible to keep a consistent potato chip product without SOPs, says CEO Gregg Halverson.

After substantial growth, Black Gold Farms applied extensive SOPs modeled after those used by

McDonalds Corporation. This enabled each location to replicate systems that are performed at the other locations, producing consistent, reliable results for customers, including buyers such as Frito-Lay.

"My goal was to expand Black Gold Farms geographically to better provide my customers with fresh potatoes for a larger portion of the year," Halverson says. "I could only do that with SOPs that ensure a consistent product, whether in Michigan or Maryland."

What to Include. When creating SOPs, it's best to watch another person perform the task and write it up based on what you observe, says Phil Tocco, Michigan State University Extension. After you get a draft, have another worker who performs the task review it for inaccuracies.

"The goal is to create a working document that specifies all the steps to a specific job from start to finish that a new employee could pick up and perform and be about the same as an existing employee," Tocco says. Every SOP is different, but there are specific things you should include when it comes to food processing.

"The auditor is looking for evidence of a system written in the food safety manual to minimize incidence of contamination, visual evidence that it is taking place and documentation that it has been taking place in the past," Tocco says. "If you are able to show evidence of these three components in place in all aspects of your farm, you will pass an audit."

The late Total Quality Management (TQM) guru and renowned statistician Edwards Deming had a law worth remembering, says Wittman: "A system always gives you 100% of what the system was designed to do ... 94% of failures come from systems, not people." TP

HOW TO START ON SOPs

- Form an in-house team with an outside facilitator.
- Review legislation and regulatory requirements; attend trainings.
- Research peers who have implemented GAPs, SOPs and BMPs.
- Research organizations that are responsible for auditing/certifying.
- Ask an auditor to do a "test drive."
- Develop a strategy for getting documentation in place.
- Place and store SOPs where staff can find them.

Source: Wittman Consulting