

## A word with food scientist Jeff Kronenberg of Idaho TechHelp

By: Anne Wallace Allen  November 2, 2015 



Photo by Celia Southcombe.

Jeff Kronenberg is an Extension Food Processing Specialist with the University of Idaho School of Food Science, the Cooperative Extension and Idaho [TechHelp](#).

Kronenberg's job is to help Idaho's food manufacturing companies achieve safety certification by carrying out on-site consulting and by designing and conducting training.

The job puts Kronenberg in close touch with the food producers around the state who are packaging their own salsa or hummus, processing potatoes, milling beans and pulses, creating confectionaries, soft drinks, and juice, and even processing seafood in the local trout and caviar industry.

Right now, a lot of Kronenberg's job is driven by the rules accompanying the Food Safety Modernization Act, or FSMA, a 2011 law that brought about the largest food safety reforms in more than 70 years. After the passage of FSMA, the Food and Drug Administration and industry groups spent years developing an array of rules and guidelines for the food industry. Many of those are just now going into effect. Many of them will require food safety training, Kronenberg's area of specialty.

Kronenberg studied biology at Western Washington University and undertook graduate studies at Hebrew University in Jerusalem before finishing a master's in food science and food microbiology at Cornell University in New York. He spent most of his career in private industry at companies such as Frito Lay, AIB International, PowerBar and the J.R. Simplot Company until 2000, when he joined the U of I and TechHelp.

He took some time to talk to Idaho Business Review about local food producers and the FSMA. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

### **Why did you switch from working for private industry to working for the university group?**

The requirements for the level of food safety have just exploded in the last 20 years. The amount of training that's going on in factories is huge. The Wal-Marts, the Syscos, the McDonald's, they are the customers.

I conducted the training and developed the training seminars, and I burned out on the travel. I was traveling almost 80 percent of the time. That was 1999. I was 48.

So I changed gears to work for an industry support group. There was an opportunity in outreach and extension, and it was kind of an interesting opportunity because it was a partnership between the typical USDA-supported cooperative extension and this maverick organization called TechHelp that had a manufacturing extension program funded through the U.S. Department of Commerce and the National Institute of Standards and Technology.

### **What do you do for the food companies?**

I do technical assistance at their site, and then I do food safety training at their site or I put on workshops. I carry multiple accreditations and certifications through different agencies, and I continually add more. That's important to the client base that we serve. If they get in trouble with a regulatory agency, or have to do certification, somebody might ask them who is helping and what are their credentials.

### **Is voluntary certification really voluntary?**

Up until January 4, 2011, when President Obama signed the [Food Safety Modernization Act](#), it was the market forces that were really pushing companies to implement upgraded food safety systems.

If you're selling to Wal-Mart, Darden, McDonald's, Burger King, they're not going to buy from you unless you participate in the voluntary food safety certification program to international standards such as the [Global Food Safety Initiative](#).

But that was only a segment of the food industry, the larger companies. The name brands, like Skippy peanut butter, have risk control.

But the smaller companies have not had any kind of demands. Nobody has mandated them to do this. The minute they visit Costco, Costco will tell them, "You have to get certified, you cannot do business with Costco without these certifications."

The FDA system hadn't been updated since 1938. We had high-profile outbreaks, and finally people said, "OK, enough is enough."

### **How did FSMA change your job?**

FSMA was not one regulation, it was a law that mandated multitudes of regulations. Since my job is to support the food industry, and since the food industry is getting slammed with a multitude of new rules, I'm going to be changing the customer offerings we have to help them with this massive job of meeting the regulatory requirements.

No. 1, every company is going to have to have a specially trained person called a preventive controls qualified individual. There are exemptions by size.

We were just awarded a grant from USDA to set up a [regional center](#) to help coordinate food safety training in the food industry and animal feed industry. University of Idaho School of Food Science, Washington State University and Oregon State University are leading the program. We'll train trainers who then go back to their states and train farmers, food processors, food sellers. It's going to cover 13 states and two territories.

Also, the University of Idaho is building a new website relating to FSMA. We sent out a needs assessment to the food industry in Idaho saying, "We know this is hanging over your head, what type of training do you need?"

We're getting all sorts of responses, and we're in the process of designing our services within the FSMA.

I'll get certified as a trainer for FSMA. I just put on a FSMA conference for employees of one of the big companies. We're trying to figure out how we're going to address the animal feed side.

### **ABOUT ANNE WALLACE ALLEN**

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