

KEEPING FOOD SAFE

From Fairs to Festivals to Football

When it comes to inspecting the thousands of public outlets where Nebraskans can purchase prepared food items, the Nebraska Department of Agriculture's (NDA) **Food Safety and Consumer Protection Focus Area** has an important but simple goal.

"Our primary goal is to protect people from unsafe food," NDA Dairy and Food Program Manager Melva Ball said. "The vendors, restaurateurs and retailers we interact with have that same goal so we work together to make sure they are handling the food safely and wisely."

NDA's 14 full-time and one part-time Ag Food Sanitarians, along with 19 contracted inspectors from three county health departments, have to cover the entire state which stretches 76,872 square miles. In Fiscal Year 2015-16 they conducted 16,861 inspections.

The inspectors are diligent in their responsibility to make sure any facility that sells, prepares and serves food to the public, does so in an environment designed to protect food from contamination, such as bacteria that can lead to foodborne illnesses.



TYPES OF INSPECTIONS IN NEBRASKA



* Contracted with the Douglas County Health Department, Lincoln/Lancaster County Health Department and the Central District Health Department.

Additional information on NDA's Food Program can be found [here](#).

Most people are aware that restaurants, bars, grocery stores and convenience stores are inspected for food safety. But not much thought may be given to what's termed as "temporary special events." These include the hundreds of festivals, county fairs and food truck events that take place in both small and large communities throughout Nebraska. And, oh yes, there are those special events hundreds of thousands of Nebraskans attend each fall, Husker football games.

"We try to talk with all the workers at the various venues," said Ball. "We teach them about the processes they use to prepare the food to make sure they're taking appropriate sanitation and food temperature precautions."

FAIRGOERS GOTTA EAT TOO

County fairs in Nebraska

remain focused on youth activities that include food, crafts, art and life skills exhibits, as well as livestock showmanship.

"I really appreciate the county fairs because they're about the kids," said NDA Food Sanitarian Bill Panec. "It's a great chance for them to raise animals and learn showmanship and other skills."

At many of the county fairs, some of the same youth entered in competitions also take time to volunteer at the concession stand to help raise money for FFA or 4-H clubs. Panec said that's why an



Baked foods are a favorite at special events.

important aspect of his job is to help educate these youngsters on the proper food handling methods.

"Everybody learns things a little differently," said Panec. "That's why I try to present information in a way the kids can visualize when explaining appropriate hand-

washing and food handling methods."

It takes a lot of traveling for NDA Food Sanitarians to get to all the county fairs in the state each year. For instance, Melanie Kunc said she can travel anywhere from 500 to 800 miles in just a week.

"I try to visit two fairs in one day when I can in order to be more efficient," said Kunc. "For example, I plan to drive to David City for the Butler County Fair in the morning and do inspections and then head to the Colfax County Fair in Leigh for inspections that afternoon and evening."

NUCKOLLS COUNTY FAIR

That roundtrip alone is about 240 miles for Kunc. Kunc said the time spent to inspect each outlet can vary greatly.

“It depends on what you run into,” she said. “At a temporary event stand if everything has been done properly, and all the appropriate steps have been taken, an inspection may only take 15 minutes. However, if there are issues with permits or sanitation problems, it can take up to an hour and a half.”



Concession stands are a big part of county fairs.

The total time spent at each county fair depends on how many total concession stands they have and if there is a carnival at the fair with food stands.

Food inspections at the Nebraska State Fair are conducted by the **Central District Health Department** based in Grand Island as part of a contractual agreement with NDA.

FESTIVALS, FESTIVALS EVERYWHERE

“It seems like almost every city, town and village in Nebraska holds a festival of some type,” said NDA Ag Food Sanitarian Supervisor Dan Kahler. “And almost all of those festivals have vendors selling food items.”

Many of those festivals are held in the summer and fall, keeping NDA Ag Food Sanitarians plenty busy since they occur at the same time as most county fairs. And of course they still have to conduct their regular inspections at restaurants and other food outlets.

Town celebrations and special events vary greatly in size. For instance, one of the larger events

is the Apple Jack Festival in Nebraska City that takes place in Kahler’s territory.

“It’s a big event with activities throughout Nebraska City and adjacent areas,” said Kahler. “There are food vendors in several parking lots, at Arbor Day Farms, Kimmel Orchard and at a large flea market. I do a lot of walking.”

Other large festivals around the state that have many food outlets needing inspections include such popular events as Czech Days in Wilber and Nebraskaland Days in North Platte.

There are also hundreds of smaller festivals in Nebraska that are enjoyed by local residents. Examples include Limestone Days in Weeping Water and Papillion Days in Papillion. There tends to be many first-time vendors and volunteers working at the



Carnival food stands are popular at town festivals.

concession stands at these events. That's why NDA Food Sanitarian Paul DelSignore tries to get a list of vendors prior to the event taking place.

"If I see a vendor that is just starting out or hasn't been to

that location before, I give them a phone call and run down a list of things they need to make sure to bring with them in order to make sure they are meeting the Nebraska Food Code," said DelSignore. "I like to establish a good rapport with people at the

booths I will be inspecting. I think it leads to good cooperation and helps me be more efficient."



FOOTBALL MEANS LOTS OF POPCORN, PIZZA AND POP



There are no bigger "special events" in the state than University of Nebraska football games. Tons of pizza, popcorn, hot dogs and hot sandwiches are sold every fall. Just think of more than 90,000 people packed into Memorial Stadium cheering on the Huskers. They get hungry and thirsty. That means a lot of concession stands, food trucks and holding areas that need to be inspected.

And that job falls primarily to one man, the aforementioned Dan Kahler. Dan is responsible for inspecting all the food and drink dispensaries in and around the stadium that are on state property. Any food outlets located on Lincoln city property are inspected by the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department which contracts their services with NDA.

"There can be anywhere from 50 to 70 vendors that need to be checked," said Kahler. "I will usually try to go to two games a season because there is a lot of ground to cover and it can take some time."

Kahler also makes sure to inspect the commissary area in the stadium. That is where all the hotdogs are placed in wrappers and popcorn put into boxes. He makes sure the area is sanitary, workers are properly attired and the food is handled appropriately.

When Kahler walks into a concession stand to begin an inspection, "...the first thing I do is wash my hands; I want to set a precedent for the people working there."

In addition to the concession areas at Memorial Stadium, Kahler is also responsible for annual inspections at the Bob

Devaney Sports Center where University of Nebraska volleyball, wrestling matches and other sporting events are held.

Sites such as the Pinnacle Bank Arena and Haymarket Park in Lincoln fall under the responsibility of the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department (as contracted with NDA) since they are located on Lincoln city property.

So whether it's 90,000 fans at a football game gobbling up millions of pounds of food, or a small group of youngsters and their parents enjoying snacks at a local fair, NDA's Ag Food Sanitarians are working hard to ensure all that food is being prepared and handled properly to keep Nebraskans healthy and safe.

