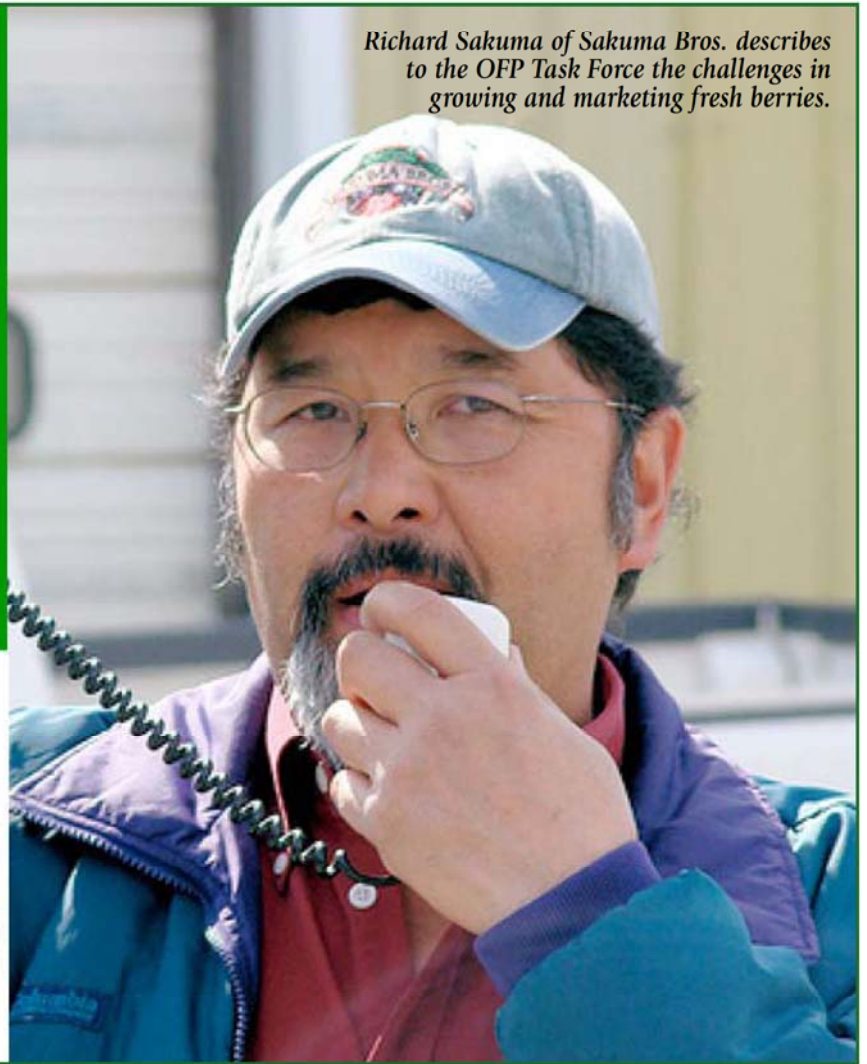


# Sakuma Brothers Takes Safety Seriously



*Richard Sakuma of Sakuma Bros. describes to the OFP Task Force the challenges in growing and marketing fresh berries.*

By Heather Clarke



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As you bite into that succulent strawberry this summer you probably aren't thinking about the measures taken to safely grow and harvest that berry.

While safety may not be forefront on your mind, it's a top priority for Sakuma Brothers, Inc. one of the largest berry farms and processing plants in the state.

Founded in 1935 and

located in Skagit County, Sakuma Brothers Farms and Processing is a third and fourth generation family-run business specializing in the propagation,



*Rick Anderson, WFB's Safety Advisory Committee Chair testifies at a hearing regarding the Retro Program in March, 2009.*

growing, harvesting, processing, and marketing of more than 1,000 acres of strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, and apples.

Operations of this magnitude require a large labor force with the Sakuma Brothers family growing to more than 400 employees during its peak season.

"Employees are our number one asset," said Rick Anderson, corporate administrator for Sakuma Brothers. "Safety is a priority for us and our employees. We want each employee to go home at the end of the day, without injury."

When it comes to safety, Sakuma Brothers practices what they preach.

With the help of Corwyn Fischer, Washington Farm Bureau Retro/Safety Assistant Director, Sakuma Brothers has implemented many new safety measures, including voluntary inspections, an employee-run safety committee, improvements to their Accident Prevention Program, and much more.

"Without the WFB Retro/Safety program, we wouldn't have a safety program – they got us started," said Anderson.

With the guidance of WFB, Sakuma Brothers applied for the Safety Star Program.

Although admittedly a lot of work at first, the program has paid off. Injuries are down and it has helped reduce their L&I experience rating which means dollars saved that can be used for equipment or new crop plantings.

Anderson credits a large part of the program's success to the employees' active role and support, "Our safety program is truly a grassroots effort with our employees taking an active role in providing formal and tailgate training in both English and Spanish. They inspect our work areas and take action to correct hazards."

One of the easiest safety improvements



Anderson stands next to the Safety Star sign to be recognized for Sakuma Brothers achievement at the WFB Annual Meeting.

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to see is the addition of safety glasses for all employees. While eye injuries used to be common from pruning, dirt in the nursery plant trim shed, or dirt falling while working on a piece of equipment – eye injuries have dropped to nearly zero since employees started wearing safety glasses.

“I can walk around the farm or processing plant and see people routinely wearing safety glasses, hearing protection, seat belts on the forklift, or using a safety harness if working at heights on a building,” said Anderson. “But the most rewarding thing is seeing the employees take pride in doing their jobs safely.”

Managers and supervisors provide monthly safety programs that change depending upon the season and the work activities that are coming up that

Safety suggestions are encouraged and the employee-run safety committee meetings have an open format that allows suggestions and provides avenues for follow up.



pen, but the real key is that our employees want our company to be a safe place to work and we all take a lot of pride in that,” said Anderson.

This approach to safety goes beyond the field, with employees being safer at home too.

For example, on the job employees have had considerable training on the safe use of fire extinguishers, which are required on all Sakuma trucks and power equipment. As a result, employees now recognize the need to have home fire extinguishers and they know how to use them. This training has helped employees save tractors and trucks on a few occasions, not just on the Sakuma

property, but also for neighboring farmers whose tractors have caught fire.

Improving safety is a continuous effort for Sakuma Brothers. In the future they hope to add more training for supervisors and managers, and create additional training materials in electronic format in both English and Spanish. They’d also like to see “train the trainer” instruction implemented for key employees who can then do a better job providing training to the general labor force.

Sakuma Brothers takes advantage of the voluntary consultation services of WFB Retro/Safety and L&I.

“The walk-throughs help us learn what is a hazard and we take digital pictures and follow up on correction,” Anderson shared.

Although the business of agriculture is always changing and the safety needs are always growing, it’s very clear that Sakuma Brothers is committed to safety for the long-haul.

They have won the WFB Safety Star award for the last three years and were awarded the 2008 Association of Washington Businesses Better Workplace Award for Safety.

Anderson is proud of Sakuma Brothers commitment to safety, stating simply, “It’s the right thing to do.”

month.

Sakuma Brothers now has a dozen certified chemical applicators and they all wear the proper personal protective equipment. They also have about 75 employees that are First Aid/CPR/AED certified.

In the last year, they’ve added defensive driving classes which are beginning to make a big difference on the farm. Employees are also benefiting from this training off the job with a reduction in their personal car insurance rates.

Sakuma Brothers has even made safety recognition part of its annual employee Christmas appreciation dinner.

To help employees be part of the safety solution, the last couple years Sakuma Brothers has sent roughly 25 employees to the Governor’s Agricultural Safety Day Conference. The conference is educational and the employees bring back ideas and suggestions for improving safety.

The committee consists of employees at all levels within the company. Supervisors and employees investigate safety issues with the safety committee reviewing accidents and near-misses. As a result, the number and severity of accidents has declined.

“We make a point to dedicate the necessary time and resources to make it hap-



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