

## **EUREPGAP – THE PRINCIPLES OF CERTIFICATION AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION IN HORTICULTURAL HOLDINGS**

Aleksandra Kurek

Maria Skłodowska-Curie University in Lublin, Poland

**Abstract.** This paper presents the history and principles of EUREPGAP certification. The system is evaluated on the basis of research conducted among three big producers of fresh tomatoes and cucumbers in the Lublin Province. EUREPGAP consists of voluntary standards for the certification of such agricultural products as fresh fruit and vegetables, cut flowers, green coffee, meat, fish and seafood. The certificate is required by all main international chains of supermarkets. Certifying food safety management system in horticultural holdings is quite advantageous to them. It is shown by presenting opinions of investigated producers about costs and benefits of EUREPGAP. The interviewed farmers have also given the reasons for implementing the system and described the difficulties that have appeared whilst certifying and maintaining EUREPGAP.

**Key words:** food quality and safety, EUREPGAP certificate, greenhouse vegetable producers, chains of supermarkets

### **INTRUCTION**

In the days of central planning economy, Polish consumers faced chronic deficit of agricultural and food products. The majority of farmers and entrepreneurs focused on maximizing the quantity of production without being concerned about the quality. Directly after the transformation of Polish economy into a market economy in 1989, agrifood production increased rapidly. It caused a big surplus of food articles on the market. Overproduction of agrifood arose from an increase in food prices along with a stable income of the population. In the nineties economic situation of Polish agricultural holdings was continually getting worse. It was more and more difficult to find a purchaser of offered commodities. Food manufacturers, retailers or wholesalers rarely contracted agrifood production. It significantly raised the financial risk of farmers' activity. The

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Corresponding author – Adres do korespondencji: Aleksandra Kurek, Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej w Lublinie, Zakład Gospodarki Żywnościowej, Pl. M. Curie-Skłodowskiej 5, 20-031 Lublin, tel. (048) 81 537 5163, (048) 505 944 006, e-mail: akurek@hektor.umcs.lublin.pl

relation between agrifood prices and the prices of production means and services was very unprofitable for farmers. Agrifood prices often fluctuated and it was hardly possible to predict the level of prices for next season. In this situation, farmers were not willing to specialize. The specialization could contribute to lower costs of production and improved quality. In the nineties export of Polish agricultural products to the European Union countries was much lower than import. It was mainly caused by the periodical duty-free import of grain and fodder. Falling profitability of agrifood production in Poland influenced the decrease in the number of holdings with the ability to develop. Polish agriculture did not keep pace with the developing economy and growing requirements of agrifood market.

At present, Polish individual farmers are still in an unfavorable situation. Their major problems are: low profitability of agricultural production, abrupt short-term changes of agrifood prices and low marketability of farm products. Polish agriculture is underdeveloped compared to the countries of EU-15 or USA. However, Poland's accession to the EU has produced more possibilities of farm development. Due to financial support from EU structural funds and better export conditions, farmers have a bigger chance to increase their income. Since the first of May 2004 Poland has not encountered legislative and trading barriers on the EU common market, which occurred before. The proof of it is a tremendous growth of turnover of agricultural products in Poland's foreign trade in 2004.

Nowadays, globalization implies aggressive and continually rising competitiveness on the agrifood market. In effect, the quality of production becomes a big market value. Ensuring high quality of farm products is a basic condition under which farmers can enter the market, stay there, find a client and keep him. Whilst purchasing agrifood, quality and safety become crucial determinants of consumers or clients' choice. They look forward to buying high and stable quality goods (often certified), and are willing to pay for good quality and safety.

At present, the concentration process is characteristic of the world trade in agrifood. Rapid development of supermarkets is also noticed in Poland. However, as compared to other EU countries, the concentration process on the food distribution market in Poland is slower. It is the result of a big number of small-scale agricultural holdings that do not meet the requirements of food retail chains. Therefore, quick and efficacious adjustments to these requirements are necessary.

To supply supermarkets with fresh fruit and vegetables, horticultural holdings have to have the crops EUREPGAP certified. It can be explained by a necessity of product traceability and safety. Moreover, farmers have to ensure big and constant deliveries. The reliability of supermarkets, which depends on farmers' deliveries, implies the loyalty of customers. It is highly possible that larger-scale agricultural producers having their crops quality certified enter into trade contacts with international food retail chains. These contacts would give farmers a much higher probability of selling bigger lots of goods and more stable income. If Polish horticultural holdings do not implement the EUREPGAP system, supermarkets will have no choice and they will offer in their stores in Poland fruit and vegetables from abroad.

The EUREPGAP certificate is usually required when Polish horticultural products are exported to other EU countries. This can be a threat to some farmers, as non-compliance with the EUREPGAP standards may lead to the exclusion from certain export markets.

Hence, the EUREPGAP certification of crops should give Polish farmers measurable benefits. It is worth noticing that Poland is the fourth producer of fruit and vegetables in the EU<sup>1</sup>.

Therefore, more and more Polish farmers produce in compliance with the EUREPGAP standards or are in the process of implementing the system. It might be said that EUREPGAP is a peculiar “pass” to enter the market.

High quality production of agricultural raw materials confirmed with a certificate should implicate that farmers will come into trading contacts and maintain them for a longer time. EUREPGAP should also ensure Polish producers a stronger position whilst negotiating the terms of trade.

Favorable terms of trade consist of good payment conditions, satisfying levels of prices, contractation and so on. At present, integration initiative usually belongs to the food retail chains. Supermarkets cannot base their activity on differentiated goods delivered by accidental agricultural producers. A farmer who is interested in long-term cooperation has to meet the standards required by a big food chain e.g. by implementing EUREPGAP. The principal benefits of contractation of agricultural production are lower sale risk and financial risk (thanks to EUREPGAP it is easier to find a purchaser who pays on time). Contractation and other favorable terms of trade should also cause an increase of farmers' income. A higher and surer return on agricultural production would let the farmers invest and modernize their holdings, enlarge the area of their farms and increase the scale of production.

## **EUREPGAP – CERTIFICATION OF THE SYSTEM**

In the last few decades, the probability of food contamination has increased dramatically. It has been a result of intensifying agricultural production by increasing the use of pesticides, fertilizers, growth hormones and antibiotics, more and more common application of genetically modified organisms, BSE (Mad Cow Disease – bovine spongiform encephalopathy) cases and presence of dioxins in fodder. As consumers and customers demand for high quality and safe food was constantly increasing, in order to ensure safety and good quality of primary products, a new voluntary standard was developed [Luning, Marcelis, Jongen 2005]. To feel secure, the European Union issued a directive, which said that retailers were responsible for the safety of supplied food articles. In response to that, in 1997 the Euro-Retailer Produce Working Group (EUREP) started an initiative of working on the EUREPGAP standard. There were fifteen members of this organization (the biggest international food retailer chains like Ahold, Tesco, Marks&Spencer, Safeway, Metro Group) [Urbaniak 2006]. They developed the new standard specifying requirements for food safety management system in horticultural holdings. Today EUREPGAP can be implemented in farms, which produce fruit, vegetables, cut flowers, mushrooms, green coffee, meat, fish and seafood. EUREPGAP includes the requirements of GAP (Good Agricultural Practices), HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) and is based on integrated crop and pest management principles.

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<sup>1</sup> Average production of fruit and vegetables in Poland in 2002–2004 equaled 8279 thousands of tons. 9.4% of this amount was exported. Italy, Spain and France were the only EU countries with a bigger production of fruit and vegetables [Szybiga 2006].

EUREPGAP requirements are based on several basic concepts:

1. Food safety – the standard is based on food safety criteria, derived from the application of generic HACCP principles (e.g. traceability of food products, fertilizer storage, hygiene risk analysis in produce handling or storing process);
2. Environmental Protection – the standard consists of environmental protection measures included in Good Agricultural Practices, which are designed to minimize the negative impact of agricultural production on the environment (e.g. by reducing the use of pesticides and fertilizers, waste and pollution management, recycling and re-use, suitability of equipment and its accessibility for cleaning, maintenance and preventive maintenance);
3. Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare – the standard establishes a global level of occupational health and safety criteria on farms, as well as awareness and responsibility regarding socially related issues (by establishing the lay-out of premises, including workspace and employee facilities, training activities and so on);
4. Animal Welfare (where applicable) – the standard establishes a global level of animal welfare criteria on farms including proper and humanitarian treating of livestock (e.g. during transport or in case of an illness) [Wiśniewska (5) 2006].

EUREPGAP is a pre-farm-gate-standard that means the certificate covers the process of the certified product from before the seed is planted until it leaves the farm.

Technically speaking, EUREPGAP is a set of normative documents. These documents cover the EUREPGAP General Regulations, the EUREPGAP Control Points and Compliance Criteria and the EUREPGAP Checklist.

The EUREPGAP General Regulations is a document, which explains the structure of certification to the EUREPGAP Standard, and the procedures that should be followed in order to obtain and maintain the certificate.

The EUREPGAP Control Points and Compliance Criteria Protocol (CPCC) gives specific details on how the grower complies with each of the scheme requirements. The CPCC consists of 14 different sections and 2 annexes, with a total of 210 Control Points. All Control Points must be audited; the possible answers are: compliance (yes), non-compliance (no) or Not Applicable (N/A). The CPCC scheme is divided into 47 Major Musts (red background), 98 Minor Musts (yellow background) and 65 Recommendations (green background). To obtain and maintain certification producers have to demonstrate 100% compliance with Major Musts and 95% compliance with Minor Musts. It is up to them which Recommendations they will take into account.

The EUREPGAP Checklist is the ground of the grower external audit and a set of points, which the grower must control to fulfill the annual internal audit requirements.

The EUREPGAP Protocol is divided into the following 14 sections: traceability, record keeping and internal self-inspection, varieties and rootstocks, site history and site management, soil and substrate management, fertilizer use, irrigation/fertigation, crop protection, harvesting, produce handling, waste and pollution management, recycling and re-use, worker health, safety and welfare, environmental issues and complaint form. Annex 1 gives guidelines for risk assessment for new plantings. Annex 2 deals with crop protection product use in the countries that allow extrapolation [Wiśniewska 2005].

The EUREPGAP system can be certified by independent authorized registered certification bodies accredited to ISO Guide 65 (EN 45011). In Poland there are only

branch offices of international certification bodies that certify EUREPGAP (e.g. BCS Poland, CERES-Poland, Control Union Certifications-Poland, Agro Quality Support (AQS), SGS Poland).

Both individual growers and grower organizations can apply for the EUREPGAP certification. In both cases internal and external audits have to be conducted annually to maintain the certificate. The aim of the audits is to determine whether the food safety management system conforms to the planned arrangements and to the requirements of the standard and is effectively implemented and updated. External audits are conducted by approved certification bodies. Group certification additionally requires the implementation of a common EUREPGAP management system in all farms belonging to the group. All the audits and verification processes are conducted among all the members of the group and on the level of organization. Moreover, all the producers in the group have to use the same procedure of internal audit.

Another option for the EUREPGAP certification is a benchmarking option. This option is a specially designed approval process that facilitates existing national or regional quality assurance schemes to prove equivalence with the EUREPGAP requirements. Hereby multiple audits are avoided at grower level and the development of regionally adjusted integrated crop management systems is encouraged.

Farmers who want to get certified to EUREPGAP have to take certain costs into account. Generally they have to pay for registration, inspection and certification.

The EUREPGAP certification is valid one year. In order to maintain the certificate, producers have to apply for re-certification. A farmer who obtains the EUREPGAP certificate receives an individual registration number, which can be given to his trading partners [Wiśniewska (6) 2006].

The aforementioned principles of implementing, certifying and maintaining the EUREPGAP system do not seem to be too hard or to be a burden for agricultural producers. It is worth making an effort and applying for the certificate especially in case of larger-scale farmers. The EUREPGAP certification is an intelligible means, recognized in the whole world, of confirming meeting quality requirements set forth in the international trade. Moreover, certification of applied quality and safety management systems is desirable especially in food production. EUREPGAP is a business-to-business label and is therefore not directly visible to the consumers. However, consumers are able to evaluate only sensuous characteristics of food products. To learn about nutritive values and sanitary safety of food, they have to rely on producer's declaration. EUREPGAP is a document of the reliability of activities designed to ensure quality and safety. This document enhances the reliability of agrifood producer and his products. Thus, the certificate should increase customers' loyalty.

In 2002 EUREPGAP was implemented in a Polish farm for the first time. In the beginning, only bigger agrifood producers that were selling their commodities in Western Europe were interested in obtaining the certificate. EUREPGAP was a condition on which international trading contacts could be maintained. Agricultural producers appreciated the value of the EUREPGAP certificate after the accession of Poland into the European Union when export to other European countries was facilitated. Since 2004, more and more small and medium producers (especially those that belong to agricultural producer groups) have become interested in obtaining the certificate. EUREPGAP has

become more common in farms, which have wanted to meet the requirements of big chains of supermarkets (Tesco, Real, Hypernova, Macro Cash and Carry etc.). For the past four years these farmers have created a prevailing group of holdings among the producers applying for and already maintaining the EUREPGAP certificate. Nowadays, producers of tomatoes in greenhouses, apples, soft fruit and mushrooms are the most interested in the certification [Katulski 2005].

Horticultural holdings, which produce safe food in compliance with the EUREPGAP principles, still have some opportunities to choose a buyer of their products. They can also profit from the changing tide of agrifood market. This is possible because there is a small number of EUREPGAP certified holdings in Poland (in 2006 there were about 90 of them) [Wiśniewska (6) 2006].

So far, there has been no reliable and systematically updated register of EUREPGAP certified farms in Poland. However, some records can be found on the websites of EUREPGAP consulting groups. One of the consulting companies, which advises Polish farmers how to implement and maintain EUREPGAP, is HACCP Center. This firm took part in implementing the system in 33 horticultural holdings in Poland (in 4 holdings in Lubelski Region; in Niemce, Cuple, Osiny and Granice).

## **FARMERS' OPINIONS ABOUT EUREPGAP**

The application of the EUREPGAP system in practice was evaluated on the basis of research conducted among three big horticultural holdings in the Lublin Province (two of them are located in the Chodel gmina [commune], and one – in the Niemce commune). The author of the article interviewed the following producers: the director of Gospodarstwo Szklarniowe LEONÓW Sp. z o.o. (Greenhouse Holding LEONÓW Ltd) in Niemce, the owner of Produkcja Ogrodnicza Andrzej Chechliński (Andrzej Chechliński Horticultural Production) in Cuple and the manager of Gospodarstwo Ogrodnicze Agnieszka Janik (Agnieszka Janik Horticultural Holding) in Osiny. The number of studied farms results from the information about EUREPGAP certified holdings that the author of the article managed to find (as was already said, no official register of these holdings was available). Unfortunately, the author did not succeed in interviewing the horticultural producer in Granice.

The producers were interviewed in their holdings in January 2007. The questionnaire consisted of four main parts: the first section dealt with farm activities, the second – with the reasons for implementing EUREPGAP, the third part referred to difficulties and inconveniences that appeared whilst implementing and maintaining the system and the fourth section concerned the benefits of the EUREPGAP certification.

All the three studied farms produce tomatoes and cucumbers in greenhouses and have all the crops EUREPGAP certified. The Horticultural Holdings in Cuple and Osiny are one-owner businesses whereas Leonów is a limited company owned by the employees. The farms have been on the market for 20–35 years but they have operated in the present legal forms for 7–10 years. Leonów differs from the other two holdings because it was the property of the Treasury before 2000. Moreover, Leonów has been the biggest greenhouse producer of tomatoes and cucumbers in the Lublin Province for 35 years. For

many years Leonów has been a well-known brand in the whole country and even abroad. It has had a big impact on its trade contacts. However, horticultural holdings in Cuple and Osiny seem to be more innovative, modernized and more up-to-date. These producers use the latest technologies and infrastructure solutions. Their know-how comes from the best Dutch specialists. The relation between the number of employees and the cultivated area (the number of ha per one permanent full-time employee) is also more profitable in these two farms (column 4 in Table 1). What is more, labor efficiency in the holdings in Cuple and Osiny is higher than it is in Leonów (column 5 in Table 1). However, area productivity of the holdings in Osiny and Leonów is much higher than it is in the farm in Cuple (column 6 in Table 1).

Table 1. The profile of studied horticultural holdings  
Tabela 1. Profile badanych holdingów ogrodniczych

Name of holding	Area of crops in greenhouses (in ha)	Total annual production (in tons)	Number of permanent full-time employees	3:1	2:3	2:1
				4	5	6
Greenhouse Holding LEONÓW Ltd in Niemce	19.6	8000	240	12.2	33.3	408.2
Horticultural Production Andrzej Chechliński in Cuple	13.5	3500	38	2.8	92.1	259.3
Horticultural Holding Agnieszka Janik in Osiny	6.5	3000	60	9.2	50.0	461.5

Source: Own elaboration on the basis of conducted research.

Źródło: Opracowanie własne na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań.

The products of the farms in Cuple and Osiny are partly exported (50% of their total annual production) and sold to big chains of supermarkets in Poland, but only through intermediaries. According to the farmers the biggest advantage of intermediaries is that they pay cash and are not late with payments. Leonów exports its vegetables (25% of its total annual production) both through middlemen and on its own. The farm makes trade agreements with all the chains of supermarkets that operate in Poland.

The producers under investigation completed the certification procedure not long ago: Leonów – in August 2005 (as the first farm in Poland), the holding in Cuple – in October 2005 and Osiny – in July 2006. The process of implementing the EUREPGAP system lasted for about 3 months in the farm in Cuple, 6 months in Leonów and one year in Osiny. All the respondents claimed that all the employees had taken part in implementing the system. Each farm hired the same consulting company (HACCP Centre) whilst working on complying with the EUREPGAP standards. The interviewed producers were unanimous in their opinion about the level of the costs of implementing and maintaining the certificate. They did not find these costs too high. The biggest expenditures were related to adapting the premises to the EUREPGAP standards (inevitable adjustments of floors, pavements, bathrooms, toilets, storage rooms etc.). None of the investigated producers has applied for a financial support from the EU structural funds designed for the modernization of farms. However, they are planning to use the EU resources in the nearest future.

The director of Leonów, when asked why they implemented EUREPGAP, said that they thought that EUREPGAP might be obligatory in the near future. In Cuple the decision about certifying the crops was made on the basis of increasing orientation for big clients (like Tesco, Real, Macro Cash and Carry etc.). The producer hoped that the certificate would help him to sell his products on the common EU market while the accession of Polish agrifood producers to this market became easier after the first of May 2004. The owner of the horticultural holding in Osiny admitted that the EUREPGAP certificate was usually requested whilst exporting food articles to Western Europe and Scandinavian countries and that the certificate was sometimes required by the clients from Southern and Eastern Europe (however, the quality requirements of the countries from these parts of Europe are rising rapidly). Besides that, it is quite possible to get a better price for the products thanks to EUREPGAP.

All the three interviewed producers judged the process of implementing and maintaining the EUREPGAP certificate as not too hard. Certainly, they ran into some difficulties, especially in the beginning. Leonów has had problems with finding a firm which would pick up waste products (empty fertilizer and pesticide packages, soiled foil, glass pieces, empty plastic bottles etc.) and acknowledge the collection of them with invoices. The producer has also had some problems with maintaining the system of monitoring and

Table 2. Benefits of the EUREPGAP certification according to the producers  
Tabela 2. Korzyści z certyfikacji EUREPGAP według producentów

Benefits	Greenhouse Holding LEONÓW Ltd in Niemce	Horticultural Production A. Chechliński in Cuple	Horticultural Holding A. Janik in Osiny
Improvements in products quality			+
Improvements in hygienic conditions	+	+	+
Better work conditions		+	+
Better social conditions for employees		+	+
Greater access to the market		+	+
More stable marketability of products			+
EUREPGAP raises the competitiveness of the farm on the domestic market			+
EUREPGAP raises the competitiveness of the farm on the international market	+	+	+
Higher possibility of choosing a purchaser of products		+	+
Strengthening the farm's position on the market	It's hard to say	+	+
Increased reliability of the farm regarding food safety and quality issues	+		+
Constant improvement in production skills			+
Minimizing destructive impact of the production on the environment		+	+
Positive organizational arrangements		+	
Putting the documents in order	+		
EUREPGAP prepares the farm to fulfill HACCP requirements		+	+

Source: Own draft on the basis of conducted research.

Źródło: Opracowanie własne na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań.

controlling vermin. The producers from Cuple and Osiny did not agree with the director of Leonów about the difficulties with collection of waste products. The number of this type of firms has steadily increased. They pick up waste products and give disinfectants and cleaners in return. The main process engineer in Cuple claimed that the only problem with EUREPGAP was to get used to the activities necessary for maintaining the certificate. In the very beginning, some activities seemed to be pointless (like e.g. labeling each lot of goods). In the course of time, it turned out that the system improved production work and farm management (e.g. in the case of incompatibility only a specific batch is withdrawn). According to all the interviewed producers, establishing and maintaining the EUREPGAP documentation has been no problem on condition that the records have been regularly and scrupulously updated. The director of Leonów has emphasized that the EUREPGAP system is created every day.

In terms of the benefits that the EUREPGAP certification brings to the producer, the studied farmers were quite unanimous. They claimed that the system had favorably influenced the hygienic conditions in their holdings and the competitiveness of their products on the international agrifood market (Table 2). When the farmers were talking about increasing marketability of their production after the EUREPGAP certification, they emphasized the positive impact of the certificate on the level of agrifood prices and other terms of trade. The implemented and certified system gives the farmers a high possibility of signing the contract agreement with big chains of supermarkets. However, in order to aim at it, a farmer must run a large-scale production enterprise (e.g. production at Osiny is too small). If a farmer does not fulfill the terms of contract, he will have to pay a high fine. This situation might even threaten the producer with bankruptcy (which happened to one of the producers in the Lublin Province).

## CONCLUSIONS

EUREPGAP is a globally recognized agrifood safety and quality management system, which has been developed for the producers of fruit, vegetables, cut flowers, mushrooms, green coffee, meat, fish and seafood. There are many advantages of implementing the system in horticultural holdings both for farmers and other participants in the food chain. Moreover, the maintaining of the EUREPGAP certification reduces the negative environmental effects of agricultural production.

Keeping up with the EUREPGAP standards is conducive to improvements in food safety and quality. It implies a bigger chance to win consumers' confidence. Food safety and quality assurance influences consumers' health and life. The conducted research confirmed that the EUREPGAP certificate raised the competitiveness of a farm and the marketability of its products, particularly on the international market. The certificate gives the farmers the opportunity of concluding agreements (e.g. contract agreements) with big chains of supermarkets or purchasers from abroad (e.g. Western Europe). These contacts should lower the sale risk and financial risk, which are really high for Polish farmers these days. Therefore, more and more Polish agricultural producers decide to implement and maintain EUREPGAP hoping that the certificate will bring them safer income. Furthermore, the farmers expect that the certification will bring financial gains, which will let them expand their production in the future.

The EUREPGAP certificate protects a supermarket when the offered fruit or vegetables turn out to be unsafe for consumers' health. Due to the EU directive a chain of supermarkets is responsible for the safety of food offered in its stores. Thanks to EUREPGAP the chain can shift the responsibility for unsafe agrifood onto the supplier e.g. a horticultural holding. The farmer can also shift the responsibility for unsafe commodities onto the certified laboratory that tested them.

In a global economy it is necessary to care about safety and quality of food products and to certify the systems dealing with it. It is a condition for entering the market, which becomes more and more competitive. In the process of concentration of the food trade in Poland and the whole world, EUREPGAP is a good choice for more significant horticultural producers.

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## EUREPGAP – ZASADY CERTYFIKACJI I ICH REALIZACJA W PRAKTYCE

**Streszczenie.** W artykule omówiono genezę i zasady certyfikacji systemu EUREPGAP, który może być wdrożony w gospodarstwach produkujących świeże owoce i warzywa, kwiaty cięte, zieloną kawę, mięso, ryby i owoce morza. System oceniono na podstawie wywiadów przeprowadzonych bezpośrednio w trzech dużych gospodarstwach ogrodniczych z województwa lubelskiego zajmujących się produkcją pomidorów i ogórków pod szkłem. Certyfikat EUREPGAP jest wymagany przy dostawach świeżych owoców i warzyw do wszystkich większych sieci supermarketów na świecie. Jednocześnie certyfikacja przynosi wiele korzyści ogrodnikom. Są one omówione w referacie na podstawie zebranych opinii rolników. Badani producenci rolni mówią też o kosztach wdrożenia i utrzymania systemu, o przesłankach wdrożenia go, i o trudnościach, jakie pojawiały się podczas certyfikacji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** bezpieczeństwo zdrowotne i jakość żywności, certyfikat EUREPGAP, producenci warzyw pod szkłem, sieci supermarketów