Concern about food allergens has been increasing for the last few years and prompted Congress to pass a new law requiring clear and unambiguous labeling of the eight major food allergy causing ingredients on all packaged foods by January of 2006. The issue of allergen liability has found its way into schools, restaurants, grocery stores, and may eventually affect any person or group who provides food for others to eat.

It is estimated that somewhere around 11 million Americans are allergic to one or more types of food and that as many as 200 deaths occur each year from food allergies. For reasons not completely understood, these numbers seem to be slowly, but steadily increasing. Reactions can vary from a mild rash to life threatening anaphylactic shock, and unfortunately, children seem to be at the greatest risk of the more severe reactions. The FDA has identified 8 major sources of food allergies and they are: milk, eggs, soybeans, wheat, fish, shellfish, ground nuts (including peanuts), and tree nuts (including pecans).

Companies, organizations (including nonprofit, educational and religious), and individuals that produce, process, distribute, sell or prepare food need to be aware of the issue of food allergies and what their responsibilities are to control them and/or make the ultimate consumer aware of their presence.

As with many other issues in our country today involving consumer safety, there will be an increasing burden on the producer and/or provider to inform the consumer about the potential risks associated with the presence of food allergens in the products they sell. As of yet these responsibilities have only been legally mandated for producers of packaged food products, but it is likely that in the future it will "trickle down" to any situation where a person or persons prepares and provides food for the public in any setting, such as fund raisers, meals during training programs, snacks for children's activities, etc.

Internally, extension offices should have written guidelines about the issue of food allergens and have trained all personnel involved in the preparation of food for the general public. Externally, agents in counties with active food processing segments can provide training regarding the proper identification, control and labeling of food allergens.