



Q&A: A Produce Industry Traceability Solution

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Can produce be traced today?

The produce industry is committed to food safety – the health of our customers is at stake. We have great incentive to be able to effectively isolate as quickly as possible any produce that may be related to a food safety problem – and a similar incentive to rule out concerns about produce that is not related to that problem. That commitment necessitates the ability to trace product through the supply chain, from the field forward. More specifically, the U.S. Bioterrorism Act of 2002 requires that every handler of food products establish and maintain records to document movement of its products both one step forward and one step back through the supply chain. These records allow product to be traced throughout the supply chain today, but we recognize that the current system isn't perfect, and we are working to improve it. We are working to standardize this information, to allow for computer storage and therefore faster electronic access to this vital information.

What is the produce industry doing to improve produce traceability?

While current traceability systems are generally effective to trace back product within a specific company's operations, the industry is now working on an initiative to build better transparency, a common framework and nomenclature for case labeling, and streamlined connectivity across the supply chain. The industry's major trade associations have been working to enhance traceability for many years, and are now actively engaged in a Produce Traceability Initiative to improve the industry's overall traceback efficiency.

Has a solution been identified?

Yes, and the initiative will soon announce a plan for implementation across the entire produce supply chain. Recognizing that each member of the supply chain will already have its own internal traceability system, the initiative's solution calls for adapting those systems to include, at a minimum, three common pieces of information that can be tracked among them. The needed connectivity can be achieved by including those pieces of information on every case of produce, and tracking that information as the case moves through each link in the supply chain.

Here's an analogy. Federal Express and UPS ship packages effortlessly around the world using unique electronic codes that identify and track each package as that package moves throughout their distribution. FedEx scanners can't read the codes on a UPS package and vice-versa; each company has its own internal coding system. Produce is slightly different, because packages are not handled in a closed-loop system like FedEx or UPS – produce distribution can involve many players, including packers, wholesalers or distribution centers, retailers and foodservice. So we need a case coding solution that can be read by any company across that supply chain, that is linked by common information and that is retained electronically by all the companies handling the package.

What are the common pieces of information needed for this process?

The information to appear on each and every produce case is: (1) a Global Trade Item Number (GTIN), which will identify who the “manufacturer” is (i.e., the owner of the brand that appears on the product case) and the type of product inside that case; (2) a lot number specifically identifying the lot from which the produce came; and (3) the produce’s harvest or pack date (if that date is not already incorporated in the lot number). This information will be labeled on each case in human-readable form, so that it can be read and understood by personnel throughout the supply chain. Labels will also carry this information in a machine-readable barcode, which each member of the supply chain will be able to scan and maintain in their computer systems.

How does this traceability process work?

Once each handler of the product is given these three pieces of information – the GTIN, lot number and pack/harvest date – they can use this information to search their own internal traceability systems to retrieve the necessary information about the path of that case, one step forward and one step back. The Produce Traceability Initiative does not create a centralized database to hold all the data for the entire supply chain. However, each member of the supply chain will be able to track these three fields in their individual databases and quickly determine where the produce came from, and where it went.

How does this process work for repackers?

If a repacker commingles product from multiple “manufacturers” into a newly configured case, or is simply repacking the case, that company becomes the new “manufacturer.” As such, they would assign a new GTIN (now showing them as the new “manufacturer”) to that new case, as well as a corresponding lot (or batch) number and pack date. The company must also establish a link in its records between the new GTIN, lot number and pack/harvest date and the original GTIN(s), lot number(s) and pack/harvest date(s) of the source produce.

Here is a very simplified example: A tomato packinghouse is repacking tomatoes to meet a customer’s need for a particular size and color. The packinghouse takes three boxes of tomatoes from three different growers – each case with its own GTIN, harvest/pack date and lot number – and repacks those tomatoes into new boxes, commingling tomatoes from the three growers in the process. Each of the new boxes will be given a new GTIN, pack date and lot (batch) number. The packer’s internal computer system must maintain a link between these newly packed boxes of commingled tomatoes and the three original boxes. So if the packer needs to trace back those cases, he can quickly link the new and old cases and trace their path through these GTINs.

Why aren’t we doing traceability this way now?

While the grocery industry has had electronic traceability for many years, for a number of reasons it has been more difficult to achieve in the more diverse world of fresh foods such as produce. However, the modern reality of today’s food safety environment now demands that the produce industry move from our old paper traceability systems to be able to more quickly trace back our products electronically, to safeguard public health. Produce industry leaders recognized this reality in 2002 and developed traceability best practices, then started an initiative to address it by releasing a second edition of best practices in 2007 for chainwide electronic traceability, which they are now working to get implemented throughout the produce supply chain.

Why isn't having an internal traceability system enough?

Having an internal traceability system is vital for any given organization to do the necessary investigation of what happened to the case while it was in that organization's possession. However, as the case makes its way through the balance of the supply chain, its movement needs to also be tracked by other companies and their different internal traceability systems. As such, adapting internal traceability systems to use these three common pieces of information (GTIN, lot number, harvest/pack date) is needed to accurately identify the case in question will ensure that everyone in the supply chain is tracking the same specific case of produce.

What are the benefits of this traceability process?

- The information is consistent across the industry and around the world.
- Companies can keep their own internal traceability systems, while modifying them to include the GTIN, lot number and pack/harvest date.
- The information can be stored electronically throughout the supply chain, permitting electronic searching and analysis that will produce answers much quicker.
- Investigations can happen concurrently throughout the links in the supply chain, rather than sequentially, which will expedite tracking.

What is the Produce Traceability Initiative?

Produce Marketing Association, United Fresh Produce Association and Canadian Produce Marketing Association formed the Produce Traceability Initiative in 2007 to assist produce companies and retail partners to move toward a common standard to enhance whole-chain traceability. The initiative is guided by a steering committee of more than 50 produce retailers, wholesalers, distributors, packers-shippers and growers. The committee is now finalizing an action plan and timeline for industrywide adoption of chainwide, electronic traceability.

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