

Ocean Mist Farms Implements PTI for Multiple Business Benefits

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Headquartered in Castroville, California, Ocean Mist Farms is the largest grower of fresh artichokes in the United States and a supplier of a full line of premium, fresh vegetables year-round in multiple growing regions throughout California.

In this story Chris Drew, Vice President of Operations, answers a few questions about the company's implementation of Produce Traceability Initiative (PTI) best practices, and what benefits the business has realized from this work.

Q: How did you get involved with PTI?

A: My responsibilities involve overseeing our cooling facilities as well as quality assurance, both of which are integral parts of making sure our trace-back and PTI procedures are followed.

Q: What were the compelling business reasons—or perhaps events—that led the company to decide to adopt standards?

A: Ocean Mist Farms had a previously established traceability program allowing us to trace each carton back to the block / field of origin. Much of the information being captured had complied with the PTI standards; however, not in a GS1 data format or applied to an actual PTI sticker as we know it today. From a traceability perspective, it made the most sense to migrate toward a product tracking platform that had been used successfully across other arms of the supply chain.

Q: What was your approach when implementing standards?

A: We jumped right in and went for it across the board. Having an established traceability program made it much easier to make the switch and implement the necessary training of all parties involved. We all understood the importance of making certain our traceback information was accurate. Utilizing our previous format of assigning blocks codes made the switch much more palatable. Although there were some new hurdles, such as establishing the necessary Global Trade Item Numbers (GTINs) for each product, private label products, as well as training our harvest crews how to use the PTI label printers, our launch was successful. A phased-in approach would have led to two different systems of traceability in commerce or inventory at the same time. Although both would have essentially been exact, it was much easier and cleaner to start evenly across all commodities and have all our traceability information / labels uniform based on PTI best practices.

Q: What business benefits have you seen from case-level traceability?

A: In our situation we had been applying a sticker to each carton prior to adding the GS1 Standards-based information to the PTI label. It does help: the information is verified prior to printing and applying the stickers to each carton which helps streamline the receiving process at our cooler. We also noticed a significant time saving while building and packing the cartons. In the past, each carton would need to be marked with a wax pen distinguishing the pack type as well as crew number designation. The PTI stickers contain all the necessary pack style attributes as well as crew information. With the application of the sticker we were able to eliminate three additional swipes of the hand to mark the carton as we had in the past. It also allowed us to eliminate the grid patterns on the carton permitting a much neater appearance.

“By implementing PTI labels, we have not only enhanced our traceability capabilities, but also improved our receiving processes and inventory management, minimized misloads, and are better prepared to provide the freshest produce to our customers.”

Chris Drew, Vice President of Operations, Ocean Mist Farms

Q: What about improvements in inventory management?

A: GS1 Standards help with inventory management from the perspective of having the product pack-style listed on each case label. In the event of an inventory variance, we can check the product pack style by reading the sticker on the outside of the carton. In the past, with the product ID marked on the carton grid pattern, sometimes we had to adjust or unstack the palletized cartons to read the grid pattern, or at times even open the carton to check which style was inside: Clear vs. Logo Iceberg Lettuce. Frequently, the wax pen on the grid pattern would smear allowing for speculation of which product style was marked.

The PTI labels have also helped to minimize misloads for the same reason. One initial concern that some had was the fact that our PTI labels show the exact calendar day the product was packed. Although this made some uncomfortable, it allowed Ocean Mist Farms to be fully transparent with our retail partners to show just how fresh our products are at the time of shipment. Adding an open date to each carton put pressure on us as suppliers and growers to make certain we only harvest what we need for our orders or what we could sell in a timely manner. Initially, it takes a strong amount of discipline; however, in the end, open dating allows us to provide the freshest vegetables possible to our customers.



Q: Are you better prepared for recall, if necessary?

A: Definitely. By simply receiving a picture of the PTI label, we can trace the product back to the field of origin as well as identity where other cases from the same block may have been distributed.

Q: How have your recipient trading partners benefited? What has been the response from your retailers/distribution or operator partners?

A: Our partners use the information to help keep us informed of specific quality related issues they may experience upon arrival or any other pertinent information they desire to relay about the product lot they received. PTI is a valuable tool that can translate very detailed information from the simplicity of a photograph.

Q: How do your consumers ultimately benefit?

A: Essentially our consumers should feel comfort in knowing we as producers have the capability to know where each carton of fresh vegetables we deliver to commerce originated and trace each through the supply chain in a time-efficient manner.

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