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Tracking System Lets Consumers Get Information about Their Produce

Jerry W. Jackson



The produce industry is stepping up its ability to trace food from packs of cherry tomatoes to single watermelons.

The great tomato scare of 2008 lasted just a few weeks, but farmers in Florida and other states lost an estimated \$200 million in sales before government inspectors figured out that imported jalapeno peppers were to blame for making more than 1,400 people ill earlier this year.

As more than 14,000 produce-industry professionals wrapped up a three-day conference in Orlando on Monday, the focus on "traceability" has never been sharper. Farmers, packers and retailers from across the country are seeking solutions.

For example, Leger & Son Inc., which grows watermelons in Florida and Georgia, is paying a California company called YottaMark to help it track individual melons from farm to store with a bar-code ID program called HarvestMark. YottaMark founder Elliott Grant, 37, who attended the Produce Marketing Association's 2008 Fresh Summit International Convention & Exposition, talked with Sentinel staff writer Jerry W. Jackson about the system and the tracking of fresh food.

Q. Bar-code tracking has been around for a long time. What's new about your system?

A. Our system gives the consumer more information than ever before. By typing in the code from the label of that basket of blackberries, raspberries or cherry tomatoes at our Web site, they can find out where the product was grown, the farmer who grew it, and a lot of other detail that they never had before.

Q: Do people really do that, take the time to check the code?

A: Not everyone wants that much information, but it's surprising how many consumers do. Hundreds of people checked on the watermelons they purchased [with the Leger & Son label] during a two-month period. And many of them took the time to e-mail the grower, to say, "That was a really good watermelon," or "I got a melon that was not that good." It's a way for the produce industry for the first time to interact directly with the consumer, down to the product level. And it gives consumers a greater degree of confidence. We plan to do in-store marketing to let consumers know that they can do this [with products from participating companies such as Driscoll's and Del Campo].

Q: How does this apply to food-safety scares?

A: It's a way for companies, from the producer to the retailer and all along the business-to-business chain, to quickly determine when the product was produced and shipped, and where it came from. It can help eliminate their product from suspicion, and reassure the consumer. It turned out that Florida tomatoes never were contaminated, but people stopped buying them, and it cost the industry millions. That's got to change. When Firestone recalled its tires, people didn't stop driving [on Firestone or other brands], because it [the recall] was targeted [to certain tires from certain factories].

Q: Florida has required fruits and vegetables to be labeled with their country of origin for many years; now a federal program requires it nationwide. How does that fit with what your company is doing?

A: COOL [country-of-origin labeling] has been seen as a bit of a threat by some in the industry. Importers see our service as a way to tell their story. There's a lot of ignorance out there about food quality from other countries. Mexican farms, for example, are some of the best and cleanest I've ever seen in the world. We're going to see more [foreign-based] producers participating.

Q: What's the future for food labeling?

A: The industry is in the early stages of a revolution. Produce traceability is going to become commonplace. Traceability will be expected everywhere within a few years.