

Special sections

#3 story of 2009: Traceability initiatives, solutions gain ground

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After food safety concerns topped the list of fresh produce industry news stories for 2007 and the Salmonella Saintpaul outbreak incorrectly linked to tomatoes ranked as the No. 1 story of 2008, the produce industry should have seen this one coming.



Traceability not only ranked as the No. 2 most important story of 2008 but checked into the 2009 countdown's No. 3 spot as the Produce Traceability Initiative took off.

The PTI Action Plan, released in 2008, includes a series of seven traceability implementation deadlines, with the final one to be implemented in 2012.

Numerous companies used 2009 to detail plans on innovative traceability solutions geared to help fresh produce companies in 2010 and beyond.

For instance, KPG Solutions Inc., Longwood, Fla., said it plans to offer an open-source, item-level traceability platform by early 2010.

That would mean consumers would be able to trace the produce they buy at the grocery store back to the grower-shipper, and the supply and buyer community can implement it for free, said KPG chairman and chief executive officer Angela Paymard.

Grower-shippers in California's Salinas Valley test-drove traceability programs offered by RedLine Solutions, Santa Clara, Calif., to provide PTI compliance for field-packed product.

The tests allowed the grower-shippers involved to devise budgets to implement PTI and also set timelines for implementation of the initiative.

In October, Redwood City, Calif.-based YottaMark Inc. announced plans to help shippers become compliant with PTI by providing an essential tool.

The company made its HarvestMark Global Trade Item Number Assignment Tool available to growers and shippers at no cost.

HarvestMark's iPhone application that allows consumers to trace their products using iPhones also is ready to go.

Many traceability companies used 2009 to push item-level traceability solutions to fresh produce companies looking to take the lead in an environment filled with case-level solutions, although produce industry pundits debated whether item-level solutions were any more valuable to them than those of case level.

Debate on the PTI timeline made news in fall 2009 as the produce industry chose it as the best option to

comply with federal law.

At an Oct. 2 Produce Marketing Association Fresh Summit workshop, Gary Fleming, then-vice president of industry technology and standards for the Newark, Del.-based PMA, said each level of the supply chain was considered in the PTI, a joint program of PMA, the United Fresh Produce Association and the Canadian Produce Marketing Association.

Fleming stressed that even companies that haven't gotten up to speed on the PTI milestones need to have some ability to trace their product one step up and one step back, since that was mandated in the 2002 bioterrorism act.

Cost/benefit

Many in the produce industry also lamented the potentially exorbitant costs of mandated traceability.

Tom Casas, vice president of information technology and mechanization for Salinas-based Tanimura & Antle, said when he first mentioned within his company that traceability was something it would have to invest in, the idea was met with denial, then anger, and finally acceptance.

"The cost doesn't really hit hard until you need to put bar codes on every box," he said. "(But) PTI will narrow the scope of recalls."

In October, federal officials missed a self-imposed deadline for issuing a food traceability plan.

President Obama's Food Safety Working Group promised on July 7 that the Food and Drug Administration would issue a draft proposal to the food industry on tracing systems within three months.

The Oct. 7 deadline came and went with no word on how long it would take for the traceability issue to be addressed.

Other traceability milestones earlier in 2009:

- In August, a sector-specific traceability implementation guide for fruits and vegetables was issued by GS1 U.S. and the Federation for Produce Standards. GS1 U.S., Lawrenceville, N.J., and the United Kingdom-based International Federation for Produce Standards described the document as a guide to implement GS1 traceability standards in the fresh fruit and vegetable industry supply chain. The document included key definitions and principles of traceability, combined with implementation guidelines for growers, packers, repackers, distributors, foodservice operators and retail stores.
- In July, **The Packer** hosted a Webcast exploring the many sides of the traceability puzzle. The Webcast was moderated by **The Packer's** editor, Greg Johnson. A second one was in October. Panelists agreed consumers today demand higher standards for food safety and traceability.
- Also in July, the White House announced tougher food safety plans, taking an active role in preventing foodborne illness outbreaks, targeting salmonella and E. coli, and allocating more resources for the effort, including development of new commodity-specific guidelines and better collaboration on investigations. The first step for fresh produce in the new food safety agenda announced July 7: commodity-specific guidelines for leafy greens, tomatoes and melons.