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Early PTI pilot programs wrap up in Salinas

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SOLEDAD, Calif. — It's an early, foggy October morning and a crew of more than a dozen are deftly cutting celery in neat rows.

The crews work fast, cutting the bunches of celery as workers with the harvest machine quickly follow, gathering the celery to be boxed up before heading to a Salinas cooler. Three men on the crew are leaning over cartons of freshly packed Dandy brand celery, unspooling labels from a dispenser around their waists.



Dawn Withers

Members of Duda Farm Fresh Foods' celery harvest crew apply GTIN labels during the company's traceability pilot program Oct. 22 near Soledad, Calif.

It's Oct. 22 and their third day affixing the Global Trade Item Number labels to each carton as they harvest acre after acre of celery for Duda Farms Fresh Food, the latest Salinas-area company to launch a pilot program under the Produce Traceability Initiative.

"There are still some kinks to work out," said Manuel Alcala, Duda's operations manager, of the company's progress.

Duda picked celery because it's the largest volume product it grows with more than 300 pack styles labeled under its pilot program with RedLine Solutions Inc., Santa Clara.

Alcala said that makes it the perfect commodity to test as each crew can pack up to six different configurations during every harvest.

David Best, director of application systems based at Duda's Oviedo, Fla., headquarters, said the company will start its next traceback program this fall in Florida, where it packs and ships radishes.

The goal of the PTI, led by the major produce trade groups, is for full supply chain traceability from farm to retail stores by 2012. The next deadline of September 2010 requires companies to have their GTIN labels applied at the case level.

Like other companies running pilots, Alcala said Duda is experimenting with a combination of field label printing and pre-printing and getting used to the hand-held scanners that hold all the different label combinations corresponding with the different pack styles.

Duda is one of several Salinas-area companies coming to an end of their initial PTI pilot programs with Redline. Chris Davis, RedLine's chief operating officer, said the pilots helped RedLine better engineer its traceback equipment and technology for the reality and variability of field packing.

In a nearby field, Coastline Produce is entering its 10th week of its pilot program with RedLine and its harvest partner, Southwest Harvesting Co. Inc., Salinas. Cesar Mercado, president of Southwest Harvesting, stands near the field of iceberg lettuce a crew is working in attaching GTIN labels to the cartons.

"It's become part of the routine," Mercado said.

Mercado said the pilot helped his company and Coastline figure out the details of producing the labels, affixing them and getting it match to new pallet tags the company is also using as part of PTI.

Phil Adrian, vice president and owner of Coastline, said by next September the company will launch a full PTI program covering all 1,100 of its products and pack styles. Next year will focus on training staff, Adrian said,

matching the PTI with the company's internal traceback system, and working with an added cost of 5 cents to 10 cents per carton.

Another traceability company, YottaMark Inc, Redwood City, which owns the HarvestMark traceability system, is also in talks with several Salinas-area companies to launch pilot programs, said Elliott Grant, chief marketing officer. Grant said the company won't disclose the details before the programs are complete but HarvestMark does have six traceback programs up and running in Nogales, Ariz., with grower-shippers like SunFed and Royal Flavor, San Diego.

"There's a ton of work to do between now and September 2010," Gant said about bringing more produce companies into traceability programs.

Representatives from SunFed and Royal Flavor were not available to comment.

However, Grant said he expects to see a lot more companies starting traceability programs next year as the deadline for labeling draws near. "No one is exempt from PTI," Grant said.