

THE PACKER

Produce industry tries a tech-savvy approach to curbing food-borne illnesses

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Bar codes, personal digital assistants and satellite technology are among the new tools being used to help harvest oranges for the Sunny Cove Citrus packinghouse.

The gadgets, along with traditional clippers, canvas sacks and ladders, are designed to help the Orange Cove packer track the path of its oranges from the grove to the grocery store.

Produce growers, packers and shippers increasingly are turning to tracking technology in response to consumer and industry concerns about food safety.

"This really is going to be the way of the future," said Shann Blue, field operations manager for Sunny Cove Citrus. "Food safety and traceability are huge issues right now, and we are trying to be forward thinkers."

Using a system developed by John Deere Agri Systems, Sunny Cove now has the ability to connect the workers to the oranges they harvested and the field in which they were picked. Other companies also have rolled out similar technology.

YottaMark, a Redwood City-based firm, is working with Watsonville-based Driscoll's, one of the leading berry companies in the United States, to deploy its tracking system called HarvestMark.

A code printed on the label of each clamshell of berries allows on-demand traceability for consumers, who can learn more about the food they purchase and the farmers who grew it.

"This really sends a powerful message to consumers that people really care about the produce that they are buying," said Elliot Grant, Yotta-Mark's president and CEO.

In Sunny Cove's case, a bar code is assigned to each citrus worker and to the bins used to collect the harvested oranges. A PDA is used to scan the workers' bar code each time they dump fruit in the bin. Also, it tracks the area being harvested using global positioning system technology.

The fruit bins then are trucked to the packinghouse, where they are scanned again before they are packed.

"Once inside the packinghouse, the fruit is identified through the regular process using lot numbers and the grower's ID," Blue said.



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After scanning, the information provided in the bar codes can track the produce from field to market.

The system also allows Sunny Cove to provide better quality control in the field. If a worker is damaging fruit during the harvest, a foreman will know exactly who is responsible and can work out any problems.

Although state or federal officials are not yet requiring a tracking system, Blue said some of the packinghouse's retail customers are demanding it.

And industry experts say that while tracking systems can't prevent people from getting sick, they can limit the damage by providing investigators with more information.

"Recalls happen all the time, and manufacturers have the ability to know where their products are and can pull them quickly," said Jim Prevor, founder and editor of perishablepundit.com, a produce industry blog. "But the produce industry doesn't have that throughout the supply chain."

Recent cases of food-borne illnesses linked to spinach, iceberg lettuce and, most recently, jalapeño peppers, have caused hundreds of illnesses nationwide and cost the food industry millions of dollars.

Blue is well aware of the potential damage a food-borne illness outbreak can have on the produce industry.

When tomatoes were implicated in an outbreak of salmonella this summer, consumers began rejecting all tomatoes, despite assurances from health investigators that only certain varieties should be avoided.

And in the end, Mexican-grown jalapeños were to blame for the salmonella outbreak that caused more than 1,400 illnesses nationwide.

Blue hopes tracking systems, including the one used by Sunny Cove, will help investigators quickly resolve the cause of the outbreaks without implicating or damaging other industries.

"If we ever get that fateful call that something is wrong, we can track the fruit back to the day it arrived in the store and the order number," Blue said. "And within our system, we can tell you which lots were there at the store and where that fruit was picked and on what day."



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A bar code on a fruit bin owned by Sunny Cove Citrus will help track the fruit from field to market.