

THE PACKER

Companies learn traceability details from PMA

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By Dawn Withers

(Jan. 19, 12:20 p.m.) MONTEREY, Calif. — If the produce industry doesn't come up with better ways to track its products and improve food safety, the government will.

That was the message from Gary Fleming, the Produce Marketing Association's vice president of industry, technology and standards, who laid out detailed traceability plans PMA is encouraging its members to follow. Fleming spoke on traceability during PMA's Fresh Connections meeting on Jan. 13 in Monterey, Calif.

The government, Fleming said, is giving the industry a "stay of execution" to address problems with tracing contaminated food supplies and standardizing how growers talk to shippers, retailers, packers and other companies that handle produce before it gets to consumers.

"If the industry doesn't fix it then the government will tell them what to do," Fleming said.

PMA, Newark, Del., has spent the past year working on traceability standards for its members to adopt by 2012. It's holding meetings this year, the first in Monterey, to introduce more details to members about traceability standards and the tools available to track products throughout the supply chain.

PMA, along with the Ottawa-based Canadian Produce Marketing Association and Washington, D.C.-based United Fresh Produce Association, formed the Produce Traceability Initiative steering committee last year and has scheduled a June meeting in Philadelphia to update members on the initiative's progress.

Good traceability "can create a brand and build a connection between shipper, buyer, all the way out to the consumer," said Scott Carr, president and chief executive officer of YottaMark, Redwood City, Calif. YottaMark specializes in creating traceability programs for produce companies.

The key to enhanced traceability, Fleming said, is a company acquiring a Global Trade Item Number, assigning it to cases, and providing that number so buyers can track cases they purchase.

"We want to go to (the government) with some solution," said Mikelea Hailstone, e-business manager for Tanimura and Antle, Salinas, Calif. Tanimura and Antle, Hailstone said, is using GTIN at the case level.

During the meeting, industry executives asked how the system can be applied to different commodities and bulk products, and what happens when retailers mix produce from a variety of suppliers in one bin.

Alan Newton, vice president of information services for Duda, Oviedo, Fla., said traceability programs haven't solved all the problems with keeping tabs on loose produce.

"It's going to be a decision based on commodity," Newton said, who also serves as vice chairman of PMA's Technology and Standards Council.