

THE PACKER

Traceability programs boost retailer, consumer confidence

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By Amy Fischbach, The Packer

When melon shippers track where their product goes, the trail no longer stops at the retail or wholesale level.

Companies must be confident they know where the melon came from if the consumer has any issues, said Greg Leger, president of Leger & Son, Cordele, Ga.

"If you put a product in the store, you have to stay with it until the end," Leger said. "It's what people are looking for."

Researching companies

In the wake of food safety outbreaks in other produce categories, melon growers are becoming more vigilant by partnering with labeling and traceability companies.

Brent Jackson, co-owner and sales manager for Jackson Farms, Autryville, N.C., said his company is adding traceability labels but hasn't decided which program to go with. The company hopes to select a partner before its North Carolina season and fully implement it by the beginning of the 2010 season.

"I am currently spending most of my time learning and researching all the new and improved traceback systems that are becoming available," Jackson said.

Gordon Etheridge, president of Etheridge Produce, Raleigh, N.C., also is researching the options available. While not all of his customers are requiring the traceability labels, some of the larger retail chains expect their growers to participate in a program. Etheridge Produce labels its watermelons with the number and product of origin, the company will soon add a bar code.

This program, however, comes at a cost. He estimated it would cost his business between \$30,000 and \$35,000 to print all the stickers for the program and fully participate in it.

Differentiating melons

Leger & Son was one of the first produce companies to participate in the YottaMark's HarvestMark pilot program.

In Georgia, workers pack Leger & Son melons in five sheds at the same time. While he already was able to traceback bins and boxes, his customers told him that sooner or later he also would have to traceback individual watermelons.

"Sometimes, if you go to a Wal-Mart in my hometown there will be five different labels in one bin of watermelon," Leger said. "The distribution center could send three different shippers' fruit into one store, and when the bins get low they would pile them all into one bin."

Leger & Son has a 2D matrix code that goes on all of its stickers. The company labels its individual watermelons with the Universal Product Code, point of origin and another traceability code.

At the end of the day, the company takes the first and last labels off each roll of stickers and scans them in. The data then goes into a database and within 48 hours a consumer can go to the Web site, punch in the code on the fruit and know everything about it.

This is easier for the watermelon industry than other industries due to the size of the fruit. While tomato or onion growers can label entire bags or boxes, watermelon growers have an advantage because they can label each individual watermelon, he said.

It typically costs about a penny per watermelon for the traceability program and stickers. To make it work, the consumer must pay the extra penny, and the retail stores and shippers must share the cost, Leger said.

"Everything can't roll downhill and come back to the farm," Leger said. "We already have our own expenses."

Building confidence

Offering product-level traceability is a tremendous advantage for all involved — from the consumer to the retailer to foodservice to the chef to the grower, said Angela O'Neal Chappell, business development manager for Coosaw Farms, Fairfax, S.C.

"In the event of a food safety outbreak, it's critical to know quickly the source of your food," said Chappell, whose company is working with HarvestMark to accomplish this goal. Coosaw Farms wants to provide confidence to retailers and consumers.

"We can't afford to lose our entire crop due a confused marketplace," she said. "It benefits us to have our own origins clearly and specifically defined and instantly accessible."

This year, Coosaw Farms' bins will include consumer-targeted traceability information. For example, the bins will display messaging such as "trace my watermelon" and "meet the grower." The bins also include the HarvestMark.com logo and Web address.

Jackson said this opens the door to consumer comments, whether they're positive or negative.

"I've gotten some comments from consumers going on and on that this is the best watermelon that they've ever had, thanking me for the experience," he said. "Others say their watermelon wasn't ripe enough."

The only way it will truly work, however, is if everyone in the watermelon industry gets on board, Leger said.

"In the case of the spinach and tomato industry outbreaks, no one could say where it came from, and the whole industries were devastated," Leger said. "If you can put your finger on it and isolate it, it won't kill the whole industry."