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Startup's stickers identify the source of food

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By Tom Abate, San Francisco Chronicle

At a farm in Manteca, in San Joaquin County, workers smack labels onto watermelons freshly cut from the vine, each sticker bearing a unique string of letters and numbers that identifies where they were harvested.

"With food safety as big as it is, we can give each watermelon its own code so a consumer can check on the Internet to see where it is grown," said Ryan Van Groningen of Van Groningen & Sons Farms, which sells watermelons under the Yosemite Fresh brand.

This new code, called the HarvestMark, is being developed by the Redwood City startup YottaMark Inc. at a time when Congress is considering food-safety legislation that could make some type of tracking system mandatory.

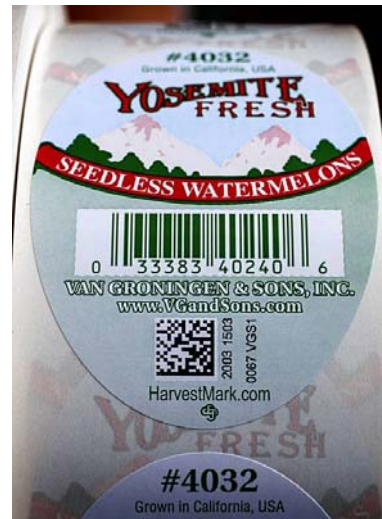
"In the event of a recall, the Food and Drug Administration can find out where a product came from and how it got to market," said YottaMark co-founder Elliott Grant.

The new tracing system is one example of how the private sector has responded to recent food-safety scares, such as the 2006 E. coli outbreak involving spinach.

In advance of any legal mandate, a few growers have started putting HarvestMark codes on products like plastic-packaged grapes and strawberries, as well as watermelons.

"We're trying to be ahead of the game," Van Groningen said.

The HarvestMark is so new that the growers using it are still running pilot programs to make sure they can get labels printed with the proper codes and train field crews to collect accurate information for the computerized database at the heart of the system.



The idea is to enable a consumer to type the 16-digit tracking code into a locator field at HarvestMark.com to learn where the product was grown. Depending on the grower's records and what the farm chooses to reveal, the system could detail the date and part of the field where the product originated.

Traceability efforts

UC Davis research specialist Trevor Suslow, who studies how crops are handled after harvest, said the spinach E. coli outbreak spurred a whole series of industry efforts to improve food traceability.

"That was really the first time the FDA had issued a blanket advisory against a commodity, and a lot of growers who couldn't possibly have been responsible were greatly affected," he said.

The economic and political fallout from that incident prompted a number of produce industry trade associations to band together to create voluntary standards for tracking crops from fields to stores.

Dan Vache, a technical expert with the United Fresh Produce Association, said the standard would require participating growers to put a tracing code on each case of produce by 2010.

By 2012, distributors, including supermarkets and warehouses, would have to make sure that their computer systems can track each case of produce at every step from the field to the store or restaurant where it reaches the consumer, Vache said.

Grant said the HarvestMark was developed almost by accident after the E. coli outbreak.

He said YottaMark was founded in 2004, and initially developed its tracking labels to help authenticate electronic goods and pharmaceuticals, in order to combat counterfeits.

But after the spinach crisis, some of California's biggest producers came across YottaMark's coding system at a packaging industry trade show and urged the startup to adapt its technology to agriculture.

"This was a perfect application we had never thought of," Grant said.

Gordon Robertson is a vice president with Sun World in Bakersfield, a fresh-fruit shipper that has started putting the HarvestMark on products like packaged grapes.

Pressure on growers

He said that, independent of any government mandate, big grocery and warehouse stores have been pressuring growers to create some way to prove that produce doesn't come from areas where there have been disease outbreaks.

"If there is a product recall, you want to be able to identify and communicate to the government, to the retailer and to the public that this product does not have to be pulled from the shelves and is safe to eat," he said.

Robertson said the HarvestMark does more than the industry standard because it can trace an individual item, not just a case. Consumers can also use it themselves to find out where food comes from in addition to providing assurance of safety.

"We can actually build information and trust in our brand," he said.

The tracking system is not unprecedented. For example, premium San Francisco chocolatemaker Original Beans prints similar locator codes on its wrappers to show where the cacao beans in an individual bar were grown.

The House of Representatives passed a food-safety bill last week that instructed regulators to come up with better ways to trace all edible products, not just produce, but did not spell out specific measures. The measure now heads to the Senate.

Daniel Sumner, director of the UC Agricultural Issues Center at UC Davis, said better food tracing is a good idea but it can't solve all food-safety concerns.

For instance, he said processed items, like mixed salads and pre-cut vegetables, are difficult to trace because they may include produce from different sources.

Sumner also cautioned against imposing strict requirements, like item-level codes, that might be too costly or impractical.

"If it's a watermelon and you can put a sticker on it in the field that's one thing," he said. "But you can't put a sticker on a walnut."