



Labels will tell buyers where their produce grew

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By Julie Schmit, USA TODAY

The world's largest fresh berry producer expects to have labels on most of its berries by next year so consumers can locate the farm that grew them.

Driscoll's, of Watsonville, Calif., is putting HarvestMark labels on clamshells of strawberries, raspberries, blackberries and later, blueberries.

The label includes a 16-digit code. By going to HarvestMark or Driscoll's website, consumers will then be able to enter the code and get information on the farm, farmer and growing region.

"Consumers want to know more about the products they take into their bodies. Where it comes from is increasingly relevant," says Douglas Ronan, Driscoll's vice president of marketing.

The ability to quickly track where fresh produce is grown is also key to helping food-safety investigators trace contaminated food back to its source, as well as getting it out of stores faster.

Given numerous recalls of fresh produce in recent years, the industry has come under increasing pressure to improve its ability to track products. While bagged salads, for instance, already have production codes, much fresh produce moves in bulk, making tracking more difficult.

HarvestMark is owned by YottaMark, a California start-up that says it's crafted an easy, inexpensive solution. It's one of dozens of companies making such claims, but it's one of a smaller number that are attempting to make "trace back" information available to consumers.

"This connects us directly to the consumer," says Martin Ley, vice president of Del Campo Supreme, a Mexico-based producer of tomatoes and peppers.

Within weeks, Del Campo will begin putting HarvestMark labels on clamshells, bags and cases of products. Its HarvestMark labels will include the phrase "Where was I grown?" to draw attention to the code. The cost? Less than a penny a clamshell, Ley says.

Del Campo expects to label individual peppers and tomatoes by year's end. That way, it will still be possible to trace their origin if they're mixed with others in stores or repacked by wholesalers.

Several watermelon makers are doing the same. Leger & Son, which produces watermelons in Florida and Georgia, started putting HarvestMark labels on melons last year. Owner Greg Leger says hundreds of consumers used the codes



By Martin E. Klimek for USA TODAY

YottaMark President and CEO Scott Carr outside his Redwood City, Calif., offices with fresh produce, which bear the company's HarvestMark label.

to get more information. Many also left compliments on the website, but one consumer complained that his melon wasn't ripe.

Using the code, Leger found the packing house that shipped the melon. He found that others needed ripening, too, and delayed their shipment. In the past, Leger was unable to trace melons that had been repacked by retailers. "It really worked well," Leger says. In this case, consumers were made happier. "If it had been a health issue, bam, I was there," he says.

100 million and growing

YottaMark is the leader in labels that connect to consumers, says Jim Prevor, editor of Produce Business and author of the online Perishable Pundit.

Founded in 2005, privately held YottaMark says HarvestMark — symbolized by a butterfly-like logo — has been used on more than 100 million produce labels and is expanding weekly.

In addition to putting farm-origin information on the Web, companies can tell consumers more about their products, such as nutritional content or dishes they complement.

"The real potential of HarvestMark is more marketing than food safety," Prevor says.

When food is recalled, government websites publish the information to alert consumers. Those websites will have the data as quickly as or more quickly than HarvestMark, he says.

In some cases, though, consumer access to product history may help.

Last year, the Food and Drug Administration told consumers to avoid tomatoes grown in certain regions, fearing they caused a salmonella outbreak eventually linked to hot peppers. Consumers largely had to rely on retailers to find out where their tomatoes were grown. With HarvestMark, they could check themselves.

"Most tomato growers have good traceability, but consumers can't see it," says YottaMark CEO Scott Carr. "That's what YottaMark does."

Preparing standards

The FDA has also said the fresh produce industry needs better tracing capabilities, given recent outbreaks in peppers, cantaloupes and fresh spinach.

Last fall, the FDA held two public hearings on the subject to gather information on what, if anything, it should require of the industry or suggest it do.

The Produce Marketing Association and other industry trade groups are also working on standards so that fresh produce companies collect the same data and display it in ways that enable regulators to follow products through long supply chains.

Del Campo's Ley says many companies have good internal tracing systems but may not collect the same data, or may not collect data in ways that the FDA can then easily track.

HarvestMark's system standardizes data collection and can include everything the trade groups want collected — such as farm, field, grower, lot number and pack date. Paper records kept in the field while product is harvested work just fine, as long as the data is eventually uploaded to a database, Carr says.

"We've come up with a low-cost way to get data out of the field," he says.