

Growers Using Traceability

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By Laura Drotleff, Western Fruit Grower Magazine

YottaMark's HarvestMark program is helping several growers reach compliance with the Produce Traceability Initiative.

With the Produce Traceability Initiative (PTI) well underway, the rush to comply with case-level tracking industry-wide by 2012 is on for produce operations of all kinds and sizes. Several large grower/packers have signed on with YottaMark's HarvestMark program to help them reach compliance with the PTI, but with the HarvestMark technology platform, they are taking their business a step further with consumer item-level traceability of their products. While the industry as a whole is tackling case-level traceability as a first step with the eventual goal of implementing item-level tracking, some industry members disagree with the logic.

"It is very important now, as we begin to invest in traceability, that all segments of the produce industry work together on a universal system," says Cindy Jewell, director of marketing for [California Giant Berry Farm](#) (CalGiant), located in Watsonville. "While we are focused on item-level traceability, there are other initiatives underway that are solely focused on case level traceability. The last thing we need as an industry is to be compelled to have more than one system in place."

To date, HarvestMark has secured more than 40 clients within the produce industry, adding more every day. We talked to representatives of a few large operations to find out how using a system like HarvestMark is beneficial, including [Sun World](#), [Driscoll's Berries](#), [CalGiant](#), and [Melon 1](#).

What Is HarvestMark?

YottaMark, a privately held company with a technology platform that delivers product authentication and unit-level traceability, provides security codes for millions of dollars worth of branded goods in the fresh produce, pharmaceutical, electronics, and consumer packaged goods industries. In 2007, a major produce shipper approached representatives from YottaMark at a trade show about developing a traceability solution for produce. After doing their homework about the industry, including extensive consumer research on preferences of trackable produce, the team at YottaMark developed its HarvestMark program in 2008, according to Elliott Grant, YottaMark's chief marketing officer.

The Future Of Traceability

In the Produce Traceability Demonstration area of the United Fresh 2009 trade show in Las Vegas in April, YottaMark launched the HarvestMark cell phone traceability capability, which allows anyone – grower, retailer, or consumer – to scan products and track them back to the farm they originated from by simply taking a photo with a mobile phone, says Elliott Grant, YottaMark’s chief marketing officer.

“It is important for consumers to realize that their produce is traceable,” he says. “Now, every time they see the HarvestMark logo, they will become more familiar with traceability.”

“I would not overstate the importance of traceability in the produce industry,” says Grant. “This will have a huge impact on how people do business and everyone has to be involved. This is an unprecedented opportunity for the produce industry to become connected – it will give the industry a common language, much the same as Internet protocol did for personal computers. It’s transformational.”

HarvestMark (www.harvestmark.com) offers solutions for both item-level and PTI case-level traceability. The HarvestMark codes speed response to suspected recall events and deliver on-demand product information via secure Web portals, cell phones, and retail store kiosks. Designed for field- and line-packed produce, HarvestMark accommodates a wide range of workflows with an open platform for integration with existing systems. YottaMark’s GS1-certified staff provides support to ease implementation and PTI compliance.

Why Choose HarvestMark?

[Sun World International](http://www.sunworld.com), headquartered in Bakersfield, CA, began to deploy on-demand traceability using HarvestMark at the case and item-level this spring, across much of its product line, including table grapes, tree fruit, seedless watermelons, citrus, and colored peppers. Table grapes will be the first to show up with HarvestMark logos at retail.



“To us, the PTI means we have consumer demand around traceability and food safety,” says Gordon Robertson, vice president of sales and marketing for Sun World International. “This is a consumer demand – we sell consumer goods. As an organization, we have the opportunity to build a strategy, think about how we’re going to address it, and bring that into the industry.”

When shopping for a traceability system, Sun World International identified a few key criteria: 1) a system that supported its harvest and packing operations with minimal impact to productivity and cost; 2) cost structure; 3) minimal technology; 4) easy to implement going forward; and 5) ability to bring traceability to the consumer level. Ultimately, two key elements were the deciding factor, says Robertson.

“HarvestMark demonstrated to us a working knowledge of the fresh produce industry and experience working with industries and companies like ours,” Robertson says.

“The platform itself demonstrated the ability to meet the PTI requirements, as well as the ability to give more information to the consumer about the food they are eating.”

For [CalGiant](#), which is conducting a pilot program only for strawberries this year, HarvestMark provided the opportunity to focus on meeting consumer needs through its item-level traceability capabilities. “Our operations department considered and did small-scale tests with multiple companies before ultimately choosing HarvestMark for our pilot program,” Jewell says. “This program had the best overall system, providing accuracy and simplicity throughout distribution, beginning with application of the label at the packaging manufacturer, all the way through the system to the consumer buying the product at store level.”

Watermelons In First

Greg Leger of Leger & Son, Inc., a watermelon grower/shipper in Cordele, GA, helped Melon 1, a large watermelon shipper in Barnwell, SC, set up its traceability system with HarvestMark. After already tracing bins of watermelons for the last several years, the businesses ran into a challenge when retailers mixed shipments and even mixed different suppliers’ products in the same bin, Leger says.

“We were looking to color code labels to identify different fields for traceability when we found HarvestMark,” he says. “We did a pilot program last season with HarvestMark, adding codes to labels and everything worked great. What sold us was the simplicity of the systems and the support we got from HarvestMark. They worked with us as we added features. We were able to track and trace different packing locations, keep up with varieties, farms, crews, and tonnage.”

Leger says he is happy that the watermelon industry has forged the way for other crops.

“The industry seems to be embracing the new technology and this is a great time for watermelon to be the leader,” he says. “Consumers seem to enjoy knowing more about their produce. Implementing HarvestMark just enhanced our already existing food safety programs.”

Implementing item-level traceability via HarvestMark was about reinforcing customer service for [Driscoll’s Berries](#), based in California’s Pajaro Valley. The operation already had a tray-level system in place and is doing a staggered rollout of clamshell-level tracking to all of its growers based on berry type and location, says Peter Townsend, Driscoll’s vice president and chief information officer. “No implementation is without challenges, but overall it is being well-received by growers, consumers, and the trade,” Townsend says. “We are proceeding on schedule.”

Driscoll’s also selected HarvestMark after evaluating several other solutions providers, due to its minimal impact on picker productivity, low cost, and broad range of features that can help further improve operations, according to Kevin Murphy, Driscoll’s senior vice-president of supply and operations. “Driscoll’s objectives for this initiative were to differentiate Driscoll’s product from non-traceable products with customers and consumers; collect valuable supply chain and product quality data; and reduce the cost and impact of recalls, should it be necessary,” Murphy says.

Solutions For All Sizes

Because the HarvestMark solution offers a package that helps industry members achieve PTI compliance, YottaMark is welcoming new clients very quickly, Grant says. Looking at the U.S. produce industry, there are about 2,700 packer/shippers and the top 10% produce 90% of the volume, he says.

“The question is, how to get all the smaller guys to comply with PTI,” says Grant. “If you have a small packer/shipper who doesn’t comply and someone gets sick, we’re back to square one and everyone is implicated. When we built HarvestMark, we wanted to make sure it worked for the largest and very smallest grower/packer/shippers.”

Grant says when he gets out at industry trade shows, he hears a lot of concern from small growers, who don’t have information technology personnel and don’t want to spend a lot of money on traceability technology. His message to these growers: Don’t panic!

“These small growers look at the PTI and feel disenfranchised,” he says. “They’re afraid of it becoming a heavy burden. Our HarvestMark for PTI package is cost effective for all size growers, at about \$2,000 to get started. It’s easy to use, easy to deploy, and doesn’t put any hardware in small growers’ hands. You don’t need an IT person to run traceability; the software does all the heavy lifting, which should help out with rapid adoption.”

While the PTI is a major transformation for the produce industry, traceability doesn’t have to be complicated, Grant says. Using a tool like HarvestMark to help with the technical aspect of traceability will allow produce industry members to focus on their business.

“There is a lot of technical skill to putting the right label on the right case at the right time, plus bar code scanning, data management, and other aspects to traceability,” Grant says. “Produce companies aren’t good at these things, just like I’m not good at growing veggies. By using HarvestMark, they can rely upon us to help them comply with PTI. They can’t rely on the old way of doing things anymore.”

Robertson of Sun World International recommends that industry members move forward in a very systematic approach and gain a clear understanding of all of the initiatives related to traceability. “They’re all really different – PTI, PLU, consumer level traceability,” he says. “Get the right people in the company to take ownership of the internal efforts and really have them involved in everything regarding traceability. Move forward with caution and address system realistically.”

Traceability And Sustainability

Though the produce industry has been talking about sustainable production and harvest practices a great deal lately, one of the big drivers toward sustainable practices is consumer preferences. The powerful thing about traceability, especially item-level tracking, is that it can show consumers exactly what growers are doing at their operations, says Grant. For example, by picking up a clamshell of strawberries and scanning the bar code at an in-store kiosk, consumers can go right to the website and learn all about that grower and what practices they're using. Thus, in the short term, item-level traceability is more of a daily marketing tool.

"Think about the organic certification movement; if organic growers didn't tell anyone they were producing crops organically and didn't get certified to market their crops that way, the demand for organics wouldn't have taken off the way it did," he says. "The same logic applies to sustainability. Why would a grower spend the money and time to adopt sustainable practices and not use traceability to communicate those efforts to the consumer? Transparency is a very powerful thing to today's consumer."

What's more, Grant says, is that the PTI will allow the produce industry to stop thinking about itself as a group of commodities, so that when one company has a recall, it won't affect everyone else. This will change how people think about produce.

"Consumers will think about brands from the point of view of sustainability, traceability, organic integrity, and start to become more educated about produce in the way that they are about consumer packaged goods, which will create enormous value," Grant says. "That's very powerful and a tremendous opportunity for the industry. We want consumers to eat more fruits and veggies, right? Communicating how we're producing those fruits and veggies is a good way to do it."