

# Tackling Traceability

Having a traceback plan in place allows growers to monitor produce from the farm to the packingshed to the consumer.

By Greg Fonsah

**T**RACEABILITY requires high standards. In fact, this regulatory measure is regarded by some countries, especially the less developed countries, as a technical barrier to trade.

There are many definitions for this process, and complete traceability is not possible. It has been defined by ISO-9000 guidelines as “the ability to trace the history, application, or location of that which is under consideration. It may refer to the origin of the materials, the processing history, and the distribution and location of the product after delivery.”

## Making It Mandatory

Talks about mandatory traceability compliance have been a policy issue for a while now. Propositions about

enacting a compulsory system that would trace back animal feed to monitor mad cow disease, improve meat safety, monitor food transportation systems, and minimize the risk of tampering, have been a priority of policy makers in different parts of the world.

All these propositions have one thing in common: providing adequate information to consumers on a variety of food attributes including country-of-origin, animal welfare, and genetic engineering.

The advantages of adopting traceability are to improve supply management, make it easy to trace back for food safety and quality, and to detect any quality problem before the product reaches the market. Some of the benefits include:

- Minimizing the production and marketing of unsafe and inferior quality goods;

- Reducing the costs involved in the distribution system;
- Minimizing the cost of recalls;
- Reducing the potential for bad publicity; and,
- Reducing liability and increasing revenue of the implementing company.

This concept was introduced to the produce industry around 1930 when Congress passed the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act (PACA). PACA became the first record keeping requirement in the fresh produce traceability system at the shipper level.

Multinational companies supplying fresh produce to Europe have figured out the advantages in adopting these regulatory policies on a timely basis and are usually quick in implementing them.

These companies have put in place a system whereby they can monitor their product from the farm through the packingshed all the way to the final consumer. Effective traceability should cover three main areas: breadth, the amount of information the system has to record; depth, how far back or forward the system should cover; and precision, the unit of analysis such as container, truck, etc.

Record management is costly and the cost varies with the complexities involved. The cost further varies from company to company, depending on size.

Record keeping, labor, and training are all expensive but must be incurred to set up this program. Traceability is a lot easier with horticultural products than other commodities. ●

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## Factors Affecting Traceability

### FACTORS AFFECTING COSTS

- Breadth of traceability and the amount of information to record.
- Depth and the number of transactions.
- Degree of precision and exactness the tracking units.
- Degree of product transformation and complexity of the system.
- Number of new segregation or identity preservation activities.
- Number of new accounting systems and procedures.
- Technological difficulties of tracking.

### FACTORS AFFECTING BENEFITS

- Value of coordination along the supply chain.
- Size of the market.
- The higher the value of the food product.
- Likelihood of safety or quality failure.
- The penalty for safety or quality failures, where penalties include loss of market, legal expenses, or government-mandated fines.
- The size of the expected premiums.