

# THE GROWER

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## Customized computer software traces produce from field to commission house

By Karen Davidson

Although the Produce Traceability Initiative has backed off some of the aggressive milestones for this fall, shippers on the front line with international customers are forging ahead. Albert Streef, for one, has just installed new software at his Princeton, Ontario farm that makes Streef Produce compatible with the CanadaGAP accredited program.

The family firm has used The Produce Inventory Control System (PICS) for 10 years at the Ontario Food Terminal. It was purchased from and technically supported by WaudWare Incorporated. Now there's an interface between the farm's potato and snap bean production and the sales department in Toronto.

"The biggest challenge is identifying fields of production because they're always in rotation," explains Streef. "Step one is to identify the produce, its originating field and the volume. The bulk truck picking up the harvested produce from the field must present that information for data input. The beauty of this system is that we always have an inventory of empty containers that are assigned lot numbers. In essence, we can keep better track of our container inventory as it's drawn down so we can replenish on a more timely basis. We no longer have to do physical

inventory."

Streef recognizes that new computer software always presents a learning curve. He assigned a university student to oversee the summer installation so that it would be ready for harvest.

"Food safety is a moving target," says Streef. "The requirements to do business with Sobeys, Loblaw and Wal-Mart are getting more stringent all the time. So we might better have a protocol to follow that we understand from the outset."

Charles Waud, President of WaudWare Incorporated, understands that while the produce industry wants to provide traceability, it must minimize the financial impact on business. It's a delicate balance in deciding how much traceability is enough. In a company newsletter, Waud says that smaller farms and packing houses, if well-organized, can be proficient at traceability by labeling products as they arrive with a date code or unique identifier and then making note of what products went out on customer orders. Computerization is not needed for businesses like these. However, manual tracking systems can be outgrown with steady or cyclical volume increases or the addition of new products.

Here are two approaches to consider:

**Basic labeling.** If you're commit-

ted to traceability and decide to go with basic labeling, here's how to proceed:

- enter the information you wish to track (potentially the field or area that the product came from, what kind of product, date picked, date packed and other relevant information).
- store the information in a computer tied to some kind of identifier (lot code, Julian date, etc).
- print stickers with this identifier and any other desired information
- label the product at either the item level, case level or pallet level

When you ship the product to customers, the next step would be:

- record the identifier (lot code, etc) that you shipped to each customer

### Complete inventory system

The optimum way to implement traceability in any business would be to:

- record the products as they arrive into your inventory system and capture all of the information listed previously (field, area grown, vendor, etc)
- If you sell the product in the form that you receive it, then the system will be able to keep track of which lot codes went to which customers.
- If you pack or repack product, the complexity increases because

you need to keep track of the inputs that were used to make intermediate or final output items.

For example, let's say you purchase cantaloupes and then you peel and cut them into chunks. Those chunks become another item which should have a lot identifier that can be tracked to the original cantaloupes. Continuing on, let's assume you take those cantaloupe chunks and mix them with pineapple and melon chunks, grapes and syrup to make fruit salad. The fruit salad would have another lot identifier in the system.

The system would automatically keep track of the fact that the fruit salad came from a number of different inputs.

If a fruit salad customer called with a problem, your inventory system has tracked all the information you need to quickly and easily identify all the customers who received the product affiliated with the problem. As well, you would be able to notify all the vendors of all the items used in the fruit salad. Attempting to keep track of individual inputs like these without using a computer system would be virtually impossible.

A produce business can go from a simple manual system if needs are not complex, to a basic labeling-only system, to a full inventory system to keep track of everything.