



# Prove It

*Traceability systems—protecting the integrity of your claim*

**Y**ou can buy an egg from the Québec company Nutri-oeuf that's individually stamped so you can tell the exact day it was graded, and even where it was laid. What's next, the name of the hen? This is an example of the extent to which food producers are heading to get enhanced traceability. Traceability is becoming a key risk management and marketing tool for the food industry.

While there are several definitions of traceability, they all basically deal with the capability to trace a food, feed, food producing animal or ingredient, through all stages of production and distribution. Traceability is a critical tool in emergency response situations. The timeliness, scope and cost of a recall is often determined by the capability for traceability.

But traceability is important for other reasons too. The food industry needs traceability to support health and safety food label claims and to support marketing claims for specialized products, such as organic produce or Omega 3 eggs. Manufacturers, processors and retailers will increasingly demand segregation, process documentation and identity preservation systems all along the food chain to support the truthfulness and integrity of claims and to meet a range of audit-based inspection and verification systems such as HACCP.

Government-industry collaboration has already created some excellent national systems that are up and running, such as our Cattle I.D. Program. And technology firms are developing data management services that allow producers to piggy back on such programs to record data on individual animals, including vaccinations, medications and feed sources. Anitech Information Systems of Markham, Ont., has developed a hardware-software package for meat processing plants that give processors the ability to create electronic files on each animal. And Maxxam Analytics of Guelph, Ont., is exploring the use of DNA sampling to improve trace back processes. (See *Food in Canada's* March 2002 issue).

But technology can also create problems. The sophistication of detection methods can now indicate readings at levels that were once thought impossible. Many Canadian regulations requiring zero tolerance were drafted at a time when only expensive tests could find parts per million (ppm) and yet now relatively inexpensive tests can find parts per billion. This is particularly problematic when background levels exceed legal tolerances and new "acceptable" or "free

of" levels are not likely to be determined any day soon. While no one knows whether the trace amount actually renders the food unsafe, it's still a violative product. Environment and other consumer groups, as well as competitors, are now going on extensive fishing expeditions to find trace amounts of ingredients that are either unapproved or exceed old definitions of zero and demanding enforcement action.

The lack of harmonization poses one of the biggest challenges for a traceability system. For example, if a supplier certifies to a processor that a product is free of a certain adulterant (zero being 50 ppm) but the final product is tested by a retailer or consumer with technology that can find 1 ppm, then you've got big legal problems.

The problem is particularly acute in relation to the United States considering the estimated 6000 truck loads of food that cross our border every day. The Canadian and American fresh produce industry recently created a joint Task Force to address this issue. Canadian Produce Marketing Association president Danny Dempster confirms that this has the highest priority for his industry, especially since 9/11: "It is of paramount importance to at least have a North American solution to this major problem. It's critical to look across the food chain, including internationally, or otherwise we'll continue to have a mish-mash with impossible problems for traceability systems."

But multilateral international standardization will not be easy. While Codex Alimentarius (the international standard setting body for food) is studying the problem, there's a whole industry developing a vast array of trace-back systems (and auditing mechanisms for them) with completely different standards from country to country. It's just a matter of time before they're used as technical barriers to trade, even though the World Trade Organization requires that traceability measures be scientifically justified and equal to the same standards domestically.

That brings us to the traceability problems associated with genetically modified foods. But that's another story.

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