

The Changing World of Food Traceability

By [Dan Flynn](#) | May 6, 2013

You, the consumer, are at the end of a long line of stops food makes before reaching your plate. Being able to trace this food back to its origins can be crucial to government and industry during a food-related recall or outbreak. But you may also want to know whether what you are about to consume is organic, whether it's vegetarian, or maybe because of your beliefs you are looking for food that's kosher or halal.

So while food companies might benefit from traceability and government may eventually demand it, food chain traceability is in large part about building relationships with consumers and giving them what they really want – the ability to trust that they know what they are eating.

Knowing what's in your food and where it comes from sounds simple enough, but food chain traceability is a complex worldwide issue. It requires consistent standards and adequate technology in an ever changing world.

Take the role of imports for example. Today 15 percent of the food consumed in the U.S. comes from foreign sources, and that percentage is much higher in some sectors like seafood, of which 80 percent is imported.

The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is a voluntary organization that since 1947 has developed standards for technology and business.

ISO has developed about 1,000 standards specifically for food to deal with subjects ranging from agricultural machinery, logistics, transportation, manufacturing, labeling, packaging and storage.

“Today more than ever, food products regularly cross national boundaries at every stage of the supply chain,” ISO says.

International standards help others develop systems for supply chain management.

The best-known developer of these standards is Global Standards One (GS1), an international non-profit association dating back to an ad hoc group that came together to develop the Uniform Grocery Product Code. GS1 is a big player in the ISO, with members in more than 100 countries.

Bar codes, electronic business standards, global data synchronization and radio frequency identification (RFID) tags are all in the GS1 tool bag. It also maintains all those Uniform Product Codes (UPCs) in the United States.

Selecting the technology and system to manage the supply chain for food and food ingredients is an important decision. When there is a problem with a food product and it must be recalled, a food chain traceability system can truly show its stuff.

Food companies need to be able to quickly identify the product, which lots are involved, where they were shipped and where they are now.

While food traceback continues to evolve to meet the private sector's needs, it can also be boosted (or hampered) by public policy. Over the past 12 years in the U.S., these "boosts" have included:

- The 2001 Bioterrorism Act: As of Dec. 11, 2006, food processors are required be able to identify the origin of all food received by lot, code or other identifier and provide the same information when releasing products. The Act applies to both foreign and domestic food, including all ingredients. Civil and criminal actions can be taken if information is not provided upon request to FDA within 24 hours.

- The 2011 Food Modernization and Safety Act: FSMA Empowers FDA to order mandatory recalls and establish a food product tracing system. The Act requires FDA to use pilot studies and stakeholder recommendations to develop the food product tracing system.

FDA has commissioned the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) to do much of the traceability work called for in the FSMA.



IFT has conducted two pilot projects, one on tomatoes and the other on processed foods including chicken, peanut butter and spices. The goal of the pilot project is to see how rapidly these foods can be traced to each prior step, and ultimately to their origins.

IFT produced a [300-page document](#) for comment in March that suggests FDA needs a technology platform that would allow "efficient aggregation and analysis" of data submitted to FDA upon request.

Foods selected for the pilot project had been associated with outbreaks between 2005 and 2010. Key findings from IFT's analysis of current product tracing practices indicate the following challenges associated with outbreak investigations:

- It can be tedious and difficult to sort through hundreds of pages of documents
- Confusion can arise when data definition is lacking
- Products often carry inconsistent item descriptions
- Wrong or incomplete information causes delays
- Companies operating under multiple names are difficult to identify as sources

IFT said that although FSMA limits FDA to enacting additional recordkeeping requirements to “high-risk foods,” outbreaks during the last several years reinforce the fact that foods previously considered “low-risk” can quickly find themselves on the “high-risk” list. Therefore, IFT suggested that FDA take the opportunity to advise the entire food industry on “best practices” for recordkeeping through the use of guidance documents.

Additional IFT recommendations to the FDA include:

- Clearly identify the types of data that industry needs to provide during an outbreak investigation
- Require each member of the food supply chain to develop, document and implement a product tracing plan
- Pursue the adoption of a technology platform to allow the FDA to efficiently aggregate and analyze data reported in response to regulatory requests
- Coordinate traceback investigations and develop response protocols between and among state and local health and regulatory agencies
- Offer extensive outreach and education around future regulations and expectations

“IFT expects that these recommendations will not only help protect consumers, but also help develop a better framework for industry and government to focus on food system improvements in the coming years,” said IFT President John Ruff in a statement on the document.

The FDA is soliciting input on the IFT report and will issue its own recommendations in a report to Congress.

The new food safety law also directs FDA to make its own recommendations on traceability in a report to Congress.

© Food Safety News

More Headlines from [Food Policy & Law](#) »

Article Found At: <http://www.foodsafetynews.com/2013/05/the-changing-world-of-food-chain-traceability/#.Ugv4tz-AnJl>