

The Importance of Food Traceability

By William Fisher



So what is driving all the discussion about food traceability? And why is traceability suddenly so important?

Traceability is most relevant when it comes to public health . Whether we are talking about food safety or food defense, emergency planning can be broken into four phases:

1. Preparedness: When planning for an emergency situation, traceability provides greater visibility into a supply chain, thereby helping be better prepared if something goes wrong.
2. Response: In case something goes wrong, traceability improves the agility of the response by all stakeholders.
3. Recovery: During the recovery phase, traceability allows the industry and regulators to maintain or rebuild trust with consumers into the safety and resiliency of the food system.
4. Prevention: Traceability allows for the determination of causality of the problem through root cause analysis, thereby preventing future issues.

Let's first take a look at who the key stakeholders are. They can be divided into government (such as U.S. Food and Drug Administration, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, not to forget state and local regulators); the food industry (including farmers, ingredient suppliers, processors, distributors, wholesalers, foodservice, retailers); academia (education, research, extension, Centers of Excellence); and consumers.

Traceability has become increasingly important. The global food supply chain today has evolved into a tangled web as companies seek to enhance their capabilities to feed the world's growing population. While food safety problems remain rare, when they do occur, time is the enemy as public health and lives are at stake, as well as the livelihoods of industries, companies and

employees. The Global Food Traceability Center is intended to assist companies to better understand and implement ways to track and trace the paths of products through the food chain, to improve food safety and security and to avoid or mitigate devastating public health and economic impacts. However, we want to emphasize that food traceability is about more than recalls. Being able to ascertain the origin of products, ingredients and their attributes, from the farm through food processing to retail, foodservice and the consumer, is growing in importance. Increasingly, public health concerns are demanding traceability, but it will be the business economic drivers that will sustain it. For example, according the Grocery Manufacturers Association in the U.S., the financial impact of a recall is quite significant: 52% of all recalls cost over \$10M and 23% cost over \$30M.

The food supply chain today is truly a maze that is global, dynamic and complex in nature. Key challenging issues include globalization of the food supply chain, changing industry processes and consumer preferences for fresh and minimally processed foods. The maze begins at agriculture followed by food processing, storage and distribution. During the transportation of food products, varied domestic and international regulations and standards are applied, not to mention variable enforcement and inconsistent and sometimes contradictory scientific rationales for such regulations are encountered. Exiting the maze, one finds a cacophony of consumer trends and changing habits, health drivers and new threats, which includes misinformation spread in the mass media. Thus, concerns about both the safety and quality of food continue to escalate.

Such concerns include the following:

- More foodborne illness: high visibility cases of Escherichia coli, Listeria, Salmonella, etc.
- Higher number and visibility of recalls
- Rise in fraudulent activities in the food chain and counterfeit products
- More products coming from countries with lower health and safety standards
- Higher risk of contamination or spoilage due to long, complex supply chains
- Increased threat of terrorism

The impact of all this is considerable and significant, including:

- Economic loss from negative impact of recalls
- Rising distrust of the food supply and fragile consumer confidence
- Greater demands for proof of food product claims
- Increased demands for regulation and guidelines
- Increased business costs to comply with regulations

Why is traceability so important? The reason really depends on who you talk to.

For public safety, it's about reducing incidences of food fraud as well as unintentional or intentional adulteration; disease management; and environmental emergencies

For businesses, it's all about risk management and mitigation—lowering the impact of recalls and lowering liability costs

For the supply chain, efficiencies relate to productivity; cash flow improvements; innovation; and reducing waste

And for consumers, it's about access to markets and specialty foods ; and enhancing or strengthening brand confidence

But regardless of the specific reason, traceability is critical to all stakeholders.

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