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Grower-shippers work on traceability efforts

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Texas onion growers and shippers say they know consumers like to be able to trace back to the source of their food.

Traceability is becoming a mainstay in the industry, and third-party audits have become standard procedure.

Edinburg-based Frontera Produce LLC, for example, has been busy perfecting its own traceability system.

"Within the last two to three months, we completed our (Safe Quality Food Institute) Level 3 certification," said Chris Eddy, sales and operations director. "We finished document and facility audits and continue to work on case-level traceability."

It's still a work in progress, Eddy said, but it's moving along.

"We're not tracing each case on all items yet," he said. "I'd say once we get going full speed, we'll be three-quarters of the way there."

Amy Gates, Frontera vice president of administration and finance, is participating in the Produce Traceability Initiative, a program to achieve supply chainwide adoption of electronic traceability of every case of produce by 2012.

"When you talk about food safety and audits, it's not really something that you do to break yourself above the competition. Now, it's expected," Eddy said.

It also is well entrenched across the Texas onion industry, he added.

Mission-based Rio Queen Citrus, another south Texas onion shipper, has safety procedures that stretch back more than a decade, said Mike Martin, president.

"We have a mature food safety program dating back to 1998," he said. "This is a way of doing business for us, not something new. I would put our facilities up against any in the country."

Traceability also is an emphasis at David K DeBerry Inc., based in Edinburg.

"Here's the thing: There's been more things come down the pike that are non-production-related in last five years than in previous 100 years," said David DeBerry, president.

"We converted our entire watermelon side, which is 70% of our production, with traceability back to the individual fruit. We were the first company to institute it 100%. As we start 2010, the onion side now is 100% (Global Trade Item Number), GS-1 (Global Location Number)-compliant (on barcodes)."

His company is ahead of the safety curve in some respects.

"The issue is the vast majority of retailers aren't geared up for it," he said. "We don't have consistent direction from them, as far as when they want to start, what they want done and how they want us to do it."

"But we have numbers assigned. All the new materials will be printed with the GTIN numbers, from the PLU stick-on label up from there, as we go through the season."

Third-party safety certification is so well established now, DeBerry said, "we almost take it for granted."

Raleigh, N.C.-based L&M Cos. Inc., which partners with Weslaco-based A-W Produce Co. to grow and ship Texas onions, has comprehensive safety programs in place, said Tracy Fowler, general manager of L&M's potato and onion departments.

"We do our farm-range GAP certification," he said. "We know that it's important to all customers. We need to have that ready anyway, whether they're asking for it or not, because we need to stay ahead of the game.

"We make sure all our sheds and farms are in compliance not only with national regulations but our own internal. We want to put out a better pack, so we have our own program here. Each shed has to report back to him and make sure everything is in place."

Antonio Restrepo, L&M's director of food safety, guides all of the programs, Fowler said.

Progreso Produce, Boerne, Texas, also has set up traceability systems, said Curtis DeBerry, the company's owner.

"We have implemented a full traceability system using GTIN tags on every product we handle," he said. "We're down to the package level at this time.

"We're even printing GTIN on some of the boxes, which traces back to the field and the date of harvest. At some point, they'll be able to scan that tag and they'll know that came from Progreso, harvested this date on this farm, all the way back."

That program is new this year, and it's being developed across all the company product lines, DeBerry said.

"We're in the midst of it now with our strawberries," he said.

Product samples are also tested regularly, DeBerry noted.

"We've focused real hard on our testing," he said. "We make sure all the water is tested. As well, we're doing sporadic product sampling and sending off product tests. We send product from harvest out to Primus for testing of contamination of any kind."

Comprehensive safety measures are the norm across the region said Bill Burns, owner of Burns Farms Inc., McAllen, Texas.

"Everybody in the valley is certainly aware of that and putting all we can into mitigating problems that might arise," he said.

"The sheds, etc., are always inspected and Primus-certified, and we're very careful and aware of food-safety issues. I think all of us are on top of it."