



Large grower of leafy greens and other vegetables takes produce traceability literally into the field using GS1 Global Trade Item Numbers® to improve food safety.



CHALLENGE

With 50,000 acres spread over multiple states and countries and crops rotated more than twice annually, lot integrity was hard to maintain and traceability suffered.

SOLUTION

By assigning case labels with GS1 GTINs® to every one of the 18 million cartons shipped annually, Growers Express has a depth of data elements on every carton for real-time traceability.

BENEFITS

- Traceability is facilitated throughout the supply chain: field-to-shelf.
- Increased productivity by eliminating manual labeling, pen marking and downstream guesswork.
- Carton consolidation alone saves \$90,000 annually.
- Stringent food safety measures are followed and constantly documented.

Growers Express Express Route to Traceability

Growers Express was founded in 1987 by eight produce growers who all believed in a few simple values: producing its own premium quality products, providing a consistent supply and superior service. The farmer-owned integrated grower, packer and shipper has taken three generations of knowledge and respect for the land and developed it into one of the nation's largest suppliers of fresh vegetables. Headquartered in Salinas Valley, California, Growers Express cultivation exceeds 50,000 acres, offering over 40 items on a year-round basis. It also grows in Arizona, Oregon, Ohio and Michigan as well as Mexico and Canada.

The vast majority of Growers Express' 18 million cartons of produce grown and shipped annually are still grown by its owners. Its largest volume items – iceberg lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower, green onions, celery and leaf lettuces – are complemented by a full line of artichokes and brussel sprouts and bunched items such as beets, leeks, radishes, spinach and herbs.

The highest quality standards have allowed Growers Express to be the exclusive supplier of Green Giant® Fresh branded lettuces and mixed vegetables. In addition to the Green Giant Fresh brand, Growers Express also offers its own premium brands and distributes its

produce from four centers in California and one in Arizona.

In keeping with its passion for consistency and quality, Growers Express maintains high standards for food safety with internal requirements for the use of land, water, harvesters and shipping facilities that are monitored by unannounced inspections by its own, government and third-party food safety personnel.

Chain of Custody

Growers Express leads the fresh produce industry in voluntarily meeting the requirements of the Produce Traceability Initiative (PTI). Sponsored by the Canadian Produce Marketing Association, GS1 US™, the Produce Marketing Association, and the United Fresh Produce Association, the PTI provides practical, useful information and tools designed to help members in the fresh produce industry maximize the effectiveness of their traceability efforts.

"It's impossible to maintain lot integrity without GS1 Standards. GS1 and PTI provide the essential foundation for traceability, transparency and accountability."

– Jamie Strachan, CEO, Growers Express



Product traceability is critical to food safety in the event of a recall and is facilitated through GS1 Standards, specifically Global Trade Item Numbers (GTINs). The GTIN uniquely identifies a product. Using GTINs on case labels, Growers Express can identify the entire “chain of custody” for its produce – traceable forward to the exact retailer receiving a shipment and in reverse to the field where the produce was grown – and all the steps in between.

Growers Express uses GTINs and GS1 barcodes on each carton in order to trace back to the brand owner, the case reference number, and the lot or batch number of the produce inside the carton.

“If we don’t have standardized coding – with the embedded information it is able to provide – it is difficult to discern harvested product from one field to another. We would have to recall an extensive amount of produce without this system,” says Jamie Strachan, CEO of Growers Express.

Growers Express stands out in the fresh produce industry because of its aggressive implementation of case-level labeling for 100 percent of its commodities, the only company in the sector that has done so. Now Growers Express has visibility into all 45 crews harvesting 40-plus varieties of leafy greens and vegetables spread across several states and international borders: the date of harvest, the produce harvested, the acreage from which the produce is harvested (including country of origin), and even the precise crew that conducted the harvest.

On the heels of the E.coli outbreak in 2006, the western vegetable and leafy green industries came together to form an agreement to invite government oversight and inspection based on rigorous standards developed by scientists, food safety experts, farmers and environmentalists. Growers are continuously audited by government

inspectors trained by the United States Department of Agriculture. Growers Express is certified by the consortium, the California Leafy Green Products Handler Marketing Agreement (LGMA) – a program that has become a model for growers in other states. And, in fact, Strachan chairs the LGMA and firmly believes this non-competitive alliance for sharing best practices is of critical importance for the industry. “If one of us fails, we all fail,” Strachan says. Growers Express adoption of standards across-the-board is certainly one of those best practices.

Ground Control a Major Job

Growers Express rotates its crops up to four times a season to ensure healthy nutrient-rich soil and mitigate diseases. Without the standardized labeling of cartons at the field level, keeping track manually of ever-changing crops, harvest dates and inventory movements was challenging. “Because there is intense pressure in terms of timing, we need to hit on all cylinders at all times and on all crops,” explains Strachan. “As you can imagine, it’s like an air traffic control tower.”

“I’d say that people in our industry claim they have a handle on it. We were surprised to find the level of discrepancy we had without these ‘license plates.’ It’s impossible to maintain lot integrity without GS1 Standards,” says Strachan. “GS1 and PTI provide the essential foundation for traceability, transparency and accountability.”

Force Field

What is also notable about Growers Express early – and all-inclusive – implementation of case-level labeling were the reasons it did so. While the company has never been subject to a recall, it has seen the effects of widespread recalls in its industry. But what convinced the leaders at Growers Express to get the system in place early were the internal benefits to its business that GS1 Standards

would deliver. “We moved quickly because we recognized that internal efficiencies would be gained, thereby improving our operations overall. We are committed to food safety at all levels, and the internal improvements also drove us to be first in the pool,” recalls Strachan.

Within six months, Growers Express had handheld devices and mobile printers in the hands of its field harvesters. “We analyzed and piloted pre-printing labels or labeling at our receiving facilities and both were unmanageable. Delivering technology to the field is the only way,” relates Bob Thorp, Growers Express director of production. “I was surprised by how quickly we were able to train our crews. Even if they were unfamiliar with technology, they quickly figured out the efficiencies they would gain.”

Thorp also points out a collateral benefit. “Our harvest crews now have a greater appreciation for the accuracy required downstream. They see this system of traceability and they are more conscious of the requirements and expectations on a daily basis.”

Harvest in Real-Time

Once the cartons have been packed and labeled, they are visible to any of the Growers Express offices that may need real-time information using TRUETRAC™, an online software-based solution that allows the harvester to access and print GTIN information from any authorized brand owner and then tracks completion

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of pallet and load tickets real time as they are built in the fields. If a Growers Express truck is waiting at a distribution center for a load of lettuce it needs to transport east to St. Louis, for example, the TRUETRAC system can tell the cooler and product manager how the harvest is progressing, when it left the field and when it will arrive at the facility. Strachan is one of many growers who chose to invest in the TRUETRAC solution based on its value.

Through improved field logistics, downstream delays and inefficiencies can be avoided. Conversely, in a business where success is judged in cut-to-cool time and orders shipped in the same day they are cut from the field, real-time information can ultimately get produce to the consumer faster and fresher. And sales people standing in the retail warehouse can easily snap a smartphone photo of a TRUETRAC carton label and discuss the exact carton with the home office. This can pinpoint cold chain, quality or handling issues, for instance, that may have affected a shipment.

Before the application of GTINs on case labels, harvest crews would need to manually apply a date sticker and mark each and every carton by checking off the appropriate box for product type and country of origin. During a day when harvesters were racing against the rain clouds, the accuracy and legibility of the markings could often be challenging to decipher at the distribution center. Now, a scan of the label eliminates guesswork.

Moreover, Growers Express has been able to eliminate the need for such a wide range of special cartons, consolidating its carton runs into larger batches, saving an

average of \$.01 per carton. Using one half of the cartons to determine the savings, (nine million cartons a year), Growers Express saves \$90,000, which is a lot of PTI-compliant case labels.

While Growers Express estimates that it has spent between \$.02 and \$.03 per carton to implement the PTI milestone throughout its operation, the annual savings in cartons alone returns a large portion of that investment. Other hidden productivity and accuracy gains from field to distribution center to office, from trucks on the road to billing, while difficult to quantify, are no less real.

Growers Express plans to more closely integrate food safety activities with operations by eliminating the parallel efforts between its food safety and day-to-day operations. By completely closing this loop, Growers Express will eliminate more manual paperwork and show each step in its extensive safety continuum on the GTINs. "By applying food safety checkpoints to GTIN information, we have a better level of certainty that food safety actions have been accomplished for each and every lot and sector. All of our quality control systems will work hand-in-hand,"

Strachan says. "This is a huge benefit."

Thorp offers these words of advice. "Don't wait until the last minute. Like any change in a process, there will be unforeseen challenges like what happens during transition or other learning curves. When you're changing operational behaviors and implementing new processes, it's always better to be ahead of the curve than chasing after it." As Thorp points out, the Growers Express project was a large one, yet it was completed in six months. "We have geographically diverse operations and extreme daily production demands, so those are some of our challenges – but it's also the source of the rewards once you're done."

"We are a grower-based company," Strachan concludes. "When fresh produce leaves our fields, we should be accountable and responsible for the food we put into commerce. With this system, we know where it came from and we know where it goes. That's why we jumped on these initiatives early."

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Traceability and the Food Safety Modernization Act

Passed by the U.S. Congress in 2010, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) Food Safety Modernization Act requires that all players in the country's food supply chain be able to quickly trace from whom they received a food product and to whom they sent it. Called "one step forward, one step back" traceability, the requirement is designed to make it easier for the FDA to identify the source of an outbreak of food-borne illness, trace its path and swiftly remove it from the food supply. The Produce Traceability Initiative advocates the use of GS1 Standards such as GTINs to uniquely identify products as they travel throughout the entire supply chain – its multiple systems, processes and hand-offs – and enable all trading partners to speak a common language for universal traceability.



CASE STUDY: Growers Express



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CONTACT US

To learn more about traceability and how GS1 US can support your company, visit www.gs1us.org/sectors/fresh_foods and/or contact the GS1 US Fresh Foods Customer Service Team at +1 937.610.4234.

ABOUT GROWERS EXPRESS

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ABOUT GS1 US™

GS1 US is a not-for-profit organization that brings industry communities together to solve supply-chain problems through the adoption and implementation of GS1 standards. More than 200,000 businesses in 25 industries rely on GS1 US for trading-partner collaboration and for maximizing the cost effectiveness, speed, visibility, security and sustainability of their business processes. They achieve these benefits through GS1 US solutions based on GS1 global unique numbering and identification systems, barcodes, Electronic Product Code-based RFID, data synchronization, and electronic information exchange. GS1 US also manages the United Nations Standard Products and Services Code® (UNSPSC®). www.GS1US.org

ABOUT THE PRODUCE TRACEABILITY INITIATIVE

Sponsored by Canadian Produce Marketing Association, GS1 US, Produce Marketing Association and United Fresh Produce Association, the Produce Traceability Initiative (PTI) is designed to help the industry maximize the effectiveness of current trace-back procedures, while developing a standardized industry approach to enhance the speed and efficiency of traceability systems for the future. The PTI has a bold vision, which outlines a course of action to achieve supply chain-wide adoption of electronic traceability of every case of produce by the year 2012. www.producetraceability.org



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