DOLE invests in Traceability

DOLE Europe and its South African division, DOLE South Africa, have played a significant role in the South African “Fresh Produce Traceability Project” (FPT). Launched in 2000, this project led to the publication of a South African FPT Guideline, which is based on a directive of the same name from EAN International and reinforces the role of the EAN.UCC System as the main tool for traceability for fresh fruit and vegetables. DOLE South Africa has launched pilot projects for the labelling of pallets and boxes of fresh fruit destined for export using UCC/EAN-128 bar codes. Furthermore, DOLE scrupulously observes the procedures developed by ISO 9002 for certification, the regulations and norms from the European Union and the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) criteria. Products are systematically controlled and data is stored at every step of the chain.

The DOLE Group

DOLE is a principal distributor of fresh fruit and vegetables in Europe. At the beginning of the 1990’s, DOLE imported exclusively into Germany and Italy, but today, DOLE products are imported through more than 20 ports across Europe. The head office of DOLE EUROPE is based in France. Other offices are located in Spain, Greece, Italy, Germany, Belgium, South Africa, Sweden and Netherlands. In the United Kingdom, DOLE is represented by Jamaica Producers, a local distributor. DOLE is also active in Asia and in North America.

Situation before 2000

In South Africa, only the regulated export of citrus and tender fruits (peaches, apricots, melons, grapes...) required compliance with a local standard using a proprietary bar code, Code 39, for the traceability of pallets. The withdrawal of a number of regulations in 1997 caused a certain fragmentation in operating practices and led to the creation of a multitude of practices in the export of fruit and fresh vegetables, and in their handling through the South-African market. Full standardisation had become non-existent.

Traceability and EAN.UCC System

In May 2000 EAN South Africa set up a working group, called the South African Fresh Produce Traceability Project (SA FPTP), with the principal objective of responding to European requests for product traceability, to the logistic requirements that result and to food safety obligations. The following organisations took part in this working group: EAN South Africa, Citrus Southern Africa (CSA), Deciduous Fruit Producers Trust (DFPT), Perishable Products Export Control Board (PPECB), and logistic and industrial suppliers.

In a first phase, SA FPTP sought to establish recommendations for the traceability of the South African fruit intended for export and to discover at what point in the supply chain would the use of standards provided by the EAN.UCC System remain effective for the South African fruit and vegetable sector. Within this framework, the working group progressed to the stage of writing a South African FPT guideline in October 2002, based on the EAN International directive of the same name.

First of all the stress was laid on the export of tender and citrus fruit. DOLE South Africa agreed to launch pilot projects to label pallets as well as boxes. To this end, DOLE invested in DoleTrack, a kit of in-house developed software. This kit made it possible to store all the data on the products packed (basis of traceability) as well as to print labels using UCC/EAN-128 bar codes.
In the 2001/2002 season, EAN labels on boxes were successfully tested at more than 35 packing stations in South Africa and Namibia. The positive effect of the addition of EAN Labels including UCC/EAN-128 bar codes to all of Dole’s produce arriving in Europe was experienced at the Port of Antwerp, where much of Dole’s imported produce for European suppliers and distributors arrives. Now some fifty packing centres in Namibia and South Africa are trialling EAN labels and the DoleTrack software.

Dole’s first observations following the implementation of EAN labels were:

- Labelling of pallets required only small changes and have been found to cost less than before the trials.
- The use of a coding system specific to South Africa and internal standards requires greater attention; to solve this problem, both the UCC/EAN-128 bar codes and local standards (Code 39) were printed on the labels.
- With regards to boxes, the problem is slightly more complex because most of the requirements are customer-specific.
- The DoleTrack system in conjunction with the UCC/EAN-128 bar code allows Dole to fulfill customers’ requirements.
- A unique and consistent coding structure can be used throughout the whole supply chain (from the source up to the final customer).

In the short-term, Dole intends to spread this system further and to use EAN.UCC standards in its trade with more European countries.

In the meantime, SA FPTP continues to promote its directive (by promotional campaigns and training programmes) for the launching of ‘end-to-end’ EAN pilot projects. In a second phase of trials, this group will be giving more attention to EDI, central data service, and to the interoperability of data pools.

**Traceability and food safety**

In order to guarantee traceability, Dole worked out a complete programme. This requires responsibilities to be allotted throughout each link in the chain in order to be fully effective. Thus quality experts closely control each movement and make sure that all procedures are followed. Additionally, internal and external audits annually evaluate the equipment and the conditions under which the products are kept and stored.

For Dole, quality implies observing rigorous international regulations and norms, from the selection of the seeds until the presentation of the Dole fruit and vegetables in the supermarkets. The Dole quality chain is presented as follows:

**Cultivation**

Before any seeds are planted, it reviews the nutritional value and flavour of the fruit and vegetables it produces. As a rule, it only plants varieties adapted to the local soil and climate.

In-house and third party agronomists audit its fields regularly during cultivation. They make sure Dole’s practices: conform to: environmental programmes like GAP, ICM and IPM; international standards such as ISO 9002, ISO 14001; and Social Accountability standards, such as SA 8000.
Upon harvesting, DOLE inspects all fruit and vegetables and records data.

**Packing**

Produce is re-inspected upon arrival at the packing plant. Even though most of DOLE’s packing plants are near its growing sites, there is some risk of damage in transport. DOLE removes any damaged fruit or vegetables before packing begins.

DOLE implements strict packing procedures in conformity with ISO 9002 and European Community norms and HACCP rules. Products are checked systematically before shipment and EAN.UCC codes (GTIN, SSCC) are used - or are in the process of being implemented, depending on countries and products - for optimal traceability.

**Transport**

Quality control inspections are conducted on all produce before exportation. Because damage can also occur during shipment, the captain of each vessel is responsible for controlling temperature and atmosphere and for recording data. International Safety Management (ISM) certification awarded to DOLE's entire owned shipping fleet requires that it follows strict procedures on every vessel.

Once products arrive in Europe, DOLE conducts an initial visual inspection, followed by a full quality assessment. Transport logs are checked, samples are taken and size, weight, maturity and colour of the produce is measured. Other samples are sent to laboratories for microbiological and Maximum Residue Level (MRL) analysis.

**Storing, ripening and distribution**

Before distribution to DOLE subsidiaries all over Europe, fruit and vegetables are stored in special climate-controlled warehouses. Quality procedures here follow ISO 9002 standards and hygiene procedures established by the HACCP.

Quality control is conducted in every receiving country. When products are sent directly to customers by train or truck, DOLE provides recommendations for transport, storage, ripening and pre-packing.

Some products, like bananas, still require ripening after shipment. DOLE’s ripening rooms in Europe have already achieved ISO 9002 certification or are in the process of being certified. Ripening undertaken by distributors follows recommendations provided by DOLE.

DOLE’s quality standards also apply to the appearance of its products and is why it makes display recommendations for supermarkets that carry its produce.

In the unlikely event of any unacceptable quality findings, DOLE takes decisive, immediate action to safeguard consumers by isolating or recalling products in order to eliminate the cause of the problem. Should distributors need information on the quality of DOLE products, they can always make inquiries to its quality manager, who will assure a timely response.

**Conclusion**

DOLE is one of the pioneers in the field of the traceability in the fruit and vegetable sector. This case study shows that traceability within the framework of food safety is a concept that goes beyond national borders and should be tackled on a global scale. This implies that traceability can only be carried out successfully with the use of global standards. To ensure a consistent transmission of product data throughout the world, one can call upon the standards available in the EAN-UCC System. To guarantee food safety, there are qualitative standards and directives recognised at the international level, such as GAP, ICM, IPM, ISO 9002, HACCP. DOLE shows that the combination of these standards ensures an optimal traceability.

Source : DOLE