

Frequently Asked Questions

Traceability in Food Systems: An IFT Report to the FDA

Q. What does product tracing mean for the food industry and why is it necessary?

A. Product tracing is the ability to capture and record vital information at every step in the food supply chain in order to track ingredients and products back to the point of harvest/production and forward to the point of sale/service. Product tracing provides a documentable history of food ingredients and products and allows tracing and verification in the event of a foodborne illness or animal disease outbreak to determine the origination and destination of ingredients and products.

Q. What is the Institute of Food Technologists and who contributed to these recommendations?

A. The Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) is a nonprofit scientific society with more than 18,000 members working in food science, food technology, and related professions in industry, academia, and government. A panel of experts assisted IFT to develop the recommendations in the report. The seven-member expert panel consisted of individuals with specific expertise in the following areas: food production/distribution/retail, produce, agriculture economics, product tracing standards, state and local trace back investigations, international and domestic food policy, and food defense. To finalize the report's recommendations, IFT relied on small subpanels of individuals with expertise in agriculture economics, product tracing systems/technology, food production, and state trace-back investigators.

Q. How do product tracing and the recommendations put forth in this report benefit consumers?

A. During an outbreak of a foodborne illness, state public health investigators and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) first try to determine the food that is causing illness. Then, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) must trace the contaminated product back to the source of production and find the point of contamination. Accurate and efficient recordkeeping of the recommended data elements required for product tracing can allow FDA to identify the specific plant or country of origin. The trace-back allows FDA and food producers to identify more precisely the source of contamination, thereby improving production practices and preventing future contamination. Additionally, tracking the product forward may allow for its removal from the marketplace so that people don't consume it and become ill. Improved product tracing can reduce the time required for an efficient trace and may better protect public health, help reduce the economic hardship relevant industries face, and maintain consumer confidence in the U.S. food supply.

Q. What impact would these recommendations have on the food industry, and how do they differ from what the food industry is currently doing in this area?

A. Currently, the food industry keeps records but uses dissimilar formats and terms. The report recommends implementing certain key data elements using agreed upon standardized formats. The recommendations do not exclude any segments of the food industry from maintaining this information, and under current laws, food systems such as farms and restaurants are not required to keep records. The report recommends that every segment maintain records, be able to provide them in an electronic format, and make product tracing a part of the audit process. Companies would need to be able to link the information they receive to the items they ship. Improved product tracing can reduce the time companies take to trace ingredients or products backward and forward and aid FDA in faster, more accurate investigations.

Q. What impact do these recommendations have on current product tracing regulations and the regulatory agencies that enforce them?

A. IFT believes these recommendations can help improve tracing of food products. Improving FDA's ability to trace a contaminated product back to the source of production would allow the agency to conduct more rapid, accurate investigations. Current laws limit the types of information that are required to be kept by food companies, and limit the ways in which FDA can access these records.

Q. How is electronic product tracing information kept secure? Will companies and others know what food products I purchase?

A. There are many means for food companies and regulatory agencies to ensure security of electronic data and proprietary information. Accurate receiving records will be kept at foodservice and retail locations, but documentation of end-purchasers (i.e., consumers) will not be maintained, as it would be very difficult to record each and every consumer purchase. Therefore, IFT does not suggest a way to trace what products consumers purchase or consume.

Q. Why do the recommendations require product tracing requirements at the case level but not at the item level?

A. Because of the way food is produced, if a food were contaminated, a large amount of product would probably be recalled, not just one or two packages. Therefore, tracking at the case level seems appropriate. The product lot number and other required data elements for each case of received/ shipped product should be recorded. Maintaining records at the pallet level, which is common, does not provide accurate product tracing, as some pallets contain various products and lots.

Q. Do these recommendations allow for me to know where my food came from?

A. Some companies are using technologies and systems that enable consumers to find out how and where a food was made and sometimes who made it. However, for product tracing, all the steps between production and sale are important. Because the recommendations propose tracking at the case level and not the item level, there would not be any additional information on the package that would enable consumers to know where their food came from.

Q. Who can I contact to find out more about product tracing and IFT's recommendations?

A. Please contact Jennifer McEntire, IFT Research Scientist and Manager, Science and Technology Projects, (202.330.4984 or jcmcentire@ift.org) at IFT to learn more about IFT's product tracing recommendations.

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