Food traceability standards in Australia

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Food traceability is defined as the ability to track each movement a food product takes throughout its journey from producer to consumer. At any given point in time, food items should be able to be tracked one step backward and one step forward in the supply chain.

This definition of traceability applies to all components involved in the food supply chain, including raw materials and ingredients, additives and packaging materials.

The goal of a strong food traceability system is the ability to issue recalls or other corrective measures when something goes wrong. As soon as a business or government agency learns about a potential contamination incident or other unsafe situation, companies can turn to their traceability systems to help them determine how widespread the problem is, and to share the most important information with the right organisations.

Why food traceability matters

The Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code has specific requirements for food traceability. There are unique rules for what information to include on labels, actions that must be taken when businesses receive food products and how to issue food recalls. There are also detailed requirements for the production and processing of certain types of food, including poultry, seafood and seed sprouts.

These laws are in place to protect consumers and businesses from contaminated or otherwise unsafe food products. Every year, Australia sees more than 285,000 cases of Salmonella and Campylobacter, two of the most common foodborne illnesses, according to Queensland Health. These diseases and other foodborne illnesses take a serious toll on the health of consumers and are also quite costly. Overall, foodborne illnesses cost approximately $1.249 billion every year.

Food traceability standards matter because, when it comes to human safety, it's essential to act quickly to prevent the spread of potentially dangerous products. When a recall or other corrective action needs to be implemented, the ability to view the entire journey a food product took is critical.

In other words, food traceability is important because it can keep consumers safe and reduce the cost to society incurred by foodborne illness.

Who needs to know food traceability standards?

To put it simply, every business that handles food products needs to know traceability standards and have governance policies in place that ensure these standards are met throughout the company. Here's what that might look like at different stages of the supply chain:

PRIMARY PRODUCERS

In the food industry, primary producers are those that cultivate animal products, or carry out fishing or pearling operations. It's here that all food products begin their journeys.

The Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code has specific rules about the traceability of foods coming from primary producers of:

- Poultry meat
- Seafood
- Meat
- Dairy products
- Eggs and egg products
- Seed sprouts

For these producers, it's essential that they keep written records detailing the immediate recipients of the products. They also must

record from where they received the products, including seeds, animals and seafood that was cultivated prior to processing.

Certain categories have additional requirements. For example, dairy farmers must have a system to identify which cows are to be milked. Egg producers supplying eggs must mark each individual egg with the producer's unique identification.

MANUFACTURERS

Once food is transferred from the primary producer to any sort of transformation process, such as manufacturing or canning, the role of recordkeeping for traceability shifts.

Food manufacturers' duties begin with the arrival of the food product. They must not accept any food deliveries where:

- ◢ The food appears to be unsafe or unsuitable for consumption

- ◢ The recipient has reason to believe the food is not of acceptable quality for consumption

- ◢ Essential information about the supplier of the food is not provided

For this last point, manufacturers must be able to review the name and address of the supplier, the lot identification, batch number or other unique qualifier, as well as the name of the food type being delivered. Without this information,

the company is not able to accurately trace food back one step, an essential factor in seamless traceability.

FOOD BUSINESSES

Food businesses are those that engage in the sale of food or the handling of food intended for sale. This includes fast food franchises, restaurants, delis and supermarkets.

Like manufacturers, these businesses must first review all information regarding where the food is coming from. If this information is not available, it's best to deny the delivery.

In each of these three major stages in the supply chain, there's room for error. A bad shipment of eggs uncaught could go on to contaminate equipment at the manufacturer, for example. Unclean equipment can render a batch of product unsuitable for people to eat or drink - and so on.

Implementing and consistently maintaining food traceability standards allows every business to respond quickly and adequately when something goes wrong.

4 food traceability best practices

No matter where your business fits into the supply chain, there are several best practices that can be applied to your operations to support food traceability.

Here are four that any company that handles food might consider:

1. LABEL EVERYTHING

Beginning at the primary producer, all food items should be adequately labelled, whether they're in transit or not. Here's what that means:

▲ At the primary producer, all lots and batches need to have unique identifiers. Those identifiers should be easily located on-site

▲ All shipments need to have the prescribed name of the food, or an otherwise accurate name for it

▲ All shipments must include the name and address of the supplier or importer

▲ All facilities that store food products should have an organisation system, complete with information about where to find specific items

To have accurate labels at all times, companies should have a reliable printer that produces high-quality labels that can be easily read and scanned. A mobile printer is especially handy when ensuring signs and labels throughout the company's buildings are up-to-date, legible and accurate.

2. DON'T ACCEPT LOW-QUALITY PRODUCTS

Every business is responsible for the quality of the food that enters its facilities. That means if a shipment arrives that is not up to standard, the business should not process the food or accept the delivery.

A few components of ensuring food is of acceptable quality are temperature, packaging and storage conditions.

Food should be stored and transported at a temperature within an acceptable range: below 5 degrees or above 60 degrees Celsius. Foods that are intended to be frozen should not be partially thawed upon delivery.

All food packaging must be food-grade and free of potential contamination.

Finally, food must be stored in a way that will prevent contamination or degradation of the food product. This may mean in air-tight containers or in areas that prevent exposure to light.

3. RECORD ALL SHIPMENT INFORMATION

Upon receipt of a food product delivery, businesses should keep track of:

- ▲ The supplier, including the name and business address
- ▲ The dates and times of deliveries and transactions
- ▲ The quantities or volumes of goods
- ▲ Batch or lot numbers

In addition, when preparing products to leave a facility, businesses should keep records of the entities to which they are shipping, including the name and address of the recipient.

4. KNOW THE PREVIOUS AND NEXT STEPS IN THE SUPPLY CHAIN

The key to a strong traceability system is the ability to name where food has been immediately before coming to a facility, and where it went or will go next. This comes down to reviewing the appropriate shipment information before accepting food products and keeping detailed records of where products are shipped.

How to counter common traceability challenges

Although these laws and best practices are well documented, these activities may be easier said than done. Traceability systems are incredibly complex, and they rely on the compliance of many individuals within the supply chain. As such, there are numerous challenges that can arise.

Here are four of the most common challenges that food-handling businesses may face, and solutions to alleviate them:

CHALLENGE 1:

CREATING AND MAINTAINING CONSISTENT RECORDKEEPING PROCEDURES

One of the biggest challenges in traceability is implementing consistent recordkeeping procedures. This is problematic as it's the baseline of any sound traceability system.

There are a lot of factors that contribute to this challenge, like the difficulty of ensuring everyone understands their responsibilities pertaining to recordkeeping, inconsistent information being recorded and even poor penmanship in manual records.

Here are a few tips for counteracting these problems:

1. **Clearly document all traceability system requirements,** including which information to include in which records. Employees should be able to reference these guides

2. **Train all employees** on the traceability system put in place at that location

3. **Use printed labels and automated systems whenever possible.** Printing labels from digital systems with pre-recorded information can take less time than manually filling out records and is less prone to human error. Plus, a quality printed label is much more legible than handwritten notes

CHALLENGE 2:
TIME LAG BETWEEN THE OCCURRENCE OF A PROBLEM AND ACTION ON IT

Unfortunately, it's all too common for issues to go undetected for a period of time. This time lag can be caused by numerous situations.

Incomplete or manual records can make it difficult to trace food back to the origin of the problem. Businesses that accept food unsuitable for consumption may overlook signs of contamination. Agencies that process complaints about food quality may not be able to respond promptly to the notice.

To avoid these problems, all businesses should have a method for looking up traceability

information promptly and easily. In addition, it's essential that all complaints are processed quickly. Most importantly, ensuring that all individuals comply with recordkeeping requirements is critical in taking timely action on a food quality problem.

CHALLENGE 3:
## POOR COMMUNICATION BETWEEN ENTITIES AT VARIOUS STAGES OF THE SUPPLY CHAIN

Even if most organisations in the supply chain follow stringent recordkeeping guidelines, a single underperformer can throw the traceability of a product off course. To ensure that all touchpoints in the supply chain are recorded accurately, companies should never accept food that does not have all appropriate information about the supplier.

In addition, adopting digital technologies that make it easy to record, look up and share information can go a long way in improving communication lines between various entities throughout the supply chain.

CHALLENGE 4:
POOR INVENTORY MANAGEMENT

This is a common challenge in any industry involving physical products: Poor inventory management leads to oversupply of certain goods, and undersupply of others.

A strong inventory management system is essential for keeping track of stock levels, and helps companies carefully plan their orders. A system that allows businesses to scan labels upon arrival so they are immediately recorded gives managers and proprietors accurate information about what's in stock, and what's not.
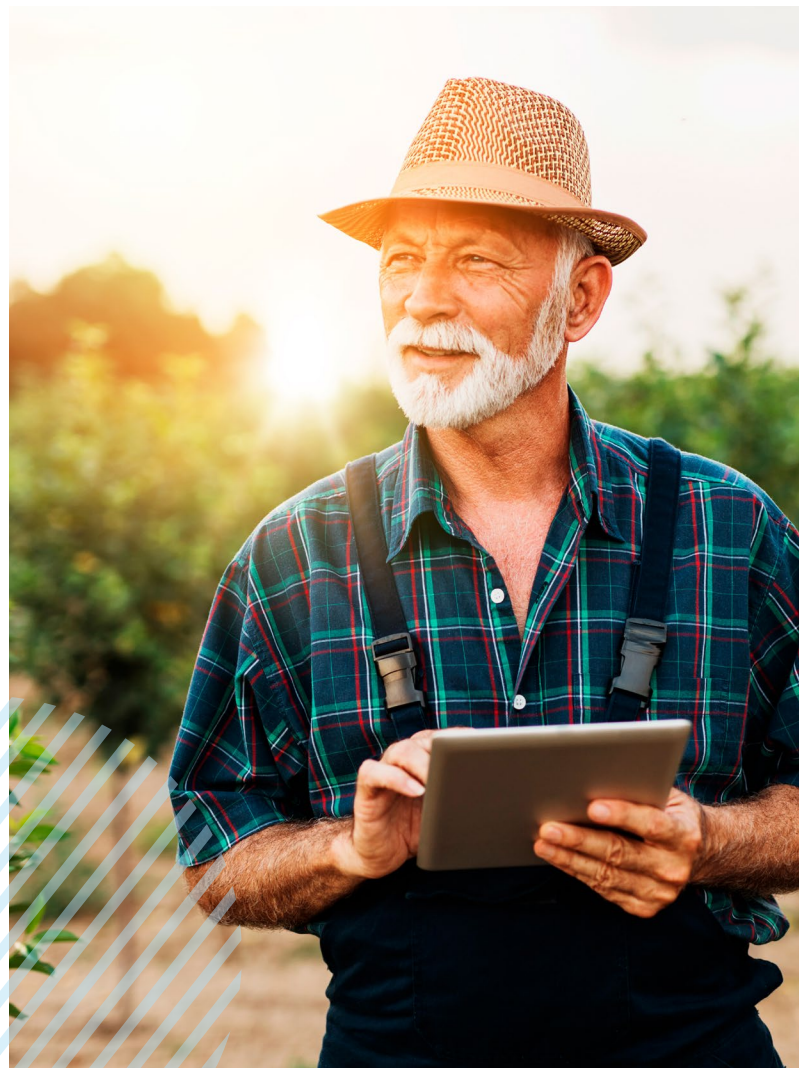
CLEAR POLICIES AND RELIABLE EQUIPMENT:

The backbone of sound traceability systems

Knowledge of the requirements, best practices and common challenges of food traceability systems will help you draft a system for your company. However, it can't be implemented without clear policies and reliable equipment that help you stay consistently compliant.

Documentation, recordkeeping and accurate signs and labels are essential in food traceability. The right printer helps companies ensure all information is properly displayed and recorded throughout the business. Mobile printing solutions allow workers to print receipts, records, signs, labels and more quickly and accurately.

Contact Brother for information about the mobile printers that can benefit your food business.

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