

Publix to Test RFID for Produce

The southern U.S. supermarket operator will deploy RFID at one of its DCs to explore the potential for using the EPCglobal Network to improve distribution of fresh produce.

By Jonathan Collins

Aug. 25, 2005—Over the next six months, Florida supermarket operator Publix, three produce suppliers and the University of Florida IFAS's Center for Food Distribution and Retailing (CFDR) will test the potential for using the EPCglobal Network to improve the distribution of fresh produce.

Publix, which operates 858 stores in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama and Tennessee, will outfit its Lakeland, Fla., distribution center with four RFID portals to track the arrival of produce shipments from suppliers in California and Florida. The suppliers will deploy equipment that will enable them to tag and read those tags in order to record shipments as they leave their facilities bound for Publix. CFDR, which was established in 2003 to study ways to make RFID tags work on produce shipments and keep perishable food from spoiling (see University Takes a Fresh Approach to RFID), will manage the research pilot, dubbed Visibility Validated (V2).

"Everyone is looking to find the ROI from using RFID," says Jean-Pierre Emond, codirector of CFDR and the lead investigator of the pilot. "V2 aims to see how every partner in the supply chain can benefit from greater visibility of a shipment. Companies miss that RFID offers benefits way beyond that of bar codes. V2 is about getting people round the table to examine that potential."

Emond expects CFDR to split the study into two parts and publish some of the trial's results by the end of the year. Results from the first three months of the trial will potentially be used to improve performance in the second half.

The suppliers will tag cases and pallets of fresh produce for shipment to Publix, each pallet containing 70 to 100 cases. In Florida, Del Monte Fresh Produce will tag shipments of pineapple, while A. Duda & Sons will tag celery. In California, Tanimura & Antle (T&A) will tag shipments of cauliflower.

CFDR will use its laboratory to set the benchmark for the RFID performance expected during the trial, as well as to study any discrepancies that occur between what is shipped and what is read at Publix's DC.

According to Publix, the trial is part of its efforts to support the adoption of RFID and the EPCglobal Network within the supply chain, and to help suppliers adopt the technology successfully. This is Publix's first RFID deployment. The supermarket operator stresses, however, that it is not mandating RFID compliance at this time. The company says that through the trial, it hopes to gain knowledge of the technical issues associated with implementing RFID in its warehouses, but it is most interested in understanding the benefit of shared supply chain visibility between it and its suppliers.

The trial is expected to use around 15,000 UHF EPC tags. Alien Technology and Symbol Technologies will jointly provide the tags.

T&A will use Alien's tags and readers; Duda and Del Monte have yet to decide which vendor's equipment to use. "V2 is not testing one RFID supplier against another. These [produce] suppliers already have their own RFID programs, so they will continue to use the technology they have already chosen. The third supplier will make its decision based on the size of the tag, given the limited space it has to affix the tag to its cartons," says Emond.

Tanimura & Antle worked with the CFDR in 2003 to determine the best way to tag their fresh produce. It deployed RFID in its operation last year. The company uses RFID in its distribution center to track RFID-enabled plastic bins and pallets. It ships these plastic bins and RFID-tagged pallets of cellophane-wrapped lettuce to Wal-Mart's Cleburne, Texas, distribution center.

Franwell, GlobeRanger, RedTail Solutions and VeriSign will provide RFID software and network services to connect the data collected by readers—both those deployed at the suppliers' facilities and those at Publix's DC—to existing operations applications. Ingersoll-Rand Climate Control Technologies will provide technical support related to potential RF interference within the climate-controlled environments.

Franwell will also be the system integrator for the project, coordinating the deployment of the RFID systems at the suppliers' shipping facilities and at Publix's distribution center.

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