

# ISO Moves on RFID Standards

The International Organization for Standardization is set to approve drafts of four supply chain standards.

Feb. 7, 2003 - The International Organization for Standardization is making progress on a number of standards related to the use of RFID in the supply chain. That's the good news. The bad news is it may not matter.

Last month, voting closed on committee drafts of two proposed standards, ISO 18000 parts 5 and 6. The two parts cover the "air interface," or the way readers communicate with tags, for RFID tags used to track items.

ISO 18000-6, which covers the air interface for RFID tags operating at ultra high frequency (860 – 930 MHz), was approved. Part 6 is perhaps the most important standard because UHF is widely seen as the frequency that will be widely used for supply chain applications. UCC-EAN's GTAG initiative was combined with ISO 18000-6 last year.

The next stage for ISO 18000-6 will be a final committee draft, after a three- to six-month voting period. The proposed standard is expected to be put forward as a draft international standard in the fall, and if approved, the standard could be published by the end of the year.

ISO 18000-5, which covers the air interface for tags operating at 5.8 GHz, was rejected. It won't become a standard unless an ISO member puts forward a new proposal and starts the lengthy standards process all over again.

Voting on the final committee drafts for four other proposed standards -- ISO 18000 parts 1, 2, 3, and 4 -- closes on Feb. 8. These cover the generic parameters for the air interfaces at all major frequencies, as well as specific air interfaces for tags operating at 135 KHz, 13.56 MHz and 2.45 GHz.

The four proposed standards are all expected to be approved. They would then be presented as final drafts in October. There will then be a two-month voting period and if the standards are approved, they will be published as international standards in the first quarter of 2004.

If the final committee drafts for ISO 18000 parts 1, 2, 3 and 4 all pass, as expected, they would be far enough along for RFID tag and reader manufacturers to begin producing products that conform to the proposed standard, because only minor changes to the standard can be made after this stage.

But the market already seems to be moving towards the Auto-ID Center's Electronic Product Code, which could become the de facto standard for UHF. Matrics and Alien Technology are already selling RFID tags that conform to the center's Class 0 and Class 1 tags respectively. And companies -- most notably Gillette -- are buying them.

"The EPC train is pulling out of the station, and there is a danger that ISO 18000-6 will be left behind," says one vendor who didn't want to be identified. "The UCC is backing both EPC and ISO 18000-6, but it hasn't

explained to end users which market niches each one addresses."

Standards and the cost of RFID tags are most often cited as the reason RFID hasn't taken off. The progress at ISO may resolve the standards issue. But if the price of tags based on the standards remains high, the market will almost certainly continue to gravitate toward the lower-cost EPC tags.

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