

# DOD Clarifies UID vs. EPC Issue

At a meeting with suppliers this week in Washington, the United States military clarified how it will use the Electronic Product Code and its own Unique ID numbering system.

By Mark Roberti

Apr. 8, 2004—Since the U.S. Department of Defense announced in October that it planned to require suppliers to put RFID tags on cases, pallets and high-value unique items, there has been confusion about whether the DOD would require those tags to carry Electronic Product Codes or use the department's own Unique ID (UID) number system. This week, at a meeting with suppliers at a hotel in Washington, D.C., the DOD clarified the issue.

Ed Coyle, the chief of the DOD Logistics Automatic Identification Technology (AIT) Office, said that in many cases the military would accept EPCs in place of UIDs. So companies, such as Kraft Foods and Coca-Cola, which will be shipping cases and pallets with EPC tags to Wal-Mart, can use the same types of tags to satisfy the U.S. military's requirements.

Military suppliers that won't be using EPCs can continue using UIDs. The UIDs can be put on RFID tags that communicate with readers using the EPC air interface protocol—the method that EPC tags and readers use to communicate.

UIDs can be up to 78 characters long. The longer UIDs won't fit on a 96-bit or 128-bit EPC tag, but the military is working on making it possible to use UIDs on EPC tags. Dan Kimball, senior functional analyst at the DOD Logistics AIT Office, said that about 46 alphanumeric characters could fit on a 256-bit tag. He said that that would cover the vast majority of UIDs, but not all. The DOD may require suppliers to use a 256-bit EPC tag with a UID and is now working out how to accommodate UID numbers that exceed 46 characters.

At the same time, the DOD is looking to make the UID part of the EPC standard. The basic EPC is based on the Global Trade Identification Number (GTIN) developed by the Uniform Code Council and EAN International, but EPCglobal is considering creating EPCs based on other established numbering schemes.

"We've had a series of meeting with EPCglobal—and we plan to have more meetings—to build a case and make sure we can support the UID under the EPCglobal construct," said Coyle. "That's our goal, and we think we'll get there."

Alan Estevez, assistant undersecretary of defense for supply chain integration, said that suppliers need not worry about UID versus EPC because the military will spell out its requirements in individual contracts signed with suppliers after Oct. 1.

"If we can't put the UID on packaging of a particular item, we will address that on a case-by-case basis," he said. "We will prescribe what we are looking for based on the state of the technology."

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