



Zebra, HarvesterGear Traceability Solutions Keep Pace with the Packing Line

Founded in 1941, the Carolina Blueberry Association is the oldest farmer-owned cooperative in North Carolina. With 24 growers, the co-op brings fresh and frozen blueberries to stores across North America under the brand name Bonnie Blue. Based in Garland, NC, the association provides sales, marketing, logistics and back-office support to its member-growers.

The association and individual farms take quality seriously. Each farm has implemented its own quality assurance programs on the packing line, and growers practice safe farming techniques and safe handling in the post-season.

Challenge

Since members of the produce industry came together in 2008 to create the Produce Traceability Initiative (PTI), PTI has gained momentum with retailers across North America. Stores such as Kroger, Food Lion, Publix, Harris

Teeter and Safeway have started requiring suppliers to comply with traceability policies in an effort to manage the supply chain and food safety.

To remain competitive, the Carolina Blueberry Association sought to bring compliance methods to its members. For traceability, farms had been taping paper labels on pallets, and in some cases, handwriting lot numbers in spiral notebooks.

From mid-May to mid-July each year, association members pack and distribute 600,000 flats of blueberries. Farmers are understandably concerned about anything that might slow down the packing line.

“We needed modern traceability measures, but it had to be something easy for farmers to learn and use — without slowing them down,” said Rod Bangert, general manager. “They work 16-20 hour days for eight weeks, so they were concerned about messing up their production cycles.”

SUMMARY



Customer

Carolina Blueberry Association

Industry

Food Supply Chain

Challenge

The Carolina Blueberry Association needed a complete PTI compliance solution for members but had concerns that technology could slow down the packing line.

Solution

- caseTracker by HarvesterGear
- Zebra ZM400 industrial printer

Results

- The co-op deployed a complete solution for members to comply with current PTI guidelines.
- Ease of use, training and fast printing contributed to a smooth inaugural season with the traceability system.
- Along with PTI compliance, the association gained greater internal visibility into production and supports its own quality objectives.

Solution

Bangert looked at a variety of traceability solutions. As a co-op, Carolina Blueberry Association wanted one system that could accommodate the wide range of size and packing operations across its member base.

The association selected HarvesterGear to implement a fully compliant PTI system for its growers. The company designed its caseTracker software solution based on the exact guidelines of the PTI and updates the software as guidelines change.

HarvesterGear recommended Zebra® printers to complement the software system. “We’ve tested quite a few different printers,” said Daniel Price, business development at HarvesterGear. “Zebra has a good reputation and track record of being low maintenance.”

Most growers use the Zebra ZM400 industrial printer, which provides industry-leading throughput and high-reliability labeling. Growers can flexibly change labeling based on the size of the product they are packaging, typically from six ounces up to two pounds. Some run a single line while others run several.

The partner deployed the complete system at the various farms, with a few farms choosing to print at the association headquarters rather than on site. Most connect laptops running Windows® directly to the Zebra printers.

Though some growers were initially apprehensive about the change, the rollout and first growing season went smoothly. HarvesterGear provided onsite installs and group and individual training to ease the transition.

“We were very pleased with the implementation and support we received from HarvesterGear.

Many of our growers were nervous with anything computer related, but the program they developed, along with the training and support they offered, did not cause us to slow down one bit,” Bangert said. “Their hands-on approach and the ease of the system gave our members a comfort level.”

Results

With the complete solution, association members create a visible value chain of their packaged blueberries that benefits growers and retailers. Along with complying with the PTI, farms now have a digital record of their physical operations, helping them track production and shipments.

“Some of the growers are using the system to monitor production in specific fields or by variety,” Bangert said. “With an accurate record, they can limit their exposure in the event of a recall and remove the affected products from the supply chain.”

With respect to PTI goals, the Carolina Blueberry Association complies with the most current guidelines and remains in compliance as caseTracker updates its solution.

With fast printing, the Zebra printers keep up with the pace of the packing line. As a result, farms achieve PTI compliance without negatively impacting their operations.

As a compliant vendor, the Carolina Blueberry Association maintains relationships with stores that require compliance and is more attractive to those that prefer it.

“Compliance definitely gives the Bonnie Blue brand a competitive edge against growers without traceability,” Bangert said.

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