

# THE PRODUCE NEWS

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## **RETAIL VIEW: Uniform recall plan developed with great retail participation; suppliers urged to join**

by Tim Linden

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A uniform communication system to help retailers pull recalled product off the shelf in quick fashion has been developed and is being utilized by a majority of the national retailers and many of the top center-of-the-store food manufacturers. As of yet, however, only a handful of produce suppliers have signed up.

Called the Rapid Recall Exchange, the Internet-based communication system has developed an electronic form that answers all the right questions in the event of a recall and quickly disseminates the information to retailers and other customers of the supplier. The Food Marketing Institute and Grocery Manufacturers Association began working on the system over a year ago and have been refining it ever since.

Jill Hollingsworth, vice president of the food safety program for FMI, said that the idea was hatched by a number of the major branded food manufacturers and retailers who wanted a uniform system.

"Prior to the development of this program, every supplier had their own method of initiating recalls," she said. "Some would send e-mails, while others would send faxes. The information on those recall forms was not always consistent."

The bottom line is that there was no standardized way for suppliers and retailers to communicate in the event of a recall. And recalls are not that uncommon. In fact, Ms. Hollingsworth said that it would not be an exaggeration to estimate that there could be 500 recalls of one sort or another in a year.

Through GMA and FMI, the retailers and suppliers began developing a form and initially launched an Internet-based system ([www.rapidrecallexchange.org](http://www.rapidrecallexchange.org)) that answered all the basic questions such as the reason the recall was being initiated, the coding on the products involved and a contact person.

The form was also designed to indicate to retailers how the recalled product should be disposed. The information would be distributed to all retailers in the system at the same time.

"We launched the program initially, and a few suppliers and retailers began using it. Once we started using it, we made it much better," she said. In addition, GS1 US, the organization that controls the UPC numbers on all products, was added as a collaborator, and now it is the organization charged with running the Rapid Recall Exchange.

Ms. Hollingsworth said that among the changes to the refined system are the ability to target dissemination of the recall only to the customers of an affected supplier; the capability of attaching invoice, pictures and other materials that help an individual retailer identify the recalled items; and the opportunity for the customer to communicate with the supplier through the system.

"There is now two-way communication," said the FMI executive. "The retailer can respond to the recall notice, ask questions or send back information informing the supplier that they have complied with the recall." By working with produce organizations, the recall form was also altered to allow for coding other than UPCs.

Initially, entering a UPC number was a mandatory field that had to be filled before the recall notice could be disseminated, said Ms. Hollingsworth. However, produce representatives pointed out that some produce -- virtually all bulk items -- do not have the Universal Product Code and that a case or lot number must suffice.

She said the value of the Rapid Recall Exchange is that it allows for the quick delivery of recall notices in an easy-to-understand format, which results in faster removal of affected product from the shelf.

Currently, more than 80 retailers representing the vast majority of the nation's supermarkets have signed up for the system, and close to five dozen suppliers are in the program.

The retailer list reads like a who's who in the supermarket business, while the suppliers tend to represent the larger food manufacturers in the country, said Ms. Hollingsworth. But there are small companies involved as well.

Some produce grower-shippers currently participating in the program are Grimmway Farms, Phillips Mushroom Farms, Sun-Maid Growers of California and Turlock Fruit Co.

The fee to join ranges from \$300 to \$2,000 annually, depending upon the size of a firm. When a company joins, it must submit an application listing the user and contact people for each company. The Rapid Recall web site is a secure site that is password-protected.

Ms. Hollingsworth said that the applications are screened by GS1 to make sure that only those with a need to access the site can initiate recalls and, for the retailers, receive information about any recall.

"They do screen the applications because we do not want any bogus recalls being put on the site," she added.

While the list of suppliers currently is in the five-dozen range, the goal of the exchange is to have virtually every manufacturer in the country join so that all recalls can be handled effectively and quickly. Ms. Hollingsworth said that suppliers can also use the site for product withdrawals for any reasons not necessarily related to food-safety recalls -- but that is the main purpose.

Kroger officials recently urged their suppliers to join the program and said that thus far, that chain has been involved in several recalls through the Rapid Recall Exchange, which have gone much more smoothly than earlier recalls.