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By Carl Collen

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NZ seeks traceability improvement

The country's NZ\$6bn produce industry is aligning and improving its traceability systems



A consultation document seeking the input of New Zealand's fresh produce industry has been released as part of a significant project to assess and improve traceability within the industry.

With the New Zealand produce industry worth over NZ\$6bn annually, the country's traceability systems "need to match our global reputation for quality", according to United Fresh New Zealand.

United Fresh, New Zealand's pan produce industry organisation representing more than 90 different organisations, embarked on the Sustainable Farming Fund project, 'Effective Fresh Produce Traceability Systems' in 2018 in response to global and local community health scares from food products.

With the majority of industry organisations around the country already utilising some sort of tracing within their own operation, Anne-Marie

Arts, project director for United Fresh, said much of the focus had been on how tracking could be shared between each step of the supply chain and across all categories.

"We know that traceability in the New Zealand domestic produce supply chain is not working to a common standard, since each supply chain varies in its management of internal and external traceability, with external traceability working well in some cases, or not at all in others," said Arts.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, the source of consumers' weekly grocery supplies was becoming more important, United Fresh pointed out.

Food safety, environmental concerns and increasing awareness of health and wellness issues have led to increasing demands from consumers who want greater assurances about the provenance of their fruit and vegetables.

"Reliable traceability systems are no longer an optional extra in the produce industry, but a baseline requirement of increasing importance," Arts continued. "Sophisticated shoppers as well as national food safety guidelines are providing strong impetus for the fresh produce industry to refine its systems."

The United Fresh project has resulted in the release of a set of Draft Produce Industry Traceability Guidelines, founded on the understanding that food safety is not negotiable for the entirety of the produce value chain.

Dr Hans Maurer, chair of United Fresh's Technical Advisory Group, said the guidelines were intended as an opportunity for the industry to adopt its own traceability practices, an option regarded as preferable to an externally developed system created without industry input.

"We already have world-class produce in our supermarket aisles and world-class

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operating systems within many individual growing operations, but we see an opportunity to utilise technological advancements to enable data-sharing right across the produce industry, an advancement that would add value without generating significant costs to either consumer or grower," said Maurer.

"International markets are an important element of the industry's strategic

marketing effort," he added. "We need to demonstrate a high level of competence in food safety traceability efforts within our export supply chains as well as our domestic supply chain networks."

Growers, packers, wholesalers, marketers and retailers across New Zealand have all been asked to comment on the work United Fresh and the project team has undertaken and offer feedback on how the draft guidelines can be further improved before its final version is published in 2021.

The consultation within the industry is expected to be completed by mid-October and United Fresh said that it intended to follow the formal feedback process with a series of workshops to further explore the implications of the draft guidelines.