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A pilot project conducted by RedLine Solutions Inc. found that growers in Salinas, Calif., were able to achieve Produce Traceability Initiative requirements without slowing down the pace or productivity of their field operations.

In May, the PTI delayed milestones four and five — which called for packers to show human-readable information on cases and encode the GTIN and lot numbers in bar codes — from the third quarter of this year to the end of 2011.

However, Phil Adrian, vice president of Coastline Produce, Salinas, said his company would have been ready Aug. 1.

"We're going to pursue a limited check of PTI to work out the last of the bugs," he said. "We know there will be bugs. There always are."

Adrian said June 4 that after a four- to six-week test, Coastline will shut it down "until it's time to ramp up for real."

Adrian said the delay will save Coastline money because the type of labels and additional manpower required by the PTI will add significant expenses to the company's operations when implemented.

He also was pleased that milestones four and five now are on the same schedule as milestone six, which requires receivers to have the systems and capability to read and store GTIN and lot numbers for each case of produce they receive.

"It was a wise decision," Adrian said of the delay. "All parties in the supply chain will be in synch and have the ability to use the new technology."

Adrian said some of Coastline's foodservice and retail customers initially wanted shippers to meet PTI requirements by September, but they have relaxed those demands in light of the delay. Others, he said, are reassessing their needs.

Adrian said that after the PTI was announced in 2007, Coastline interviewed a plethora of companies that offered traceability products and services.

"Most of them, in my opinion, were peddling snake oil," he said. "They didn't have the appropriate hardware, software or produce industry expertise."

That wasn't the case with Santa Clara, Calif.-based RedLine, he said.

"They have a great deal of produce experience," Adrian said.

"They understand my operation, and they understand the produce industry. They have software and hardware that works. They're willing to get out in the field and learn and develop processes that allow us to do it as efficiently as we can."

The pilot followed six Salinas growers from July through October 2009 as they labeled and tracked more than 250,000 cases of iceberg lettuce, romaine, romaine hearts, red lettuce, green lettuce, celery, strawberries and raspberries.

Chris Davis, RedLine's chief operating officer, said one of the key points learned in the pilot was the different times and places that were most appropriate to print and apply labels for the various

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products.

For example, cauliflower labels could be printed in a company's office 80% of the time because demand and yield were relatively stable. By comparison, growers preprinted only 5% to 10% of labels for celery — enough to get started each day — because of unpredictable shifts in demand.

"Their orders seem to change all day long for celery, so it became critical to print in the field," Davis said.

"It's more cost effective to print in the office because those labels are cheaper than labels printed in the field, and you have one person making labels instead of a lot of people in the field."

Companies in the pilot project also determined that printing and applying labels at the cooler — which would not require any change for field operations and could reduce the risk of pre-printing too many labels — was inefficient for high volume commodities, adding at least 20 minutes to the process.

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