

Washington Fruit & Produce Co. Enhances Food Traceability with Key Distribution Center Upgrades

For Washington Fruit & Produce, Co., one of Washington state's largest shippers of apples, maintaining the most effective technology possible for distribution center (DC) operations is a constant requirement. Given the perishable nature of fruit, frequent analysis into process improvements is imperative to maintain customer satisfaction and maintain overall productivity.

The company, which recently moved into a brand new state-of-the-art packaging and storage facility in Yakima, Wash., identified a need for a more streamlined pallet tagging and inventory management system that would not only help streamline daily operations, but also provide them with compliance to new food traceability initiatives required by the U.S. Government.

They engaged with Pacific iD, a technology solution provider, to recommend and install a completely new hardware system for their DC operations that would offer improved inventory management and accuracy, increase operational efficiency and increase throughput.

Their ultimate solution: a complete range of Intermec products including CK3 mobile computers, CV60 vehicle mount computers, SR61ex scanners and PM4i printers, immediately seeing improved efficiency as a result.

At a Glance

Washington Fruit & Produce Co.

Profile:

- Washington Fruit & Produce Co. grows and ships premium apples, pears and cherries from Washington and Oregon

Business Problem:

- No clear pallet tagging/inventory management system
- Needed better system for food traceability

Goals:

- Improved inventory management and accuracy
- Increased operational efficiency
- Increased throughput without adding additional staff

Solution:

- Intermec CK3, CV60, SR61ex, PM4i
- (Services) from Pacific iD

Results:

- Beating daily packing records without adding additional staff
- Overall increased efficiency

Enhancing Operations

“On a daily basis, we package fruit from orchard bins to size, shape, color, and quality-graded boxes for worldwide sales,” said Washington Fruit & Produce, Co. Systems Operator Mikey Hanks. “We operate year-round and ship both domestically and export to Europe, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Canada, Mexico and South America, so we not only require extremely efficient operations, but we rely on accuracy for all of our shipments.”

However, Hanks noted the company was severely lacking a pallet tagging and inventory management system, which often resulted in the wrong pallets being shipped. Additionally, of the 250,000 boxes of apples the company usually has on hand, there was often a discrepancy in tracking what they actually had in the warehouse. This resulted in daily “house counts,” to ensure inventory control, which proved timely and an ill use of employee time.

Washington Fruit worked with Pacific iD to find a solution that would ease their inventory control and eliminate some of their more antiquated processes.

“Before deploying the Intermec products we relied heavily on a manual inventory system,” said Hanks. “We had hand-written sheets used on the loading dock for loading trucks that can be hard to read or many times were inaccurate as to what was actually loaded onto the truck.”

Working together with their independent software provider, Pacific iD helped Washington Fruit select new technologies that would integrate seamlessly with their current software with only a few minor program adjustments made to handle their updated serialized box tracking needs.

Integrating New Technology

After testing the Intermec products directly against those of a leading competitor, they ultimately chose the Intermec CK3s to aid in their pallet tagging operations. This new technology also helped Washington Fruit become one of the first in the region to comply with the new food traceability compliance laws.

“Our inventory at the our new facility is tracked at the box level with all information about the fruit inside each box – all the way down to what part of which orchard the fruit was picked from,” said Hanks. “This is done with serial numbers printed on each box, and we are the first to deploy this traceability to apples in our entire region. In case of a recall, we know exactly where every box was shipped and which orchard’s fruit it came from in case the problem was rooted there.”

Additionally, Washington Fruit chose to deploy CV60 terminals and keyboards on each of their forklifts, as well as SR61ex scanners for their main means of inventory control. The new technology allows the forklift drivers to stay on their trucks when scanning pallets.

With the new system, apples come into the DC in large wooden crates. The forklifts pick them up and put them on a conveyor belt. The entire crate is then submerged into water, where the apples float to the top. The apples are then graded and sorted. They are then sent to a packing station where workers put the apples into boxes and use the CK3s to scan the labels on the boxes, associating the packer to each individual box.

Down the line after the boxes are full, they are auto taped and sent to a pallet station manned by robots. The robots pick up the boxes of apples and built the pallets, even shrink wrapping the pallets. The forklifts then crab the pallet, scan it and put it into the inventory management system. In shipping and receiving, Intermec PM4i printer network and custom labels are used to print labels for each box, and the CV60s and SR61s are again used to put the pallets onto the trucks to fulfill orders.

Since deploying, the the CK3s are already proving their worth.

“They’ve got a lot of cost effectiveness over the competition, said Jason Long, President of Pacific iD who worked directly with Washington Fruit on the project. “The CK3 is a good fit for them – smaller, easier to carry and very rugged.

Streamlining Success

Hanks noted that deploying the new technology was challenging in terms of staff integration, given that workers were also adapting to the much larger warehouse.

“For our shipping department it was incredibly tough in the beginning because our crew of forklift drivers were still getting used to the increase in production volume due to our larger DC, and then at the same time they were adjusting to a completely new system using the vehicle mounts,” said Hanks. “For the first two months it was very labor intensive to get everyone up to speed.”

However, Hanks said once the new system was up and in place, the staff had no problem adapting to the new products and the company saw very little resistance.

Since deploying, Hanks said they have already begun to see their overall efficiency improve, simply due to the ease of use.

“The CK3 has a lot of buttons that can be utilized without needing to press the function key first, so overall it’s just faster and more efficient. Plus, we’ve also seen vast improvements with the printer speed on the PM4i – we’re able to generate in the neighborhood of 40 pallet tags an hour now using customized Intermec labels.”

In fact, Long said the company has been breaking their own daily packing records without adding any staff, something Hanks attributes to the seamless integration of both their new hardware and software to their new state-of-the-art facility.

Hanks also said their accuracy has greatly improved.

“Since deployment at our new facility, we have not had any instances of the wrong products shipping to customers, something we just wouldn’t have been able to accomplish without our new software and hardware implementation.”

Keys to Success

Hanks cites the local aspect of both Intermec and Pacific iD as one of the major keys to success.

“Pacific iD has provided great customer support and has done very well in helping us troubleshoot any issues we’ve had to help us get to where we are now,” said Hanks. “Plus, one of the reasons we ultimately liked the Intermec option was that they were able to provide semi-local support as well.”

In the future, Hanks said the company still has a long way to go in terms of deploying a full WMS system to completely manage their new 228,000 sq ft. warehouse. However, for now, the company’s newfound system is offering them accuracy and capability for food traceability that would have not been possible before.

“We look forward to where this system can take us in the future,” said Hanks. “Our new warehouse has the capabilities to do a lot more in terms of increasing our throughput, etc. so we’re excited continually monitor our processes and implement continued upgrades as we’re ready.”

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