

Safe, Sustainable, Transparent Tracing System for Agricultural Products

Min-Hsien Yang, Professor, Feng Chia University, Taiwan

I Han, Associate Professor, Feng Chia University, Taiwan

Source: Council of Agriculture (<http://www.coa.gov.tw/ws.php?id=2503971>)

According to the “Agricultural Product and Verification Act”, the Council of Agriculture (COA) has been promoting the Traceable Agricultural Products (TAP) system since 2007. The tracing system was set to promote product safety, traceability, environmental sustainability, and information transparency as the core values, which incorporated risk control, batch management, record tracing and system verification into the standard procedure for agricultural operators to follow. In addition, the introduction of international third-party certification system required qualified institutions to impose document evaluation, on-site auditing, sample testing to verify and to trace the products. For those that have gone through the certification process, they are entitled to use the TAP mark and to make it available to the consumers the issuing authorities, product names, tracing number, and ways to access further information.

Complete the Law Structure & Incentive Mechanism

The COA has been collecting data relevant to the tracing system, conducting pilot studies, introducing the Taiwan Good Agricultural Practice (TGAP) and implementing verification and certification systems during 2003-06. After the Agricultural Production and Certification Act came into effect, in order to upgrade the capacity to verify and to maintain the supply of certified agricultural products, the COA has established the corresponding regulations in 2007 to provide a strategic subsidy on certification fee, with a full amount during 2007-09, a two-third amount during 2010-12, and a half amount during 2013-15. In order to provide more incentives for purchasing products with TAP mark, marketing and communication programs have also been addressed since 2011 after the effectiveness of the system was confirmed.

Third-party Verification & Quality Assurance

The COA referred to the international trend and introduced the third-party verification system in order to ensure consistent quality standards. Candidate verification institutions should hold a general standard of ISO/ IEC 17065 as well as certain criteria required by the COA. While the application proceeds to the COA, the candidate institutions should also apply to a body member of International Accreditation Forum (IAF) to acquire a multilateral certification (currently Taiwan Accreditation Foundation, TAF, is the only available organization under IAF in 2016). The mechanism would ensure a fair and professional verification service meeting both national and international standards.

Besides the verification system, the COA also conducted random inspection according to the regulations on products with TAP mark of around 3,000 items per year. Over 99% of the products inspected got passed, showing high reliability of the tracing system.

Enhance Marketing Communication to Consumers

In order to raise public awareness on the health and sustainability aspects of promoting the tracing system, to educate the general consumers how to distinguish and purchase the products, and to encourage the informed use of TAP by food processors, distribution channels, and business procurement such as restaurants, the COA has initiated a series of public campaigns since 2011 to promote extension marketing of the tracing system via commissioned kiosks, affiliated restaurants, and distribution channels.

A total of 1,679 agricultural production operators have been certified with the TAP mark by 2016, providing 241 varieties of certified agricultural products at 460 distribution outlets and via 540 sourcing-origin restaurants nationwide. The total sales of TAP has grown from 1,272 metric tons per month in 2013 to 3,432 metric tons per month in 2016, suggesting a growing amount of consumers have identified TAP as one of their priority choices.

A well-established agricultural product tracing system serves as a multi-purpose policy to enhance food safety for consumers, to maintain a sustainable environment for agriculture, to promote agricultural product marketing, and to safeguard food risk management. The COA is set to work towards the direction to achieve easier participation of the tracing system, higher motivation for acquiring the certification, and better maintenance of the verification quality.

Date submitted: July 10, 2017

Reviewed, edited and uploaded: July 25, 2016