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Migros monitors chilled food chain with RFID

Retail group would like industry standards for transponders in loading areas - Substantial advantages for route planning. By Björn Weber

Switzerland. Migros East Switzerland is using RFID technology to monitor its truck fleet and its chilled food chain. Now other members of the leading Swiss retail chain are considering whether to equip their fresh food fleet with this truck tracking system.

In order to include deliveries from external carriers, Migros would like industry standards for this technology.

Co-operative members save money

The installation of active transponders in its vehicles has given Migros East Switzerland several advantages. As well as the automatic, uninterrupted monitoring of the temperature of the loading areas, the fresh goods distribution centre has more accurate control of the truck fleet, and can thus plan the routes, and the deployment of personnel, better.

In this way the Migros can save over EUR 160,000 a year. "Whereas projects in food safety normally cost money, we will reach a return on investment after two years," explained Manfred Geiger, transport manager for Migros East Switzerland. He will promote the system at the Migros logistics managers conference in March.

Migros Aare is about to decide

Other Migros cooperatives are already thinking about implementing the solution as well. Migros Aare will be making its decision very soon. "This is a good thing, which would further increase our high standard of food safety," explained René Meyer, logistics manager of the Migros cooperative. "However a system like this should actually be used by the whole group".

It would be ideal if all the trucks, motor tractors, semi-trailers and trailers, including those of external carriers and suppliers, would register and de-register in the distribution centre and pass on their temperature data automatically with RFID. René Meyer said he would be holding discussions with the ECR-Initiative for Switzerland to this effect.

In Switzerland, the logistics company SGL, the ECR-Initiative and the EAN organisation are planning to merge to create "GS 1 Switzerland". The discussion about standards for truck transponders could play an important part in the international efforts to adopt EPC standards for RFID identification.

All vehicles will be monitored via RFID

Migros East Switzerland is the pioneer. At its distribution centre in Gossau the movements of not only the 75 trucks and motor tractors but also the 143 trailers and semi-trailers used to deliver chilled goods in different temperature ranges to 121 shops daily are monitored via RFID.

The manual recording of entry and exit can be dispensed with. Since the 130 loading bays in Gossau are accessed directly from the public road, the RFID readers had to be installed on the kerb. The active transponders on the trucks have a range of 100 metres using the frequency 868 Megahertz.

Intellion AG, a spin-off from St. Gallen University, is undertaking the development of the software and the implementation of the technology for Migros. Baumer Electric AG is delivering the RFID hardware.

Control creates additional security

Every time a truck leaves, the temperature in the loading area is automatically checked. "This creates additional security, since we use the same vehicles for different temperature ranges," reported Geiger.

The transponder records the temperature every three minutes during a delivery trip. On return to Gossau, the temperature records for every journey, without exception, are automatically read via RFID and transmitted to the Intellion software Object Control for evaluation.

The software creates significant advantages for the truck fleet. Whereas, up to now, the vehicle disposition system "Cadis" only recognised the motorised vehicles, now with Object Control, the distribution staff know exactly which trailer or semi-trailer was used for which delivery and which are on the premises and available for use. The scheduler receives a warning directly in "Cadis" if a truck leaves the yard with an incorrect temperature.

Changing batteries could be uneconomical

It is still unclear what should be done about the hardware when the power source for the transponder is exhausted. Since the units, which cost approximately EUR 70, are watertightly sealed, changing batteries in them could be uneconomic. Migros East Switzerland has been promised a five year maintenance-free lifetime for the transponders.

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