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When Every Minute Counts: Strengthening Food Recall Readiness

What a retail-initiated traceback revealed about the data and interoperability needed for faster, smarter recalls

When a food recall happens, speed and accuracy are essential. Retailers are often the first to act, working quickly to remove affected products and protect consumers. Disconnected data and inconsistent processes can slow this response. A traceback exercise, led by GS1 US® in collaboration with a national retailer, Oddisea SuperFrozen, Toyo Reizo, Wholechain, and Trace Register, explored how consistent use of GS1 Standards can help trading partners act faster to get recalled food off the shelf, understand where the problem originated, and better inform future risk mitigation.

Designed to mirror how a recall unfolds, the pilot started at the retail store. Over the course of a month, participating stores were instructed to capture receiving information for a specific product SKU, including batch/lot and dates. The data would be used to initiate a traceback through distributors and suppliers. The team mapped both the physical and digital flow of products across trading partners, testing how well store-level data could be linked to upstream systems under real-world conditions.

The traceback exercise revealed a clear insight: Traceability is as much an organizational challenge as a technical one. Clear product setup, ownership, consistent data capture, and documented processes are critical to closing gaps. These lessons will guide the expansion into a broader traceability pilot. With the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) Rule 204 reinforcing consistent data sharing, retailers and trading partners can move toward faster, more accurate recalls and a safer, more resilient food system.

This retail-initiated traceback revealed where data traveled smoothly, where it broke down, and what it truly takes to act quickly, accurately, and confidently when consumer safety is on the line.

59%

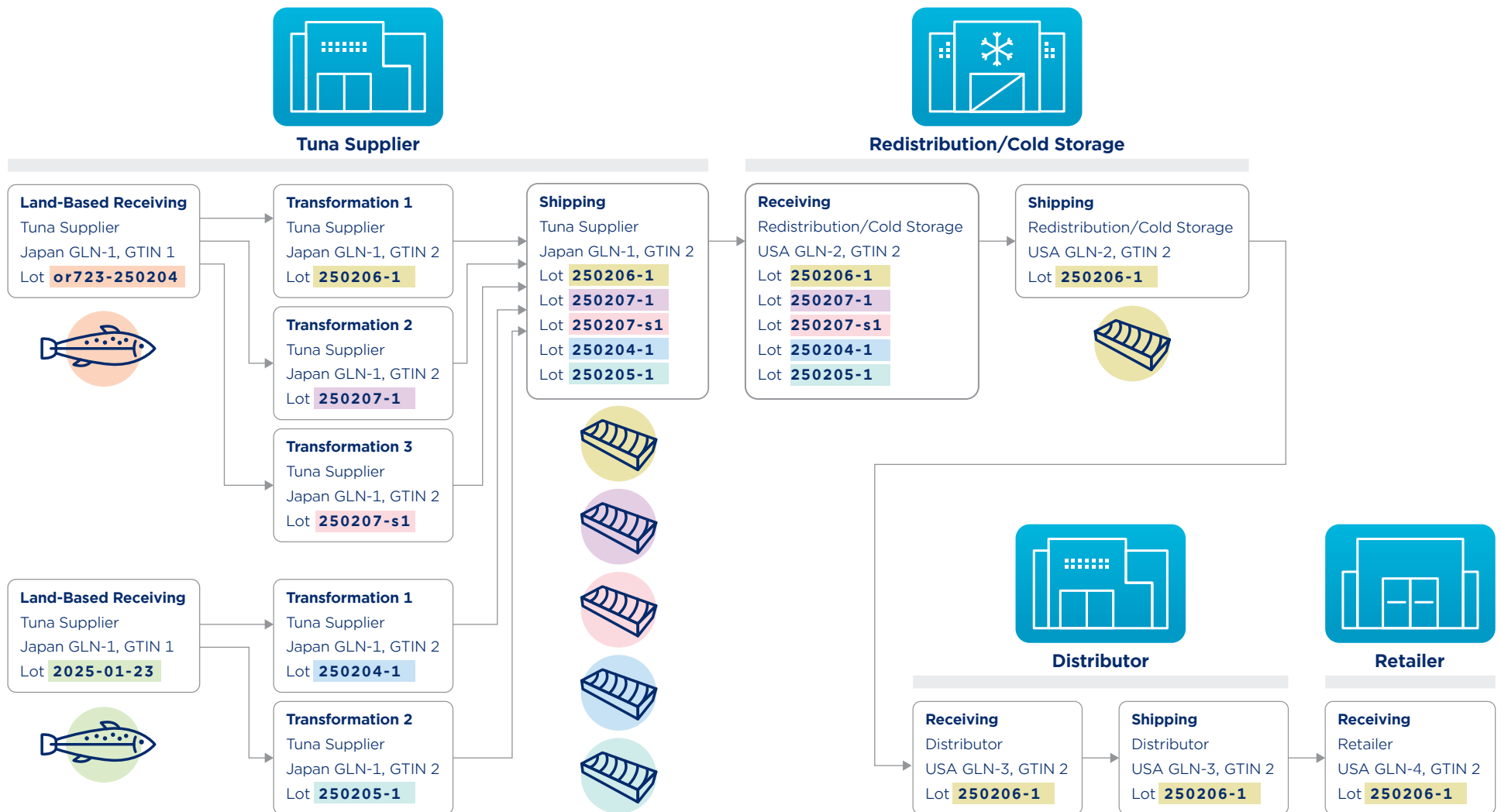
When following GS1 Standards, participants were able to trace product throughout transformation events and across international supply chains.

For 59% of the product identified, a detailed product journey—from processing in Korea to transformation and labeling in Japan to distribution in the U.S.—was recorded, demonstrating that when data is captured and shared correctly, traceability is achievable.

41%

When data was incomplete, misaligned, proprietary, or trapped in manual processes, recall performance suffered.

For 41% of cases, Global Trade Item Number® (GTIN®) mismatches, missing master data, and inconsistent practices across trading partners created delays and uncertainty, forcing broader actions than necessary.



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