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Packaging & Grading

RETURNABLE PLASTIC CRATES

Trans.L boxing clever

Returnable plastic crates are Trans.L Systems' game, and the pitch is growing daily for the Australian company

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As consumers and companies worldwide look for more environmentally friendly business practices, returnable packaging is becoming an increasingly common sight in retail supply chains across Asia.

One company heavily involved in the growing business of returnable plastic crates (RPCs) is Australia's Trans.L Systems. Trans.L provides both consulting services for groups who want to set up an RPC system, and automated crate-assembly and palletising technology for businesses with manual RPC set-ups.

The company's chief executive, Ian Neeland, says RPC supply chains are a growing global trend being adopted by some of the biggest global retailers. In Australia, Coles and Aldi supermarkets already use them, and Woolworths will bring its RPC system online in February 2009.

"In the US Wal-Mart has converted, and Kroger is in the process of converting their supply chain to RPCs too," says Mr Neeland, adding that Tesco use them across Asia.

He says the benefits of RPCs over conventional cardboard

packaging are legion, and especially pressing as both consumers and a global economic slowdown demand lower use of resources.

"The RPC is lower cost, it's safer, and ensures better quality produce than fibreboard," Mr Neeland says. "When it gets to store level it can go straight on display, so there's less handling and wastage, and you need less labour."

Mr Neeland's involvement with RPCs started during his time as Coles' national vegetable manager. He was part of a Coles investigation into the viability of RPCs, and was then responsible for the system's rollout across Coles' fresh produce supply chain.

According to Mr Neeland, major retailers who have adopted RPCs have found they reduce the environmental burden of packaging by about 80 per cent. The ecological savings can be equal to removing tens of thousands of cars from the road and energy savings equivalent to the annual electricity and gas consumption of thousands of households. RPCs also use only 8 per cent of the water needed for cardboard packaging.

The company's automated crate-erecting technology, which assembles the collapsible plastic crates four times faster than doing it manually, is the first in Australia and one of few systems globally, according to Mr Neeland.