

[Back to article](#)



Printed on page J1

RFID: Polk's Burgeoning Industry

Radio-Frequency Identification Technology Is Gaining Ground In the County

By [Kyle Kennedy](#)

POLK COUNTY BUSINESS JOURNAL

Published: Monday, September 14, 2009 at 6:42 a.m.

The term "RFID" might still be unfamiliar to much of the business world, but Polk County is already well-acquainted.

Radio-frequency identification (RFID) is the technology behind the SunPass toll collection devices, and it's playing a growing role in the supply chain industry, where it could eventually replace the barcode as the go-to tracking tool.

Some observers also expect RFID to lead the charge in improving food and drug safety.

All of this bodes well for Lakeland, which is home to a burgeoning cluster of firms working in RFID development and support technologies.

"RFID has really come on the scene in the last five years," said Jeff Wells, president of Franwell, a Lakeland-based RFID developer. "I think there are some very exciting things coming down the pipeline for RFID in this area."

First, a primer.

RFID consists of microchip-embedded tags that send information to and from scanning devices using an antenna and radio waves. The actual tags can be paper-thin and flexible, sometimes the size of a postage stamp or smaller.



PIERRE DUCHARM | The Ledger
Lakeland-based Solicore makes thin, flexible batteries, shown here stored on rolls, that power RFID applications.

Some tags are marked with a unique serial number known as an Electronic Product Code, allowing users to track detailed data, such as a product's place of origin and the date it was manufactured.

Unlike a bar code, an RFID tag can be scanned remotely and doesn't require a direct line of sight.

Though RFID technology traces its beginnings back to the 1940s, its appeal has largely grown in the past five years, most notably with Walmart adopting RFID for its supply chain operations.

Franwell has focused on RFID research and development since 2004, the year it helped create an RFID lab for the University of Florida's Center for Food Distribution and Retailing.

In addition to serving the logistics industry, Franwell counts NASCAR among its clients. The professional auto racing association uses RFID to inspect the chassis on drivers' cars, making sure the parts are NASCAR-certified.

Franwell, which has been working with wireless signaling technologies since the early 1990s, is testing other innovative uses of RFID.

The firm is currently developing a hands-free RFID reader worn like a sleeve that automatically collects and transmits data as the user handles boxes of product in a warehouse.

Franwell also is working on an improved electronic shelf tag with a digital display that would allow retailers to instantly change prices and other information - no stickers needed.

Wells said Franwell hopes to partner with the University of South Florida Polytechnic to speed along research and implementation of those and other RFID innovations using the college's business incubators, which give support and resources to start-up and fledgling businesses.

"They definitely are positioned to do that, and we're going to help them in any way we can," Wells said.

In addition to Franwell, Lakeland-based Solicore has delved into the RFID industry. The company, which makes thin lithium polymer batteries for credit and gift cards, also produces batteries that extend the transmission range of RFID tags.

"The RFID market is an enormous market," said Dave Corey, chief executive of Solicore. "Look at the overall value proposition: save time and money through the ability to track a multitude of products."

Another Lakeland firm, Innovatier, makes RFID packaging and recently secured a

patent for an RFID bracelet.

As for RFID adopters, Lakeland's Saddle Creek Corp. and Southern Wine & Spirits both use RFID in their warehousing and distribution operations.

"We see RFID as one of the technologies of the future, without question," said Marshall Goodman, chief executive officer of USF Poly. "You're going to see it replace barcodes in a huge range of products, because everyone recognizes the advantages of RFID. You can inventory an entire warehouse in seconds."

Goodman says RFID will play a pivotal role in enhancing drug safety by tracking the production and shipping of pharmaceuticals to cut down on counterfeits. In addition, temperature-sensing RFID tags have been developed in an effort to combat issues with food handling and safety.

However, Corey said RFID is still working through some growing pains, particularly when it comes to standardizing the technology for wider use and compatibility. He also says sales volumes will need to increase to make RFID pricing more competitive.

Still, the potential is there. Wells said he expects Franwell's revenues will double again in 2009, for the third consecutive year. RFID makes up about 25 percent of Solicore's business, Corey said.

According to New York-based ABI Research, total revenues from RFID readers, software and services will amount to more than \$5.6 billion this year. Goodman says RFID will likely be featured in research efforts at USF Poly, especially with Polk's high concentration of warehousing and distribution firms.

"We've got to be one of the leaders in 21st century technology for the distribution industry," Goodman said. "We are, I believe, in the sweet spot for major growth."

This story appeared in print on page J1

Copyright © 2009 TheLedger.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.