



# GFSI Food Safety Standards

Several standards exist to help companies comply with food-safety laws. Any of them can help your company reduce costly recalls.

by Paul Valder

Food safety standards have been well accepted in Europe for quite some time. But as international food trade expanded, it was apparent that the existing private and public food-safety policies could not stave off the food recalls that were occurring worldwide. A representation of common ground between food safety schemes was needed to enhance food safety, ensure consumer protection, and to strengthen consumer confidence.

## Know & Go

- The experience of the last few years, especially with regard to recalls, proves that there are significant risks associated with the global food supply chain.
- Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) requirements led to ISO 22000, an international standard designed to ensure the integrity and safety of the food supply chain.
- ISO 22000 is designed to be largely preventive in nature.
- Organizations should consider adopting ISO 22000 due to its benefits in the marketplace, its benefits to the organization itself, and the fact that the standard goes well beyond HACCP requirements.

To address these needs, the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) was coordinated and launched in May 2000 by CIES—The Food Business Forum, an independent global food business network headquartered in Paris. Founded in 1953, CIES has developed numerous programs for retailers and supply chains,

and continues to facilitate the development of common positions and tools on strategic and practical issues affecting the food business. CIES shares best practices throughout 150 countries.

## About GFSI

The GFSI is a nonprofit foundation created under Belgian law with a mission to work on continuous improvement in food safety management systems to ensure confidence in the delivery of food to consumers. The GFSI objectives are to:

- Promote convergence between food safety standards through maintaining a benchmarking process for food safety management schemes
- Improve cost efficiency throughout the food supply chain through the common acceptance of GFSI-recognized standards by retailers around the world
- Provide a unique international stakeholder platform for networking, knowledge exchange, and sharing of best food safety practices and information

The GFSI guidance document was developed for guidance and to set commonly agreed criteria as a framework to which food-safety-related schemes can be benchmarked. It is not a standard

and GFSI is not involved in certification or accreditation activities.

Currently in its fifth edition, the guidance document provides the procedure for benchmarking of food safety management schemes, the key elements for the production of food within a conforming food safety management standard (i.e., good manufacturing practices, or an HACCP program or equivalent system), and guidance on the certification processes of a food safety management system.

The GFSI guidance document is freely available on the CIES web site ([www.ciesnet.com](http://www.ciesnet.com)).

### Different standards

Currently there are four food safety standards formally benchmarked to GFSI. They are the British Retail Consortium's (BRC) Global Standard for Food Safety, the International Food Standard (IFS), the (Dutch) National Board of Experts Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (NBE HACCP) Option B, and the Safe Quality Food (SQF) 2000 Code.

In this article, we'll analyze the Global Standard for Food Safety and SQF 2000. We'll also discuss ISO 22000, due to its international presence. ISO 22000 is currently undergoing the GFSI benchmarking process, and may soon be recognized.

### BRC Global Standard for Food Safety

The BRC Global Standard for Food Safety is an accredited, certifiable standard, and the first one to be approved by GFSI in 2000. It has been adopted by more than 8,000 food businesses in more than 80 countries.

It sets out the requirements for food businesses that process food or are involved with the preparation of primary products for supply as retailer-branded products and branded products. It also covers food or ingredients for use by food-service companies, catering companies, and food manufacturers.

The principles of the BRC Global Standard for Food Safety are based on two key components: senior management commitment and HACCP—an approach to food safety that identifies where a likely health hazard may occur, then establishes and maintains safety measures to prevent the hazard from occurring.

Each clause of the standard begins with a "statement of intent" to which a company must comply to be certified. Within the standard are certain fundamental requirements that relate to systems that are crucial to the establishment and operation of an effective food safety program. These fundamental requirements together with the statement of intent specify the criteria against which the audit will be carried out. The clauses that are deemed fundamental are:

- Clause 1—"Senior management commitment and continual improvement"
- Clause 2—"The food safety plan—HACCP"
- Clause 3.5—"Internal audits"
- Clause 3.8—"Corrective and preventive action"
- Clause 3.9—"Traceability"
- Clause 4.3.1—"Layout, product flow and segregation"
- Clause 4.9—"Housekeeping and hygiene"
- Clause 5.2—"Handling requirements for specific materials—Materials containing allergens and identity preserved materials"
- Clause 6.1—"Control of operations"
- Clause 7.1—"Training"

### Safe Quality Food 2000 Code

The SQF 2000 Code is designed for use in all sectors of the food industry as a HACCP-based quality management system to reduce the incidence of unsafe food reaching the marketplace. It is a food safety program that also covers product quality. It offers benefits to suppliers and buyers at all links in the food supply chain by addressing the buyer's food safety and quality requirements, and provides a solution for the suppliers.

First launched in 1994, The Food Marketing Institute acquired the rights to the SQF program in 2003 and established the SQF Institute (SQFI) division to manage the program. Now in its sixth edition, SQF 2000 Code is recognized by GFSI as meeting its benchmark requirements. It is the only GFSI-recognized certification system that links primary production certification to food manufacturing, distribution, and agent/broker management certification.

The program provides independent certification that a supplier's food safety and quality management system complies with

international and domestic food safety regulations. This enables suppliers to help assure their customers that food has been produced, processed, prepared, and handled according to the highest possible standards, at all levels of the supply chain.

### Levels of certification

The SQF 2000 Code is divided into three certification levels: Level 1 covers food safety fundamentals; at Level 2, certified HACCP food safety plans are recognized by GFSI; and at Level 3, comprehensive food safety and quality management system actions exceed the GFSI benchmark requirements.

The SQF program has many unique features that help ensure trust and consistency in the auditing process. Certification bodies that are licensed by the SQFI to perform SQF audits are subject to regular assessments of their certification and audit activities by internationally recognized accreditation bodies licensed by SQFI. Auditors are only permitted to perform audits in the food industry sectors for which they have been registered, and in which they have extensive expertise and experience.

### ISO 22000

ISO 22000—"Food safety management systems—Requirements for any organization in the food chain" specifies the requirements for a food-safety management system that combines the following generally recognized key elements to ensure food safety along the food chain, up to the point of final consumption: interactive communication, system management, prerequisite programs, and HACCP principles.

The ISO 22000 standard delivers a common global framework of safety requirements for all organizations in the food supply chain, including crop production, processing, distribution, and related operations. It is an international standard that harmonizes various existing national and industry certification schemes.

ISO 22000 incorporates all seven of the contemporary HACCP principles and implementation plans. Overall, ISO 22000 creates an effective framework for food safety management, communication along the food supply chain, and control of food safety hazards.

ISO 22000 is recognized by more than 157 stakeholder countries around

the world. Accredited audits are carried out by certification bodies in accordance to ISO 22003—“Food safety management systems—Requirements for bodies providing audit and certification of food safety management systems.” Auditors must inspect as many product lines in the manufacturing facility as possible, and prerequisites must be audited at every site inspection. As per other ISO standards, the auditing cycle takes three years, including a first-year, longer inspection and shorter surveillance audits in the next two years.

### Benefits of certification

So how does being certified to an accredited food safety standard benefit your business? With specific safety and, in some cases, quality requirements, and system requirements, each of the standards requires a detailed third-party independent assessment (certification audit) that is carried out on site at least once per year. The purpose of this audit is to ensure that systems are in place, monitored, in use, and effective. This independent measure is not used as a “snapshot” of current conditions; rather, it evaluates the overall process and mechanics of the operations, assessing the ability to function day-to-day and in times of crises.

The requirements to be met to gain certification are rigorous and well-defined in each standard. The requirement is such that all parts of the standard being evaluated are met, and all nonconformances found during an audit must be successfully corrected prior to the issuance of certification status. In addition, as this is a live certification, any recall is mandated to be reported to the certification body, so that additional evaluation can be undertaken, if required.

Beyond the act of designing and enhancing your business to meet these world-class standards, and beyond the annual audit process, the action of becoming certified, and maintaining this certification, shows diligence in maintaining the level of product and consumer safety at world-class standards. A company that is part of our food chain should be doing nothing less than aiming for the highest level of assurance in this regard.

In the end, choosing which standard to utilize and be certified to is the decision of the individual operation. The act of enhancing and maintaining a top-level food safety program, and being certified, is

| <b>Attributes</b>       | <b>SQF-2000</b>   | <b>BRC</b>   | <b>ISO 22000</b>   |
|-------------------------|---|--|--|
| Total audits            | 9,000 plus  | 6,500 plus   | 1,300 plus   |
| Standards / assessments | SQF 1000 – Prefarm gate<br>SQF 2000 – Postfarm gate   | BRC global standards – Issue 5<br>BRC/IOP global standard – Packaging – Issue 2<br>BRC global standard – Consumer products   | ISO 22000:2005 first edition   |
| Criteria/components     | Level 1: Food safety fundamentals<br>Level 2: HACCP (GFSI benchmarking based on achieving Levels 1 and 2)<br>Level 3: Food safety and quality management system | The audits cover fundamentals, the food safety plan, HACCP, site standards, product control, process control, and personnel. | 16 manufacturing and seven agricultural categories. The prerequisite programs for ISO 22000 have not been defined. |
| Auditor training        | Three days with exams   | Four to five days with exams (approx.)   | Three days   |
| Audit cycle             | One year, but can be changed to six months depending on the type/number of nonconformances.   | Six months to one year, depending on the type and number of non-conformances   | Three-year cycle – Certification audit and two surveillance audits.  |

much more of a requirement than a choice in today’s marketplace.

### Preventing recalls

All food safety standards provide the opportunity to thoroughly inspect an organization’s systems for safely managing food. Through these inspections, there are clear opportunities to head off food recalls and maintain a healthy food marketplace.

More important, most standards contain clauses pertaining to the management of incidents, product recalls, and product withdrawal. There should be procedures in place to effectively manage incidents and potential emergency situations that affect food safety, legality, or quality. Companies are required to define what would constitute an incident or emergency situation that would require proper reaction.

Procedures are expected to be capable of being operated at any time, and will take into account stock reconciliation, logistics, recovery, storage, and disposal. The procedures should be regularly reviewed and, if necessary, revised.

In the event of a product recall, the certification body issuing the current certificate for the site shall be informed in a timely manner. In such cases, it can be determined that certification might be revoked.

In addition to the above preventive measures, others include:

- Certified companies are expected to adhere to personal hygiene principles, to document infractions in this area, and, through continuous improvement practices, ensure that they do not happen again. Close monitoring in this area reinforces that employees are committed to adhering to the policies, which further ensures compliance in this area.
- Certain standards include requirements to strictly define and control access points for employees and visitors to the facility. Companies are required to ensure that access will not compromise product safety.
- Monitoring and measurement devices are routinely inspected and calibrated to ensure precise frequencies, quantities, and more.
- Nonconforming product is clearly identified, labeled, and quarantined. Procedures for this control are in place and understood by all relevant staff. Corrective actions shall be implemented to avoid recurrence of nonconformance, and details of the non-conformance shall be documented.
- Companies undertake inspection and analysis that are critical to confirm product safety, legality, and quality. Based on risk assessments, testing and inspection schedules are implemented to ensure that requirements are met. Results should be reviewed regularly to identify trends. In several

standards, foreign-body detection equipment is required to be in place.

- All facilities used for the storage and transportation of product, movement around the facility, and dispatch of finished product shall be suitable for the purpose, maintained in good repair, and be in proper hygienic condition.
- Specific parts of the audits are designed to monitor issues such as pest control, waste disposal, chemical management, and other variables.
- The physical facilities, such as ventilation, lighting, utilities, walls, floors, and windows are all inspected to ensure that they are suitable for the intended purpose.
- Security shall be maintained to prevent access of unauthorized persons.

The above measures are examples of how food-safety management system

standards create great opportunities for reducing food recalls and ensuring the safety of our food from field to fork.



Finding the standard that suits your organization's needs is essential to a successful implementation. Make sure to listen to your customer's demands, get yourself educated about the different food-safety standards through formal training or information sessions, and finally, consider using help during the implementation phase of your project. An external pair of eyes could greatly help you identify your situation, and help you foresee the challenge ahead of you. When you are ready for registration, make sure to look for an accredited registrar that

will provide you the assurance you need that your system is in place, and working toward your goals of reducing the risk

of recalls and improving the quality and safety of the food that you manufacture.

*Note: Quality Digest editor Laurel Thoennes contributed to this article.*

### About the author

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### Comments

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