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Global Food Safety Initiative Update In The United States

By

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In early 2008, large retail companies in the U.S. announced their decision that third party audits as part of a supplier certification program would be valuable toward assuring customers of the safety and quality of their products, potentially increasing sales. They also considered that this initiative might assist in avoiding name-brand damages from recalls associated with products sold through their stores. Several companies began to require certification of all suppliers to standards benchmarked (deemed acceptable) by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI).

The Global Food Safety Initiative was launched in May 2000 by a group of business and trade association members. This group reviewed standards to find similarities and determine the basic requirements for any food business worldwide that wishes to be known as having sound food safety and quality practices. This group compared many standards to their agreement as to what minimum requirements need to be in place. Only a few were determined globally applicable. Among the benchmarked standards, the two most prevalent being implemented in the U.S. are the British Retail Consortium Standard (BCS) and the Safe Quality Foods Standard (SQF).

The requirements of the retailers instigated a rush of companies trying to learn the Standards, prepare their systems, and arrange for audits to gain certification. The demand for training and auditing has been quite significant throughout 2008 and 2009. Companies that waited too long to begin preparations are failing to meet customer imposed deadlines. In order to gain compliance, companies must have well organized food safety systems, and in most cases, this must include HACCP systems regardless of the type of food produced.

Although this is not an all-inclusive list, both the BRC and SQF Standards contain sections on overall management and commitment, HACCP, internal auditing, corrective and preventive actions, traceability, facility design and construction, housekeeping and hygiene, sanitation, operational control (i.e. weights and measures), training and the handling of specific materials such as allergens or products whose identity must be carefully preserved (i.e. kosher, export eligible, or Certified Angus) .

Initially it appeared that SQF was the more ‘popular’ choice due to a well organized marketing and training program. A comparison of SQF and BRC illustrated that SQF was a more expensive option due to prescriptive training requirements and a more frequent auditing schedule. For this reason, as well as what may be a more clearly written Standard, BRC gained ground in the U.S. and some large corporations even switched direction to work toward BRC after learning more about the SQF requirements and comparing them.

SQF remains a more detailed (some would say, prescriptive) standard, but the financial differences in working toward certification were decreased when some SQF requirements were adjusted in the latest version of the code for manufacturers (SQF 2000, version 6).

Initially, only SQF offered an online list of certified suppliers enabling customers to find suppliers who meet the standard. Recently, BRC has added a list to their website as well. SQF also offers complete disclosure of audit results including corrective actions completed on a password protected basis so that suppliers can release their data to their select customers and reduce the number of requests for audit results.

Both sets of requirements are very similar and suppliers or manufacturers should choose the standard with which they are most comfortable. SQF Standards can be located at www.sqfi.com and the BRC Standards at www.brc.org.uk. Additional information can also be located on the HCG web site at www.haccpcg.com.

A large illness outbreak due to *Salmonella* and recall of peanut butter associated with the Peanut Corporation of America caused significant doubt in the value of current third party auditing systems in the U.S. Because SQF and BRC are relatively new here, there is a sense of hope that these new requirements will provide the stricter controls necessary to drive improvement. Still, it remains to be seen if the added certifications indeed improve food safety and quality.

An alternative benefit of the GFSI standards may be an overall reduction in audits. With many medium to large companies being audited 6-10 times per year, this may be a welcome relief. If GFSI standards are indeed universally accepted, many of the smaller audits may become unnecessary. At least one large company (McDonald's) now has an addendum incorporated into a GFSI audit system matching their requirements and reducing the need for multiple audits since their requirements will be included in the GFSI audit. Individual companies are being encouraged to talk to customers who require third party audits and ask them to accept GFSI standards.

Companies that produce organic or 'local' foods may be temporarily exempt due to the demand for these products but for most companies considering waiting to see if BRC and SQF are here to stay, they may find themselves removed from customer lists if compliance or documented steps toward compliance are not taken within the year.

HCG has been actively involved in providing HACCP and SQF training and assistance to U.S. companies in developing and implementing either SQF or BRC systems in their establishments.