Overview of GFSI and Accredited Certification

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Introduction

Global food trade is expanding and providing consumers with access to a wider variety of foods all year round. Expanding trade has brought the diversity of food safety regulations and standards in different countries into sharper focus. This regulatory diversity is compounded by varying consumer tastes and preferences, the ability to produce safe food and the willingness to pay for risk reduction technologies. Building common ground for food safety regulation through both public and private initiatives is helping to achieve the simultaneous goals of improving food safety and facilitating trade.

Food regulations are based on domestic law and practice. However, they also operate within an international framework of rules and agreements. In the past this institutional framework has often been under developed and poorly enforced. However, in the last twenty years these multilateral rules have become much more stringent concerning the development and use of standards.

Differences in food safety regulations and standards between importing and exporting countries can cause friction and even disputes that impede the international trade in food. Countries are nevertheless tackling the issues of food safety and trade through learning from each other's successes in managing food safety. In order to narrow regulatory differences, governments are working together to reach consensus on accepted standards. Private food safety initiatives, such as voluntary food safety and quality assurance standards, are also contributing to the resolution of cross border differences.

Overview of the Global Food Safety Initiative

The Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) is the result of collaboration between some of the world's leading food safety experts from retailers, manufacturers and food service companies, as well as service providers active in the food supply chain.

In May 2000, following a number of food safety incidents, the CEO's of a group of international retailers identified the need to enhance food safety, ensure consumer protection and to strengthen consumer confidence. The result was GFSI, a non-profit foundation, created under Belgian law, which sets the requirements for food safety schemes.

"Scheme" in the food safety certification industry, is a term used to define a commercial food safety programme that includes an auditable and certifiable food safety standard and a governance and management system.

As food safety is of paramount importance, the principal goal of GFSI is to ensure that the global supply chain is safe for consumers.

Governance and Structure

The GFSI governance process is vital in ensuring the fulfilment of the GFSI mission. The aim of the structure is to facilitate the exchange of information and the identification of best practice at an

international and multi-stakeholder level along the entire supply chain. In addition, the governance structure facilitates the ultimate aim of fulfilling the GFSI mission, which is safe food for consumers everywhere.
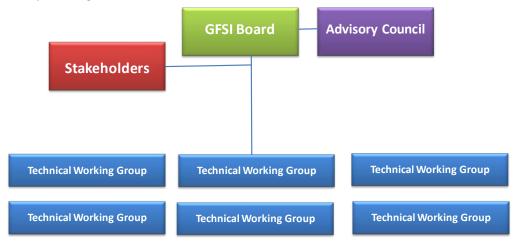
GFSI Board members are drawn from major retailers, manufacturers and food service operators. The Board provides strategic direction and oversight. A new governance structure was implemented in October 2008 by the GFSI in order to ensure that key partners in the supply chain are equally represented in the decision making process of the Board.

An Advisory Council, whose membership consists of academics, non-government organisations and government representatives, provides further expertise to the GFSI Board in its decision making concerning matters related to the mission, objectives and goals of GFSI. This body of experts has been in place since early 2010.

The GFSI Technical Working Groups are individual working groups composed of retailers, manufacturers, food service operators, standard owners, certification bodies, accreditation bodies, industry associations and other technical experts. Each Working Group meets independently throughout the year, according to a mandate set by the GFSI Board.

The GFSI Stakeholder Group is an international forum, open to all, which attracts retailers, manufacturers, certification bodies, accreditation bodies, standard owners, food safety experts and consultants. This annual meeting consists of an open dialogue on current and emerging food safety issues with the aim of identifying the priority areas for consideration by the GFSI Board as topics to be addressed over the following year. The purpose is to ensure that GFSI is run and managed by its members and is as inclusive and transparent as possible.

All of these groups are linked together to drive the strategic direction of GFSI. Any issues raised during the Stakeholder Forum are considered by the GFSI Board and, in turn, the GFSI Board provides the mandate to the GFSI Technical Working Groups to address the issues based on the recommendations made by GFSI Stakeholders. The GSFI Technical Working Groups are charged with delivering the objectives set by the GFSI Board and providing recommendations on technical issues.

Mission and Objectives

Those involved in the GFSI share a simple aim: "Safe Food for Consumers Everywhere". The GFSI mission is simple, but highly meaningful, for all stakeholders with an interest in ensuring the production of safe food. The mission is 'continuous improvement in food safety management systems to ensure confidence in the delivery of safe food to consumers.'

GFSI Objectives:

1. Reduce food safety risks by delivering equivalence and convergence between effective food safety management systems
2. Manage cost in the global food system by eliminating redundancy and improving operational efficiency
3. Develop competencies and capacity building in food safety to create consistent and effective global food systems
4. Provide a unique international stakeholder platform for collaboration, knowledge exchange and networking

History of the Harmonised Approach

Prior to the creation of GFSI in 2000 there was a proliferation of demands for audits primarily from major buyers within the food supply chain. Different retailers often applied specific food safety requirements for particular products and suppliers were obliged to provide evidence, through a number of audits of their premises and systems, of their compliance with these varying specifications.

The emergence of national or regionalised harmonised schemes, developed by industry, such as the British Retail Consortium's (BRC) Technical Standards and the International Food Safety Standard (IFS) in Europe, marked a step forward by allowing suppliers to carry out a single food safety audit to satisfy a number of retail customers. However, these schemes only provided a limited solution to the problem of the duplication of supplier audits, with many users of the schemes still being reluctant to move to only one, or to a series, of recognised schemes.

GFSI proposed a method by which it would be possible to take a harmonised approach to the recognition of food safety standards and their supporting systems, firstly by drawing up a set of food safety criteria to be incorporated into food safety standards and secondly by establishing common procedures for the accreditation and certification bodies responsible for verifying the implementation of these standards (the GFSI Guidance Document). This approach should allow a supplier in any country to commission a single audit regardless of the number and nationality of customers it supplies which will be accepted everywhere.

Benchmarking and Equivalency

Within GFSI, benchmarking provides the framework for the recognition of food safety schemes and is a "process by which a food safety scheme and food safety related schemes are compared to the GFSI Guidance Document to determine equivalence." The process is carried out in an independent, unbiased, technically proficient and transparent manner. Schemes that are successfully benchmarked and recognised have a common foundation of requirements, which should provide consistent results when applied. However, benchmarked schemes cannot be considered identical because they differ in terms of

their level of prescription and specific needs.

GFSI Recognised Schemes and the Relationship to Codex

All the schemes recognised by GFSI have been developed over many years from standards created by individual organisations, such as retailers, sectors of industry or certification bodies. The GFSI recognised schemes have their origins in standards dating back to the early 1980's, with the major influence being the requirements specified by retailers for their suppliers of private label products.

The GFSI recognised schemes, by their very nature, are written in differing styles, but they all 'amplify' or describe in more detail the requirements laid down in the Codex General Principles of Food Hygiene Code of Practice. These schemes are reviewed and revised more regularly than the Codex General Principles of Food Hygiene Code of Practice and, therefore, attempt to address issues that are currently faced by the food industry; good examples of this are incident management, food defence and allergen management.

All GFSI recognised schemes and standards contain requirements that go beyond those laid down in the Codex General Principles of Food Hygiene Code of Practice. These additional requirements are seen by the food industry as being important to food safety or at least highly desirable in order to ensure continuing compliance; good examples are product specifications, product analysis, purchasing procedures, internal audit and full product/ingredient traceability. These supplementary requirements, by their very nature, add robustness and rigour to the base requirements of food safety principles and provide added confidence and further verification of processes.

Although it is very difficult to trace the precise origin of these schemes, they all reflect the need for compliance with legal requirements and are based on HACCP principles, food safety management systems and prerequisite programmes, such as Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP). It must be appreciated, however, that these schemes are all based on best practices and can, therefore, be traced back to the basic requirements of Codex standards. In fact, there are only a relatively small number of specific requirements, which cannot be referenced back to the Codex standards.

In 2009 GFSI commissioned a report to compare the GFSI Guidance Document, GFSI recognised schemes and the Codex General Principles of Food Hygiene Code of Practice. The key elements defined by the Codex Code of Practice to control risk factors throughout the production of food are found in the GFSI Guidance Document and the GFSI recognised schemes. The comparison document can be found at www.mygfsi.com. The comparison demonstrates convergence between the schemes with a strong foundation in food safety controls that are internationally recognised by both the industry and governments.

Figure 1: the elements that GFSI recognised schemes are built on, including the foundation of legal, regulatory requirements and Codex principles.

Benefits of Third Party Certification

There are benefits for all those involved in the supply chain in seeking certification as a means to demonstrate compliance with legal and industry food safety requirements, thus promoting customer confidence and market access. There is strong evidence to show that certified companies enjoy higher margins through efficiency savings resulting from the application of disciplines defined by one of the schemes. Certified companies are also able to show consistency in their respective processes across countries and continents, which, in turn, facilitate cross border trade.

One of the key benefits of using the GFSI recognised schemes is the independence between the scheme owner and the certification bodies who audit against the GFSI recognised schemes. By ensuring the separate management of both entities, the food industry can have the confidence that there is no conflict of interest and that full impartiality is applied during an audit.

Finally, the requirements defined in GFSI recognised schemes are accessible and shared by many. For the buying community, therefore, GFSI recognised schemes provide effective and shared risk management tools for protecting brands, improving consumer confidence and ensuring product integrity. Recent developments have also indicated that certification can provide benefits for governmental bodies by demonstrating compliance with legislation and the commitment of companies to controlling and managing food safety risks.

Conclusion

The increasingly diverse tastes of consumers and the realities of the food supply chain have created a global food economy in which local ideas and food products are gaining international recognition. Ensuring the security of a global food chain requires a more thoughtful approach about how food businesses and governments attempt to ensure food safety. Cooperation and coordination in the development and implementation of third party certification throughout the supply chain has taken on a new urgency and a new focus. Third party certification can provide consistency and cost efficiency, reduce duplication, increase confidence and help provide safe food for the consumer.