

Achieving Global Certification In Food Safety & Quality

Consumers, retailers and food manufacturers today are increasingly focused on food safety and quality. In fact, an annually repeated industry survey conducted by the Consumer Goods Forum found that food and product safety remains in the top priorities of manufacturer and retailer concerns.



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1 Introduction

What is the only thing on retailers and manufacturers' minds more than safety? The economy and consumer demand, which translates to profitability. In a competitive world market, made even tougher by recent legislation in major markets such as the U.S. and China to reassure consumers, producers at every point in the supply chain are carefully watching margins while seeking new strategies to protect market share.

In addition to general food safety, other industry issues such as healthy or organic / biologically-grown foods – as well as animal welfare – are gaining importance. Addressing these issues, as well as food safety & quality basics, via certification by a globally-accepted food standard – which helps ensure consumers get what they pay for – is one way manufacturers have begun to carve out niches for themselves in the global food arena.

Specialization aside, with the broader adoption of global food standards, retailers and manufacturers are now able to favor purchasing from certified suppliers and sub-suppliers. For this reason, work to gain conformity among standards – and help manufacturers decide which one is best for their purposes – is underway, mainly driven by the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI), a retailer / manufacturer non-profit foundation.

This paper highlights four of the most-used standards. It also offers a short comparison of each, providing points producers may want to consider when deciding which standard to adopt. Finally, it gives an outlook on trends – such as the need for manufacturers and suppliers to take a more active role in certification to ensure future profitability – in food safety and quality discussions worldwide.

2 Certification: Oversight, Responsibilities & Benefits

At its most basic, certification can be defined as a procedure by which an accredited certification body gives written assurance that a product or a process conforms with the respective standard. Standards can be set-up by the public sector (governmental institutions) or by the private sector (retailer / industry associations).

2.1 Benefits of Certification

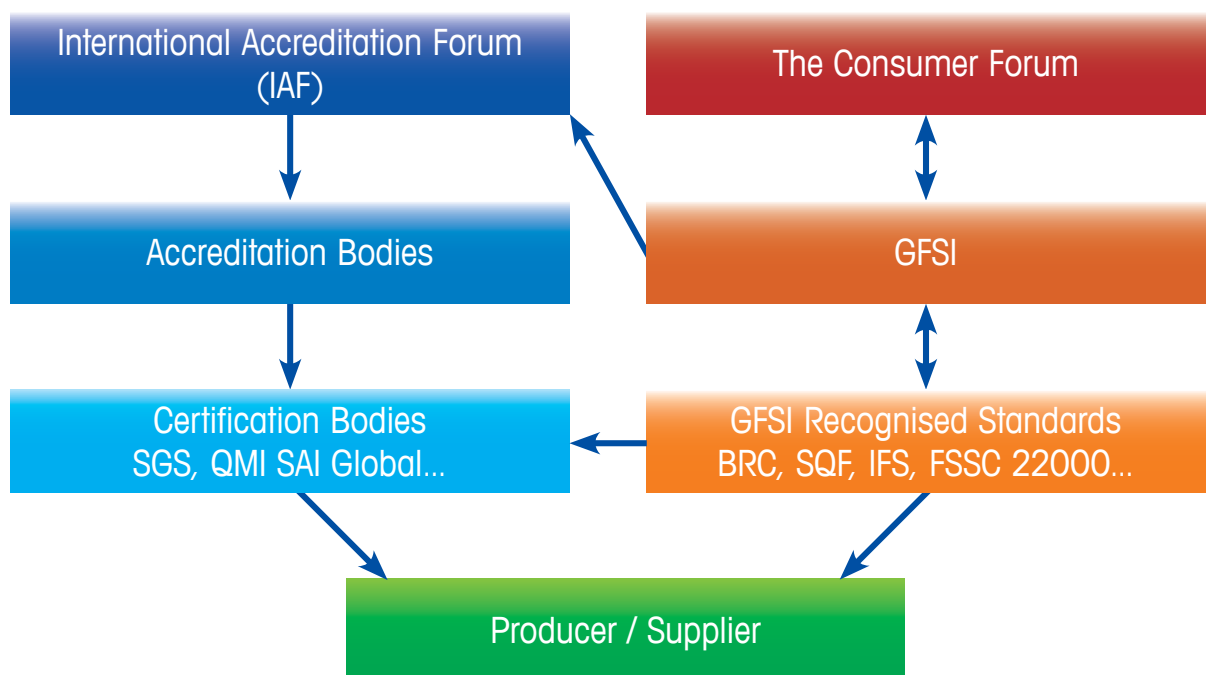
In addition to existing general quality standards, such as ISO 9001, and quality systems, such as GMP or HACCP, it is becoming increasingly important for food manufacturers and retailers to be certified according to a food-specific, GFSI-accepted standard. Benefits include:

- Improved customer confidence
- Enhanced brand protection
- A standard process / quality measure
- Minimized costs through not having to “clean up” after distribution of nonconforming products

2.2 The Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI)

GFSI was set-up in 2000 as a non-profit foundation at the request of the CEOs of around 30 international retailers. Today, it is managed by The Consumer Goods Forum. The initiative was set-up against the backdrop of various food safety crises, including Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), with the intention of ensuring worldwide consumer confidence in food safety.

GFSI benchmarks existing food standards against food safety criteria, with the goal of standardizing certifications and eliminating multiple audits. Preferred implementation places the GFSI just above Third Parties / Accreditation Bodies, as referenced in the following graphic. Key elements and further requirements are summarized in the GFSI Guidance Document (found via links at the end of this paper).



3 Choosing a Standard

As a result of their ongoing work to ensure each certification method is sound, GFSI promotes the equal acceptance of all approved standards: "Once certified, accepted everywhere". Actual practice proves, however, that retailers, manufacturers and even entire segments may have strong certification preferences.

Before deciding on a standard or a set of standards, manufacturers should check with customers to determine which standard they accept – and which ones they prefer. Understanding these preferences, some certifying bodies offer combi-audits (for example, BRC & FSSC 22000) in a single, integrated audit process.

4 GFSI Accepted Standards

As of the beginning of 2012, the following standards were GFSI-recognized manufacturing schemes. Schemes in bold currently rank as the most often used and accepted worldwide.

- **BRC Global Standard for Food Safety**
- Canada GAP
- **FSSC 22000**
- The Global Aquaculture Alliance
- Global GAP
- Global Red Meat Standard
- **IFS (International Featured Standard) Food**
- Primus GFS
- **SQF CODE**

An overview of the most commonly-used, GFSI-accepted food safety and quality standards follows, ranked in order of prevalence in today's market.



4.1 BRC Global Standard for Food Safety

Originally developed in response to the needs of UK members of the British Retail Consortium, BRC standards have gained use worldwide and are specified as acceptable by growing numbers of retailers and branded manufacturers in the EU, North America and further afield. BRC covers the supply chain with four related standards: BRC Global Food Standard, BRC Storage and Distribution, BRC IOP for Food Packaging and BRC Consumer Products.

BRC Global Standard for Food Safety was first introduced in 1998 and now has almost 18,000 certified sites in over 100 countries. Developed to specify safety, quality and operational criteria required for food manufacturers to comply with regulations and protect consumers, it was the first standard accepted by GFSI in 2000.

4.2 IFS for Food

Founded in 2002 by a German retailer association, in 2011 the IFS (International Featured Standard) represented more than 190 dealers including 12,000 IFS-certified suppliers in 90 countries. The standard provides a range of integrated checks on safety and quality in food processing companies and offers certification across the whole range of food processing with the exception of agricultural primary production.

The IFS comprises five related standards: IFS Food, IFS Broker, IFS Logistics, IFS Cash & Carry / Wholesale and IFS HPC.

4.3 SQF CODE

Developed in Western Australia but now owned by the Food Marketing Institute (FMI) in the USA, now in its 7th edition, SQF emphasizes the systematic application of HACCP for control of food quality hazards as well as food safety. The implementation of an SQF management system addresses a buyer's food safety and quality requirements and provides the solution for businesses supplying local and global food markets.

Those suppliers with an existing SQF certification will be required to upgrade their systems to meet the requirements of Edition 7 by June 30, 2012.

4.4 FSSC 22000

This standard combines the ISO 22000 Food Safety Management standard with the Publicly Available Specification (PAS) 220, which focuses on covering the Prerequisite programs. It was accepted by GFSI in 2010 and lists 400 FSSC 22000 certified organizations. This includes public and private companies that manufacture: perishable animal or vegetable products, products with a long shelf life, food ingredients, and / or food additives.

Manufacturers who are already ISO 22000-certified only need to be reviewed against the PAS 220 and any additional requirements to ensure they receive this GFSI-approved certification. This may be the easiest certification route for companies who are already ISO 22000-conformant, but the certification scheme itself may not yet be widely understood or accepted among customers.

Other standards are largely industry-specific (red meat, aquaculture). However, the food safety specifics of these industries are also covered to a great extent by one or more of the major certification schemes.

5 Comparing the Standards

All GFSI-accepted standards, whether for primary or secondary production, must meet three main areas of certification requirements:

- Companies must demonstrate they have a food safety management system
- Companies must demonstrate Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), good distribution practices and / or good agricultural practices
- Companies must demonstrate they have conducted Hazard Analysis and identified the Critical Control Points where warranted in line with HACCP principles

Each scheme varies in scope and structure. The following chart analyses basic differences among the most widely-used standards.

Subject	BRC	IFS	SQF	FSSC 22000
System requirements	Quality and food safety	Quality and food safety	Level 2 Food Safety; Level 3 includes Quality (need to conduct food safety analysis, define critical quality control points)	Food Safety
System establishment and implementation	Prescriptive requirements	Prescriptive requirements	Some requirements are prescriptive; Requires SQF practitioner (full-time)	Provide framework requirements for the company to demonstrate how to comply and demonstrate their food safety system
Report / data management	By certification body and standard owner	By certification body and standard owner	Company needs to register in Quickfire system prior to certification process	By certification body and standard owner
Certification process	No stage 1; Company goes directly to an on-site certification audit	No stage 1; Company can easily go direct to an on-site certification audit	Stage 1 on or off site; Stage 2 on site; Any major nonconformity found during stage 1 needs to be closed out prior to stage 2 audit	Stage 1 on site; Stage 2 on site; Critical items from stage 1 to be closed out during stage 2 audit

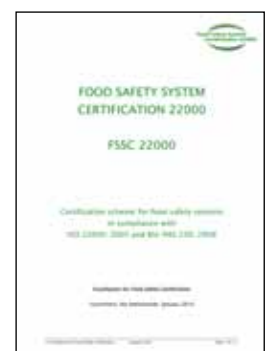
There is much to consider when comparing the standards. Producers may want to bear in mind the following factors:

- Product characteristics
- Company's position on the supply chain
- Current management systems
- Company's historic compliance with existing regulations
- Customer / industry preferences

As noted previously, one standard may be the easiest to apply, but it may not offer the benefits of certification because it is not yet considered acceptable among a particular company's customers.

Subject	BRC	IFS	SQF	FSSC 22000
Certificate validity	Certificate valid for 1 year; Grade C-Recertification within 6 months	Certificate valid for 1 year	Certificate valid for 1 year; Grade C-Recertification within 6 months	Certificate valid for 3 years
Integrated audit	Recertification depends on audit result (Grade C needs to be 6 months so interval or integrated condition will be changed depending on result)	Does not allow integration with ISO management system standard; Allows integration with product certification schemes	Different management system structure but possible for integrated audit – will require separate reports since SQF reporting is uploaded to a database	Same management system structure as ISO standard so it is easily integrated with other management system standards
Recertification/ maintenance visit	Same audit time as certification visit	Same audit time as certification visit	Same audit time as stage 2 on site	Maintenance audit requires less audit time on site than initial or recertification
Certification mark	Not allowed to be displayed on the product	Not allowed to be displayed on the product	Level 3 certification - can use certification mark on the product	Not allowed to be displayed on the product

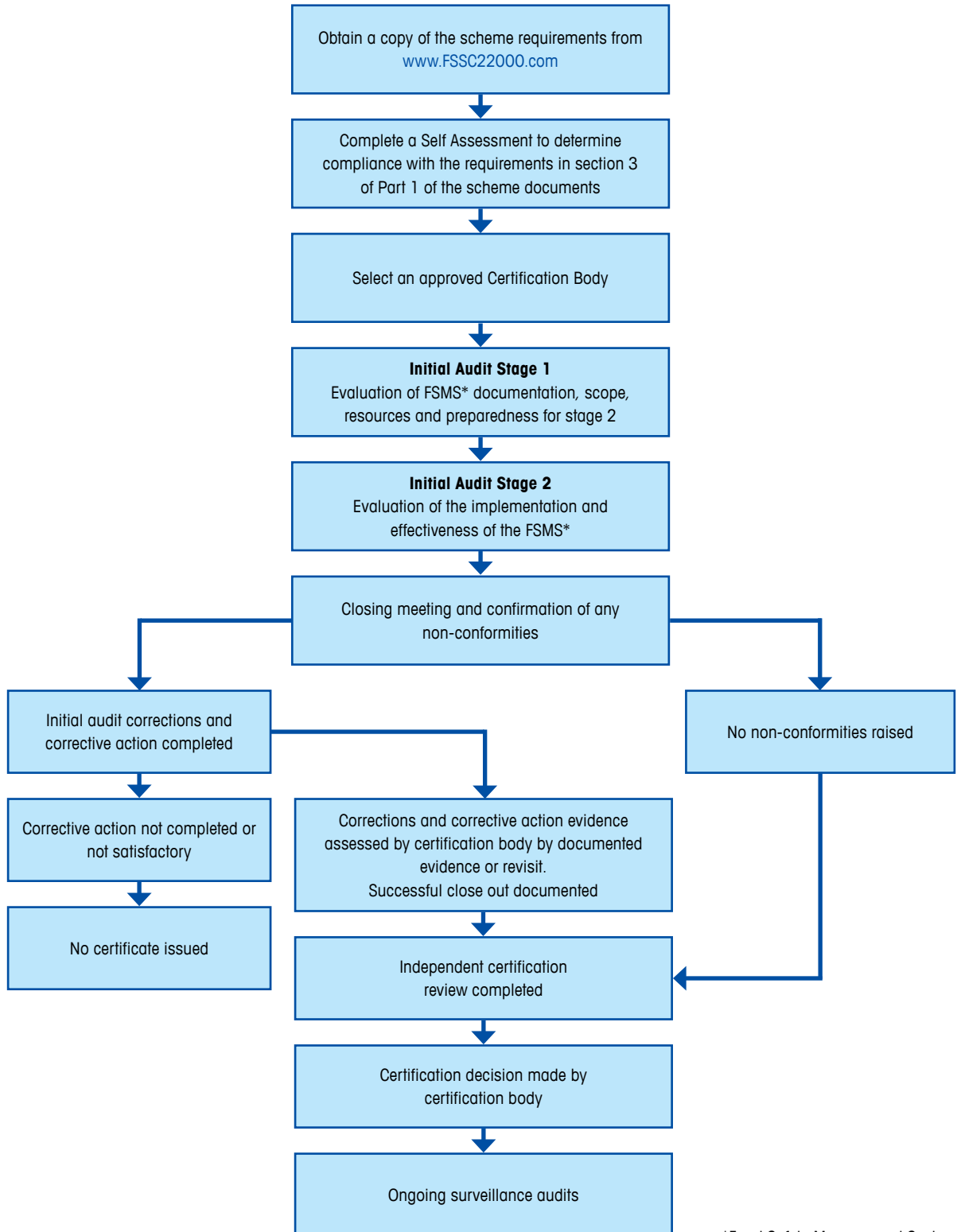
Source: COMPARING GLOBAL FOOD SAFETY INITIATIVE GFSI RECOGNIZED STANDARDS, SGS, 2011



6 Sample Audit Procedure

The following flowchart illustrates the standard procedure for obtaining FSSC 22000 certification. Other procedures may vary slightly; however this is an excellent basic representation of a certification audit.

The process can be arduous, but experts within the certifying body and industry are available to provide necessary guidance to ensure systems are compliant and safe.



*Food Safety Management System

7 Outlook

The trend towards more stringent food safety & quality regulation continues. New challenges concerning aspects of food safety & quality are created through developments such as GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), nanotechnology and the increase in international sourcing / trade of food / feed, and are expected to propel this trend forward even more forcefully.

Robert J. Parrish, Vice President Global Food, SGS Geneva – Consumer Testing Services, sees the following food safety issues deepening in the coming years:

- Organizations taking even more ownership of food safety to protect their brands
- Even tighter controls established to safeguard the food supply chain
- Traceability and integrated management programs becoming an essential – and perhaps involuntary – part of food production

With these trends, and corresponding changes in international and national laws, standards and certification processes will be subject to regular revision.

Some examples of recent legislation impacting certification processes follow.

7.1 New Chinese Food Safety Law

In February 2009, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress of the People’s Republic of China passed the “Food Safety Law of the People’s Republic of China” after five years of deliberation and review. The law became officially effective on June 1, 2009. Apart from the Food Safety Law, there are over 3,000 regulations and standards on food safety in China, which have been published by the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA), the Ministry of Health (MOH), and the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ), among others.

China’s current food safety system involves at least five departments, including health, agriculture, quality supervision, industry and commerce administration, and food and drug supervision. These departments shoulder different responsibilities for food safety; for example, quality supervision administration monitors the food production sector, but when food stuffs leave factories for sale, this is monitored by the industry and commerce administration.

7.2 U.S. Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA)

In the U.S., the Food Safety Modernization Act was signed into law by President Obama in January 2011. It shifts federal regulators’ focus from responding to contamination onto preventing it. Implementation of the new regulations is in progress and covers:

- Enhanced prevention controls
- Increased frequency of mandatory FDA inspections
- Stronger accountability for importers.

In general, both the new Chinese Food Safety Law and the FSMA:

- Strengthen monitoring / supervision powers
- Toughen safety standards
- Mandate recall of substandard products
- Subject offenders to severe sanctions

With these more stringent requirements in mind, and knowing that global oversight bodies are working to ensure that certification standards are comprehensive and widely-accepted, more and more manufacturers and suppliers will find themselves seeking certification to stay ahead of legislative changes and ensure profitability well into the future.

8 Summary

Consumers, and governments worldwide, are becoming increasingly concerned about unsafe food. Recent contamination cases (EHEC outbreak, June 2011) are published and distributed widely via electronic media, which clearly leads to reduced income for involved suppliers – and even perhaps the industry segment as a whole.

Being certified according to a GFSI-accepted standard, such as IFS, SQF, FSSC 22000 or BRC, demonstrates a company's commitment to meeting the demand that they focus on safety.

While all certifications deal with similar food safety related concerns, choosing the right certification based on a company's industry, needs and customer preference remains important, even as GFSI continues to work to create harmony among the approved scheme owners and provide a "once certified, accepted everywhere" approach.

Knowing and implementing requirements according to one of these standards provides a framework for continually improving production quality processes. This helps to protect and enhance brand reputation and ensure future profitability in a competitive global market.

9 Additional resources

- METTLER TOLEDO, Meet Global Food Safety Standards and Increase Productivity and Profitability – www.mt.com/food-regulations
- SGS - This document contains an extract from the paper "COMPARING GLOBAL FOOD SAFETY INITIATIVE (GFSI) RECOGNIZED STANDARDS" and remains the copyright of the SGS. The paper can be downloaded from SGS – www.sgs.com/comparing-gfsi-recognized-standards-information-request
- GLOBAL TRENDS IN FOOD SAFETY, Robert J. Parrish, Vice President Global Food, SGS Geneva – Consumer Testing Services – www.sgs.com/comparing-gfsi-recognized-standards-information-request
- International Featured Standards (IFS) – www.ifs-certification.com
- British Retail Consortium (BRC) – www.brcglobalstandards.com
- Safe Quality Food (SQF) Institute – www.SQFI.com
- Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) – www.mygfsi.com
- The Consumer Goods Forum – www.ciesnet.com
- Food Safety System Certification 22000; FSSC 22000 – www.fssc22000.com
- FDA Food Safety Modernization Act, FSMA – www.fda.gov/food/foodsafety/fsma/

Lined area for taking notes, consisting of 25 horizontal lines.

Grid area for calculations or drawing, consisting of a 25x25 grid of small squares.

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