

# Is It Time For A Standardized Audit?

*A standardized audit will ensure consistency in how we grade ourselves, and will clearly benefit the industry and the safety of our food supply.*

By H. Louis Cooperhouse

**A**s our industry has evolved to meet consumer needs, there have been concerns that the dramatic growth in prepared convenience foods could lead to a corresponding dramatic increase in the incidence of foodborne disease outbreaks in this country. Although America's food is among the safest in the world, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations and 5,000 deaths are due to foodborne disease in this country each year.

Highly publicized outbreaks of E. coli O157:H7, Salmonella, and Listeria have raised consumer consciousness about the risk of foodborne disease. Huge recalls in the food industry have created a demand for mitigating this risk. Industry executives are increasingly concerned.

The industry has effectively responded to mitigate this risk. With federal government support, the implementation of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) in the seafood, meat and poultry, and juice industries has refocused both industry and regulators on identifying the controls truly critical to ensure a safe food product. Recent statistics from the CDC point to a decline in foodborne illness from a number of pathogens.

In addition to adopting technologies such as irradiation of ground beef and the ultra high-pressure processing of refrigerated juices, among many new technologies, the food industry has also responded to ensuring

a safer food supply by requiring thorough audits of its suppliers. Oversight of a quality assurance program for a large national or multi-national company is an increasingly major responsibility, and vendor qualification and routine auditing is clearly a component of an effective QA program.

Over the past few years, there has been a significant increase in the amount of audits requested by retailers and foodservice operators of their suppliers and of their store operations; food manufacturers of their suppliers; and by raw material manufacturers of their suppliers. All segments of the food and packaging chain have become involved in this process, and this has truly "raised the bar" for safety in our food operations.

An effective supplier-auditing program strengthens food safety programs and assures customers of a commitment to production of a safe food product. Tens of thousands of audits occur in our country each year and are conducted by in-house quality assurance personnel, independent consultants, and third-party auditors, such as the American Institute of Baking (AIB), Silliker Labs, NSF Cook & Thurber, and ASI Food Safety Consultants.

Areas that are audited include HACCP management, administration and regulatory compliance, facilities and equipment, sanitation and hygiene, rodent and pest control, receiving and inventory control, process and product evaluation, packaging and labeling,

storage and shipping, retained and rework product control, and data storage and laboratory support. In addition, to respond to new industry needs identified over the past few years, auditing modules for allergen control and for food security have been developed by most of the third-party auditors.

Unfortunately, this proactive industry stance has resulted in quality assurance personnel who have become inundated with audits. Some individual plant locations are audited 20 times per year, as each customer may require a 1-to-2 day audit of the supplier each year, and each customer may use the same or a differing auditing individual or service.

Not only has redundancy become an issue, but not all audits are alike. In fact, they can be quite different. Generally speaking, audits conducted by third-party auditors typically utilize a better-trained and less subjective individual than those conducted by in-house quality assurance personnel. However, third-party auditors differ dramatically in their emphasis of certain elements of food safety. In addition, a third-party auditor may potentially audit the same plant twice, but have different requirements each time based on the needs expressed by the customer/client.

The National Food Processors Association (NPPA) has recognized this issue and has sought to develop a standardized program that will eliminate the duplicative audits that are currently an issue in industry. The NPPA's Supplier Audits for Food Excellence (SAFE) program was designed with the help of more than two-dozen of its member companies and utilizes trained and certified third-party auditors who are guided by a comprehensive audit checklist. Such a program has the potential to transform the industry, yet it still needs to gain acceptance by the vast array of suppliers and trade associations within our industry.

A standardized audit will ensure consistency in how we grade ourselves, and will clearly benefit the industry and the safety of our food supply. Government, industry, and trade associations are encouraged to collaborate on the adoption of such a standardized auditing program and identify the modules that are appropriate for the various constituents of our food system.

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