



More than taste



Improving food safety through inspector certification

by Cynthia Woodley, Julia E. Bradsher and Gerald Wojtala

As many as 2.2 million people die annually from foodborne and waterborne diseases, estimates the World Health Organization. Food safety is a critical, high-profile concern for global public health. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each year one in six people become sick, over 127 000 are hospitalized and around 3 000 die of foodborne illness. The annual economic cost in the US alone is about USD 77 billion.

Adding to the risk, the food supply chain has become highly globalized. As this has occurred, the number and severity of food safety incidents have risen. Protecting the supply chain and reducing the incidents of foodborne illness are, therefore, priorities for governments and industry worldwide.

Setting benchmarks

Common, measurable food safety standards not only safeguard public health, but also bring economic benefits. For example, in order to export food into the European Union, a company must comply with all standards required by the European Food Safety Authority. Those who do not have the capacity to meet basic safety standards significantly limit their ability to export food or ingredients, while putting the health of citizens in their own countries at risk.

Organizations with an interest in strengthening the food supply chain are stepping up to the challenge by introducing better safety management and auditing practices, and by forming coalitions and standards-setting bodies. Examples include ISO technical committee ISO/TC 34, *Food products*, and the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI).

Standards have also been established by various agencies and organizations such as the European Food Safety Authority, the Codex Alimentarius Commission and the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

Private-sector industry self-regulation has produced successes such as the GFSI. However, it is public-sector initiatives that generally set national and International Standards by which the ultimate authority and responsibility to ensure public health is balanced with trade.

Consistent, high-quality inspections

Inspection is a key tool used by government agencies to ensure food safety throughout the supply chain – from “farm to fork”. They inspect activities such as agricultural and meat processing; food manufacturing, packaging and transport; and point-of-sale food retail and food service.

The quality, quantity and consistency of inspections vary widely throughout the world, both nationally and by the level of governmental agency involved. To address this variability in the USA, the FDA developed the concept of an integrated food safety system. The system facilitates recognition of inspection work across all

levels of government – federal, state, local tribal and territorial.

Lack of competence among food safety inspectors can result in significant consequences for governments and society. Not only can foodborne illness incidents increase, but this may also lead to higher enforcement costs, failure to achieve policy objectives, reduced citizen trust in government, and a lower level of compliance.

Consistency and quality of inspections has the potential to improve the safety and consumer confidence along the food supply chain, facilitate increased food exports, reduce costs, improve government transparency and accountability, and strengthen the entire food safety system.

The FDA is among the regulatory agencies relying on ISO/IEC 17024.

The FDA realized that the competency of inspectors and comparability of their inspections could be increased through training and certification. Organized efforts are, therefore, underway to train and certify inspectors and other food protection officials. The International Food Protection Training Institute has developed and implemented a career-spanning, training curriculum framework. It aligns competencies and provides knowledge and skills for professionals using a common body of knowledge.

Certifying inspectors

Personnel certification is a way of verifying that workers are competent to



perform their jobs. ISO/IEC 17024:2012, *Conformity Assessment – General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons*, can help ensure the qualifications and competence of food safety inspectors.

The FDA is among the regulatory agencies developing certification programs for inspectors according to ISO/IEC 17024. The Administration is developing personnel certifications including manufactured food inspector, manufactured feed inspector, seafood inspector, low-acid canned foods inspector, produce inspector, retail food inspector, and imported foods inspector.

In accordance with ISO/IEC 17024, these personnel certifications involve conducting a job analysis to identify necessary tasks. The certification programmes also investigate the candidate's required knowledge, skills and attributes with an exam.

By requiring that all recognized work be performed by certified officials, the FDA is ensuring the competence of food safety inspectors. In order to account for any differences that may occur (for example,

if federal regulations differ from state regulations), job/task analyses are being validated at different government levels for inclusion in the training and certification system.

The experience of the FDA can be used as an international model. New requirements of the US Food Safety Modernization Act call for building international food safety capacity in the public and private sectors.

Food safety efforts by the World Bank and the World Health Organization recognize the value of a standards-based approach to training and certification to assure sustainability and measurability of outcomes.

The FDA has made great strides in establishing training and certification processes for food safety inspectors. Quality and consistency will be enhanced by the establishment of a new ISO standard for assessing the quality and content of food safety training.

As more governments and regulatory bodies develop food safety inspector certification programmes, the public can be increasingly confident in their competence. ■

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