

Single food standard gets closer as US food giants back global initiative

By Rick Pendrous

- Published: 18 February, 2008

Fast food giant McDonalds could be the next big US company to put its backing behind the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) following news last week that retailer Wal-Mart would require its suppliers to be certified to GFSI standards, which other major retailers use to certify their own-label suppliers.

Reliable sources at a food safety conference organised last week by CIES, the Food Business Forum, in Amsterdam, reported increasing interest being shown in GFSI by the very powerful US National Restaurant Association. They also revealed that a senior McDonalds food safety specialist looked set to join the GFSI technical committee, which could be a precursor to it embracing GFSI.

In the past, McDonalds Europe had said it would be following the ISO 22000 international food safety standard, with which the individual standards covered by the GFSI umbrella are also attempting to "bridge the gap". GFSI includes the British Retail Consortium (BRC) standard, the US Safe Quality Food (SQF) standard, Dutch HACCP (hazard analysis critical control points), and the International Food Standard (IFS).

GFSI chairman Roland Vaxelaire, quality, responsibility and risk management director for French retailer Carrefour, pointed to the significant progress made by GFSI over the past year with further convergence between standards and more organisations coming on board. Vaxelaire also reported on "engagement" with bodies such as the Australian-based International Accreditation Forum and European Accreditation. However, one source suggested the backing for GFSI by some retailers – notably Metro – was not as wholehearted as was being suggested.

GFSI was launched by CIES in 2000 with the backing of major retail chief executives as a way of ensuring confidence in food safety while reducing duplication of audits on suppliers. The aim of GFSI has been to bring about convergence between different standards.

Also at the conference last week, IFS and SQF announced their future collaboration in areas such as auditor qualifications, selection of accreditation and certification bodies and the connection between databases. However, the actual standards will not be affected and both IFS and SQF will continue to provide global services for food safety certification worldwide. SQF is promoted by the US Food Marketing Institute. At the same time, SQF announced closer collaboration with GlobalGap, the global partnership for good agricultural practice.

The harmonisation of the services of IFS and SQF is yet another step towards a single global standard and a significant boost for GFSI.

IFS is the food safety standard of the German, French, Italian, Austrian, Swiss and Spanish retailers with currently more than 8,500 certifications a year. SQF is the food safety standard provided by the US Food Marketing Institute with over 8,000 certifications per year. Following the Wal-Mart announcement and growing interest from the US government, third-party certification is set to rocket in the US, which has so far lagged behind other parts of the world in this approach.

SQF Institute executive director Paul Ryan expressed considerable excitement at the way SQF was taking off in the US, particularly as retailers source more produce from around the globe. "We are getting inundated with lots of inquiries about SQF," said Ryan. He expected SQF certifications to reach 12,000 by the end of 2008.

SQF is developing a new web site and is working closely with Muddy Boots Quickfire software for data collection and entry and Agentrics for an on-line database to simplify use of the standard by suppliers, buyers and certifiers. This is expected to be ready by the end of July. "We will be moving away from paper audits and to electronic collection across the board," said Ryan.