

GFSI: “Safe food for consumers everywhere”

A year of promise lies ahead for the food industry’s flagship technical and quality alliance.

By Chris Anstey www.anstey-ltd.com

As the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) enters its 15th year, the members of its Board will be looking forward with some optimism to what promises to be an important and significant period. Over the next 12 months, their well-known benchmarking process for food safety management systems will complete its revision into a seventh version. Their groundbreaking Global Markets Programme for small and less developed businesses will be starting its fourth year with its first revision. There will also be a giant step forward in their work for auditors. After five years of multi stakeholder cooperative work by volunteer experts from supportive organisations, their Global Food Safety Auditor Foundation will be founded to deliver the long stated aim to formalise the profession of food safety auditors. Of further significance, their 14th Global Food Safety Conference will be held in the Asia-Pacific region for the very first time at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, Malaysia from March 4-5.

What is the impact of GFSI?

A core GFSI objective is to reduce food safety risks by delivering equivalence and convergence between effective food safety management systems. Another objective is to manage cost in the global food system by eliminating redundancy and improving operational efficiency. These aren’t easy things to measure. In February 2014 the results of the GFSI Efficacy Study were published, a global online survey with 834 respondents from 15,000 manufacturers across 21 countries and 10 languages. It showed that that certification to a GFSI recognised scheme does make food safety management systems more effective. The respondents said that their ability to produce safe food in compliance with regulations has been enhanced. However, the research also showed that short-term costs of implementing GFSI recognised schemes exist and that some of the efficiencies hoped for through the elimination of multiple audits have not been realised.

GFSI's new Director. Her first interview.

In November 2014, The Consumer Goods Forum, who founded the GFSI in May 2000, announced the appointment of their new Director. Previously holding a series of senior roles with global retailer Carrefour, Véronique Discours-Buhot joined the team with a view to continuing to drive the work on harmonisation for food safety standards while helping to make sure that the right business environment is in place to support companies that are involved in GFSI to continue their international expansion.

Question: When did you first become aware of GFSI?

Véronique: I knew about it right at the beginning in 2000. I had just started as Quality Director at Champion Supermarkets, which was a part of the Carrefour Group. My responsibilities included food safety for our private label and my new colleagues were already involved in the first meetings that were setting up GFSI. The question of what to do about the proliferation of standards was a big issue at the time for all retailers and it was quickly agreed that one single standard would never be realistic. Instead, it was decided that the GFSI approach would be to endorse standards using a benchmark model. The original vision was "Once certified, accepted everywhere." The idea was to determine equivalency between food safety schemes, whilst leaving flexibility and choice in the marketplace. I believe that the success of that approach can now be clearly seen.

Question: What is the evidence of this success?

Véronique: First of all, I see an extraordinary growth of the partnership. Although the retailers did get it started, it has truly become a shared effort with the brand manufacturers and foodservice companies. If you look at the composition of the GFSI Board, you will see senior people from all of the leading food companies. Secondly, although it did start in Europe, it has now become global. As recently as 2010, we held our first conference in the USA and have since been back twice. Our current Chairman, Cenk Gurol, is from the Japanese retailer, Aeon. Also, we will be holding the 2015 conference for the first time ever in the Asian-Pacific region, in Kuala Lumpur.

Question: During the first three months of your new job, what has surprised you?

Véronique: *“I was one of the founders of another CGF initiative, the Global Social Compliance Programme and played an active role in the CGF ‘Sustainability Pillar’. I was expecting that GFSI would be quite similar. What has surprised me is the breadth of their activity which has now gone way beyond the original benchmarking effort. Thanks to their unique global neutral platform, GFSI has had the industry support to innovate in some particularly challenging areas that have held back business from developing and growing internationally. For example, auditor competence may not sound like a business critical issue. In fact, the entire food sector depends on these people who do a tough job in what can be a challenging situation. Food companies rely on their expertise, independence and judgement. Before GFSI started its auditor work, there had never been a joint food sector approach to help these special people achieve their true potential within a genuine profession.”*

Question: How credible are these third party certification schemes?

Véronique: *“Accredited certification, as recognised by GFSI, doesn’t guarantee food safety nor prevent food safety incidents. It provides a proven framework of checks and balances that significantly improves the rigour of the audit process and reduces the risk of food safety failures. There is always the human element that can have a negative impact on credibility but it is worth looking at the figures. Over 120,000 factories and 200,000 farms are now certified to one of the ten schemes that are recognised by GFSI. In every instance, the achievement of that certification has come from a significant investment in quality management systems, in training people and in the implementation of best practice. For those that have been certified for some time, they have also experienced the bar being raised every couple of years. Our own GFSI Guidance Document is now being revised into a seventh version and we tend to follow the certification schemes rather than to lead them. There is a cycle of continuous improvement and it is driven by companies who find that certification works for them. For me, the evidence for the credibility of the schemes is the fact that so many companies are making this investment. There is a strong trend with the outcome that certification is increasingly becoming the food sector’s passport to market access. We talk about this a lot in our meetings and the bottom line is that certification is*

good for business because food safety is good for business. Take the whole process seriously and you will reduce your business risk.”

Question: Looking forward, do you think that all food factories will need to be certified?

Véronique: “The trend is so strongly supported by the major food companies, retailers, foodservice and brand manufacturers, that I can say that soon any factory that is involved in exporting will need to be certified. In addition, for local markets, any factory of significant size will find that certification will make them more disciplined, more efficient and more profitable. Certified companies will have the framework for a legal defence and their food safety management system will be structured to continuously improve to internationally accepted standards. It makes complete sense for larger companies and I think it is already happening.

However, in the food industry, there are far more small and less developed businesses than large companies. When I started this job I hadn’t realised that GFSI had also considered their needs. For them, certification would be unattainable. Because of their size, lack of technical expertise, economic resources or the nature of their work such businesses find it difficult to get started with food safety. The GFSI Global Markets Programme is a voluntary, free access system designed as an unaccredited, non-certification assessment process. It considers both primary production in the field and manufacturing in the factory and concentrates on building capacity. We launched this in 2011 and will already be publishing the first revision of our manufacturing checklist in April 2015. It has aroused a lot of interest, from international organisations, governments and companies. We describe it as ‘The pathway to market access and certification.’ I can tell you that it is a very exciting development for everyone involved in GFSI.”

Question: What are you most looking forward to in your new job?

Véronique: “That’s easy! It’s meeting the people! At the heart of GFSI is an incredible network that is both professional and personal. Even after just three months I have made great new contacts with some amazing people. Around the world in multiple cultures, I am meeting chief executives, directors, professors, regulators, auditors, quality managers, graduates, interns and students. The world of food safety professionals and their ways of

working has become global, just like food supply chains and my job is going to put me at the very centre. I consider myself very fortunate indeed.”

The future for GFSI

In the last 15 years, GFSI has developed from those roots planted by some of the world's biggest retailers to become a global movement for change. From benchmarking to the Global Markets Programme it has pioneered a new collaborative approach to food safety that is already having a profound effect on all food production.

Predictions for its future impact must include increased recognition by companies and regulators, a shift towards true professional status for auditors and a transformation of food safety systems for small and less developed companies everywhere.

The neutral platform: a priceless network

One of the GFSI objectives is to provide a unique international stakeholder platform for collaboration, knowledge exchange and networking.

Since 2001, CGF has welcomed delegates from all over the world to the **Global Food Safety Conference**. The venue for the annual event has alternated between Europe and the USA but in March 2015 it will be held in Malaysia. The conference has established itself at the centre of the world food industry's policy work on food safety. The GFSI Board and Technical Working Groups take the opportunity to hold their meetings. The GFSI Stakeholder Group is convened on the morning before the conference begins. Many of the participating companies also convene their own team meetings.