



## Third-party audits & food safety



The most significant food safety development in the last decade has occurred outside public law — the extraordinary growth in the role of private-sector traceability systems characterized by third-party audits.

Driven by the heightened public awareness of foodborne illness due to the widespread publicity of major recalls, the damage such recalls have done to major brand names, large foodborne illness lawsuits, and the unprecedented globalization of the food supply, large processors and retailers are requiring their suppliers to undergo regular inspections by third-party auditors. Producers, ingredient suppliers and processors must no longer simply have their own quality systems and meet government regulations; now they have to sign onerous supplier warranty agreements and open up their businesses to multiple audits. But these systems and their audit schemes have gone through some significant growing pains that have served to seriously undermine their credibility.

In 2006, 199 people were seriously sickened and at least three died from eating bagged spinach produced by a company that had just passed an audit. In 2009 Peanut Corporation of America (PCA) was linked to a huge *salmonella* recall that implicated 350 companies and more than 3,900 products, with 691 consumers sick and nine dead. PCA had just received a “Superior” rating from the most commonly used auditor in the U.S. This past summer it was reported that 25 people died from eating cantaloupe from a farm that had just received an audit score of 96 out of 100.

Critics emphasize that auditors have a conflict of interest as they are paid by the companies they audit. Because schemes are not standardized, companies have to endure multiple audits from various buyers, so they just choose the cheapest auditor who will give them advance notice and help them get a passing grade. Public sector unions and consumer groups accuse these systems of being the “privatization of food safety.” The former assistant commissioner for food safety at the Food and Drug Administration

has been dismissive of these systems as being merely “a business strategy, not a public health strategy.”

Part of the problem seems to be confusion about the role of the auditor. For example, when asked to explain how PCA could pass with such poor sanitation, the auditor replied that the audit was done to provide “guidance and education for improvement.” This is not the function of third-party audits, as David Rideout, Canadian food safety expert, SQF auditor and trainer, explains: “Third-party auditors have to identify objective evidence of compliance or non-compliance and understand that they are not doing second-party audits. My job is not to provide guidance and advice to the company; if I do, my manager rejects my audit, as SQF auditors must draw a clear line between third-party (non-consultative) audits and providing advice to the company, which is the role of second-party audits.”

The largest international effort to bring greater rigour and standardization to third-party audit systems is the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI). Started 10 years ago by eight major European food retailers, GFSI has now spread to North America. And with its adoption by large retailers such as Costco and Walmart many see the trend as irreversible. But only with improved training, more rigorous certification and systems that audit the auditors can third-party audits regain the public’s confidence. And, as food safety expert Doug Powell of Kansas State has said, “Third-party audits are only one performance indicator and need to be supplemented with microbial testing, second-party audits of suppliers, and the in-house capacity to meaningfully assess the results of audits and inspections.” ■

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