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Leveling Up With Certification

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Customer requirements

In addition to regulatory audits, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) audit, it may be necessary for your operation to participate in third-

party food safety certification to sell your products to your targeted customers. If you're selling your products directly to consumers, such as through a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program or farmers market, additional certification is typically not necessary unless you just want to give buyers extra assurance regarding your food safety practices. However, the financial return from this isn't likely to offset the additional cost to your operation.

If you plan to sell your products to major retailers such as Walmart, Aldi, Costco or Whole Foods, you'll likely need to obtain a GFSI-benchmarked 3rd party food safety certification. This refers to a standard that meets the requirements of the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI). In the United States, the main standards that offer this for "primary production," aka growing/agricultural, include SQF (Safe Quality Food), PrimusGFS and GLOBALG.A.P.

Certification under these standards includes structured annual audits to ensure ongoing compliance and continuous improvement, and also opens global access to markets (i.e., exports) with a widely accepted standard. Before pursuing any type of certification, always check with your buyer to ensure that you fully understand their supplier requirements.

Operational fit

Which certification scheme you choose should be guided by your operation type.

Basic Indoor Growing

- Indoor growing and harvesting of fresh produce and sprouted seed crops is covered by SQF's Food Safety Code 2. This includes Modules 2 (SQF Food Safety Code for Plant Production) and 18 (Good Agricultural Practices for Indoor Farming of Plant Products).

- PrimusGFS Module 3 covers GAPs (Good Agricultural Practices) for indoor growing activities of plants within the food industry. PrimusGFS Module 1 is also required to assess the Food Safety Management System (FSMS) across all production areas. Additionally, Module 4 Harvest Crew is needed for all harvesting activities, whether manual or mechanical. PrimusGFS also offers an optional Module 9 Integrated Pest Management (IPM), which some retailers are beginning to prioritize.
- GLOBALG.A.P. offers two GFSI-benchmarked solutions for indoor growers. Harmonized Produce Safety Standard (HPSS) addresses only food safety for fruit and vegetable producers who supply the U.S. market. Integrated Farm Assurance (IFA) addresses food safety; environment; workers' health, safety and welfare; production processes and traceability. IFA also meets Walmart's IPM requirements.

Packhouse Activities

- SQF FSC 4 covers fresh produce, grain and nut packhouse operations. If these activities are conducted in combination with growing operations, Module 10 (Good Operating Practices for Pre-Processing of Plant Products) should be added to the other modules.
- Packhouse operations where commodities are sorted and/or sized and may be minimally trimmed/washed/treated and packed, require PrimusGFS Packinghouse certification with Module 5 GMP (Good Manufacturing Processes) and Module 6 HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points). PrimusGFS Cooling & Cold Storage certification is adequate for facilities that not only receive and store finished goods, but perform pre-cooling techniques and/or cooling activities without packing, again with Modules 5 and 6. PrimusGFS Storage and Distribution certification applies to the storage and transport of perishable or non-perishable food, feed or packaging (no labelling activities), also with Modules 5 and 6. These three types of operations can be certified independently (including the mandatory Module 1 FSMS) or in combination with Indoor Ag and/or Harvest Crew certifications. Module 7 Preventive Controls is optional for both such operations, but is required by some retailers like Costco.
- Both GLOBALG.A.P. IFA and HPSS can cover post-harvest activities that are pre-processing when combined with the farming operation. However, stand-alone packhouses would require Produce Handling Assurance (PHA) certification.

Processing

- If your operation progresses into processing and offers final products, such as canned sauces, fruit juices or bagged salads, additional SQF FSCs would be needed. FSC 14 covers bagged salads and fruit juices, whereas FSC 15 covers canning. These fall under the Food Manufacturing code and require Module 2 (SQF Food Safety Code: Food Manufacturing) and Module 11 (Good Manufacturing Practices for Processing Food Products).
- PrimusGFS offers Processing certification for facilities producing perishable food from plant products or ambient-stable products. This certification requires Modules 1, 5, 6 and optional Module 7, in combination with Indoor Ag or independently.
- GLOBALG.A.P. does not certify processing activities. However, it does offer Chain of Custody (CoC) certification, which helps to ensure that any product sold with a GLOBALG.A.P. claim is truly sourced

from a GLOBALG.A.P. IFA-certified production process. CoC does not directly address food safety.

Preference

Which third party certification scheme you select will also be influenced by your personal preference. Factors such as how prescriptive you want the scheme to be, how you want to craft your food safety plan and how you want to maintain your records may influence which scheme is the best fit. Finding the requirements that align best with your day-to-day operations will increase your success in adopting that program.

Certification Bodies (CBs) are the organizations that carry out the aspects of the various schemes, coordinate your audit activities and oversee the issuance of certification. CBs can be a valuable source of information as you determine the certification that best fits your operation. **IG**

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