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Story published: Fri 3 Dec 04

Are you assured?

As fruit and vegetables play an increasingly high profile role in today's diets, it is incumbent on the industry to ensure its products are safe and of high quality when they reach the final consumer. Anabella de Sousa and Elspeth Waters review quality assurance programmes in Europe, Africa, Chile and the UK and the impact they are having across the sector.



The UK example

The British Retail Consortium (BRC) has announced plans to publish a new version of the globally recognised BRC Food Standard on December 31, to be implemented on June 1 next year.

The BRC Food Standard, used by certification bodies in 23 countries across four continents, is revised every two years to ensure continuing compliance with best industry practice.

The latest revisions, based on extensive consultation with key stakeholders across the industry, reflect changes in legislation including traceability, product segregation and the process by which product integrity is managed through the supply chain. "Most large UK retailers will require their supplier to have gained certification to the appropriate BRC Global Standard," says BRC head of technical services, Kevin Swoffer. "So we are pleased to now offer the revised Food Standard that reflects the changing industry, and clearly focuses on the need to establish the highest standards across the food chain."

CMi Certification is a leading UK certification body for the food sector and is the principal certifier for the Assured Produce Scheme, EurepGAP and Tesco Nature's Choice. The fresh produce sector accounts for more than 30 per cent of its business. "It is an area that has grown quite rapidly," says managing director, David Richardson.

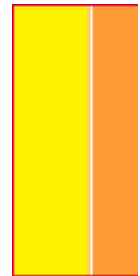
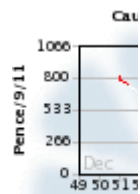
"There is an increasing demand for existing standard certification like EurepGAP at the grower level and BRC at the produce packhouse level. Newer standards like Tesco Nature's Choice are also fuelling demand."

CMi is the sole administrator for the worldwide roll-out of Tesco Nature's Choice, which was originally introduced in Spain and the UK but has since expanded to France, Germany and other European countries. The company is now training other certification bodies to work alongside it.

CMi insists it continually trains its assessors to ensure it can deliver a consistent and high quality service especially since competition in the EurepGAP market has led to an influx of small national certification bodies, which is causing some concern with the auditing standards.

Richardson says CMi's success in the produce sector is based on its ability to deliver all of its services out of one division, albeit from various international locations. He says: "Owing to the increased retailer demand for certification, we are now dominant in all the major production countries – including the UK, Spain, the Netherlands, Greece and Italy.

CMi is also the biggest certifier of LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming), which promotes integrated farming management system (IFM) principles, demonstrating how IFM can produce affordable food while conserving the environment. LEAF is a UK organisation and is part of a European wide movement – the European Initiative for

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Sustainable Agriculture (EISA).

The LEAF marque scheme is a certification standard providing the environmental equivalent of crop and livestock assurance schemes. Many of the major supermarkets are keen to support LEAF farmers and display the LEAF logo, to indicate high environmental standards of food production.

Waitrose is a key LEAF supporter and requires its farmers to be audited by the organisation to show that the farm is encouraging biodiversity and minimising any negative impacts of farming on the environment.

Richardson says LEAF is still a small-scale operation, but a widespread increase in concern over environmental and sustainability issues and increased retail activity has helped to promote it recently.

CMi is the sole UK certifier for the International Food Standard (IFS), the German equivalent of the BRC global standard for food. In order to deliver this standard CMi is developing an increasing network of offices overseas and has established a base outside Johannesburg, in South Africa, as well as a network of offices in India, Australia and Chile, which Richardson considers the most important contributor of fresh produce to the UK.

The Latin American approach

As an exporting country, Chile is focused heavily on the development of good agricultural practices, which proved the catalyst for ChileGAP, launched in September this year.

The programme was initiated in 1999 to establish a framework, based on the EurepGAP programme, for fresh products to meet standards imposed by demanding international markets. The ChileGAP programme aims to safeguard fresh produce exports, ensure fruit quality, and address issues consumers are most concerned about – food safety, health and working conditions, and the environment.

The Chilean minister of agriculture, Jaime Campos, says: "It is needed to face free trade conventions agreed by Chile with the main fruit and vegetable market." ChileGAP has been recognised by EurepGAP incorporating both global GAP requirements and the scope for all produce grown in Chile.

ChileGAP was developed by Fundación para el Desarrollo Frutícola as a requirement of the Chilean Fruit Exporters Industry, the Exporters Association (Asoex). Ronald Bown, Asoex president, says: "ChileGAP is the answer of the Chilean fresh produce industry to the food safety, social and environmental demands from the market. This programme is a complement to the productive success recently reached with the export of two million boxes of fresh fruit this season. From now Chilean exporters needing to certificate their products can demonstrate a superior level because ChileGAP integrates the European requirements with the food safety issues especially asked for by the US." Currently, only Certificador Demo has been accredited as a certifier for the ChileGAP scheme.

EFSIS Spain has been active in South America working in Ecuador with banana growers, multinationals and Chilean companies.

The company's managing director, Nazario Muñoz, supports the formation of ChileGAP. "In principal, the scheme is benchmarked to EurepGAP, and if set up properly, should raise the level of the Chilean sector, as well as be suited to meet the local conditions and requirements needed to guarantee consistency, which is important," he says. In its work in South America, EFSIS Spain carries out local inspections to allow growers and co-ops better access to European export markets.

The group was recently appointed as an inspector for Tesco's Nature's Choice standard. "We already have a lot of work in fresh produce and it is growing steadily," he says. "Now with Nature's Choice, to go with EurepGAP, BRC, Assured Fresh Produce and IFS, we offer a one-stop shop to fresh produce producers and packers. We have already agreed inspections with a number of clients for the Tesco standard and we are expecting many more."

On the Continent

Muñoz says Spanish fresh produce co-ops and companies want combined inspections nowadays and see certification as a way of adding value and recognition from their clients. An increasing amount of work is coming into EFSIS under the packaging standard.

"There is considerable interest among packaging specialists in Spain in the BRC/IOP standard, and we are the recognised experts," says Muñoz. However, he says that one area that needs further attention in Spain is training for growers and co-ops to better understand the different systems. "Many of the problems that arise with schemes are based on the lack of understanding by the industry participants, especially newcomers to certification. EurepGAP is more specific in its guidelines while BRC is a broader scheme. EFSIS Spain has launched a range of training schemes for Spain and other Spanish speaking countries to encourage training.

"The courses we've already completed on EFSIS and BRC standards have been a huge success," says Muñoz. "There is great demand for our expertise in standards as more companies try to become internationally competitive. At the same time we show these companies that we are the people to come to for the answers to all their inspection and certification needs." In addition to the EFSIS and BRC courses, there are EurepGAP, HACCP and IFS training sessions.

"With more than 340 million native Spanish speakers in the world we have a huge potential market," he says. "There are already signs that these courses are going to be very popular and successful."

Attitude of accession

For Polish exporter, Nawrot, the prospect of entering the EU with easier access to the new markets pushed the company to adjust to European and world quality standards.

In 2003 Nawrot became ISO and HACCP certified for the distribution of fresh mushrooms, fruit and asparagus, and is introducing BRC and IFS systems. The company had decided to introduce ISO and HACCP to obtain the standards before Poland joined the EU.

"The growing competition in the fresh produce market pushed us to introduce the quality schemes before most Polish companies even considered them," says president, Ireneusz Nawrot. "We realised we had to look forward to approach western wholesalers and retailers to get a positive response. Quality certificates open the door to these markets. They present us as an exporter who provides safe and high quality produce, packaging and delivery but most of all as a reliable and credible partner, which is very important when it comes to Polish companies because we generally do not enjoy a very favourable image."

Prior to EU accession, Polish local governments or consumer organisations paid little attention to global standards of hygiene, safety and traceability, and small to medium-sized companies were not even familiar with global quality and safety standards and procedures. However, over the last three years accredited certification bodies mushroomed as the need to be certified augmented.

Today, ISO and HACCP are the basic requirements when approaching EU importers, but Nawrot went a step further by working towards BRC and IFS accreditation since January this year. "As we entered the UK market and had offers from supermarket chains, the key factor that would determine our success was BRC accreditation, which will be completed in February 2005," says Jakub liwa, who is responsible for audits. "The basis for BRC is ISO and HACCP so it was easier for us to go through the procedure.

As we are mainly exporters and distributors of fresh produce, we needed to convince our clients that, post production, the highest standards are maintained."

Paying more attention to accreditation and quality assurance schemes has resulted in a change in the Polish sector's attitude, especially following new EU opportunities and improved access to modern trends in the management. In effect, the whole structure of Nawrot changed with regular internal audits and better-trained staff at suppliers, supervised by one of the accredited certification bodies. In order to receive BRC, Nawrot re-built and modernised its store and packhouse, cool rooms, offices and canteen.

Nawrot says: "The efficiency of the company results from good organisation of departments and responsibilities, which facilitates the flow of goods. BRC and IFS schemes are more complex and cover produce traceability, staff management and facility conditions. BRC says more about our professionalism and ability to be a bigger player. Even if we did not deal with the UK market, we would have introduced it as it improves the whole working and management process."

So far in Africa

The Horticulture Crops Development Authority (HCDA) is the main regulatory agency overseeing horticulture in Kenya and has been instrumental in driving EurepGAP compliance.

"We see EurepGAP as an opportunity and not a threat for the Kenyan horticultural sector," says Dr Wilson Songa, new managing director of HCDA. "The level of commitment and partnership of the Kenyan public and private sectors to ensure EurepGAP certification of smallholders will further increase Kenya's competitive position in the marketplace. It will better prepare us to access new markets in Africa, Asia and the US, which are already being targeted by some of our exporters."

The Kenyan horticultural export sector is made up of more than 50 large-scale modern farms equipped with specialist packhouses, and supplemented by more than 50,000 small and medium-scale outgrowers of products such as fine beans, mange tout, Asian vegetables, avocado, passion fruit and mango.

The large farms are all EurepGAP certified, and are making good progress in moving their outgrowers towards compliance. The majority of Kenyan fresh fruit and vegetable exports are destined for the EU, with annual exports at more than \$300 million today. "Kenya is unique among most supplying countries in that smallholders account for more than 50 per cent of total supply," says Dr Stephen New, director of the Horticultural Development Centre (HDC). "The sector provides income to more than 100,000 farmers and employees, who might otherwise be below the poverty level. Initially, many people in the industry saw EurepGAP and new EU traceability and MRL regulations as a threat to the livelihoods of many of these small farmers. However, the revised version of EurepGAP makes specific provision for farmer associations, essential for Kenya, and we now see it as an opportunity to increase our market share and to further contribute to reducing rural poverty."

Over the last two years, EurepGAP training programmes, led by the ministry of agriculture and the HCDA, have reached all the smallholders producing horticultural crops for the EU market. The USAID-financed HDC has brought additional resources to help move the programme from a focus on training to the main objective of out-grower certification. This will involve an industry-wide, public-private sector partnership of individual exporters, the Fresh Produce Exporters Association of Kenya (FPEAK), the ministry of agriculture, HCDA, donor programs, local certification agencies and private-sector service firms.

In May, the HDC began testing models for EurepGAP certification of outgrowers with various major exporters. The first wave of growers achieved certification in November, sharing the results with the industry to formulate a nationwide methodology for smallholder certification activities. Developing lower-cost alternatives is one of the goals of HDC partnerships with exporters. "We estimated the initial certification cost at \$25-\$30 million," says New. "While this may seem staggering, it is less so when placed in context with total annual export earnings."

"We estimate that Kenyan fresh horticultural exports will increase by more than this amount in 2004 alone, and sector-wide EurepGAP compliance will result in continued strong growth for both existing and new products."

Donor support will be required to increase the substantial financial support given by exporters to help many outgrowers with initial compliance costs. Donors involved in the sector are now coordinating activities and assessing required funding contributions and the sophistication of the Kenyan horticultural industry compared to other developing countries is seen as a real competitive advantage.

Three accredited certification agencies are now present in Kenya, including Africert, the first Kenyan-owned company to receive EurepGAP accreditation. Production and extension staff of the major exporters buying from smallholders is also trained in

EurepGAP requirements, and is further complemented by a growing specialised service sector that has developed to implement training programmes in horticulture. These private sector firms are working together with government and donor program extension staff to enable the certification of over 10,000 smallholders over the next two years, an ambitious goal but one that most participants believe will be achieved.

“The exporters are determined to make this happen,” says Hasit Shah, managing director of SUNRIPE, a major grower and exporter, and chairman of FPEAK. “It not only benefits us and EU consumers, but it is the right thing to do for Kenyan small farmers and for the country as a whole. We see our partnerships with small farmers expanding, not contracting, under EurepGAP”.

FPEAK is benchmarking its revised code of practice to EurepGAP protocols with EU-PIP support, and after rolling it out in Kenya, will introduce it regionally. FPEAK and HDC are currently looking at ways to promote the contribution of Kenya’s small farmers to supplying EU consumers with high quality fresh produce. “European supermarkets are supportive of this,” says New. “And a recent study by the ethical trade initiative in Kenya confirmed the positive impact of horticulture in rural communities.

As large corporate farms are marginalising small farmers in much of the world, Kenya stands to gain by taking the opposite approach of using the competitive advantages of its highly skilled smallholders. These EurepGAP certification activities are just one of the many initiatives to introduce new technologies and improved production practices to smallholders nationwide.”

In accordance with EU legislation, article 18 of EC178/2002, a large-scale revision of food safety requirements for EU imports will come into force in South Africa on January 1, 2006. According to Gerrit Bruwer, executive of customised services for Perishable Products Export Control Board (PPECB), South African growers/packhouses have felt a strong push from European retailers to comply with customer requirements such as accreditation from EurepGAP, BRC, HACCP and Nature’s Choice.

Figures from June 2004 indicated that 1,917 South African growers have been certified for EurepGAP – the third largest after Spain and UK and the second largest after the UK in terms of area. Bruwer says: “This is an indication of the commitment of South African growers and exporters to comply with international standards and compete on the global market.”

“The South African Department of Agriculture (DoA) has taken a proactive approach by introducing ‘The official export food safety control system for regulated products of plant origin’, which will be implemented on March 1, 2005. The product scope is all fruit and vegetables – whether fresh, frozen, canned or dried – intended for all export markets, not only the EU.”

All products requiring an export certificate are included in the system.

“Good agricultural practices are required for primary production, good hygiene for packhouses on farms, HACCP principles for packhouses off farms, good manufacturing practices for processing plants and good distribution practices for all areas of transportation,” says Bruwer. “The principles of HACCP are included in all the segments of the supply chain, where any (possible) hazard to the safety of food, has been identified. The PPECB has been assigned to ensure that food business operators (FBOs) are in compliance with local and EU legislation. The development of checklists to be audited by PPECB at each stage of the supply chain, to ensure compliance, is currently in its final stages.”

The PPECB hosts and updates the database on FBOs and audits them against the requirements of the South African food safety legislation. The updating of data is based on a code generator that allows controlled input by users. A number of codes were standardised in October this year following requests from the main fruit industries.

After January 2006, FBOs will complete self-assessments to achieve compliance with PPECB auditing.

[Return to list](#)

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