

Improving standards of food safety through accreditation

For consumers around the world, access to safe and nutritious food and water are essential requirements for maintaining health and well-being. Accredited conformity assessment plays a pivotal role in improving the contamination control, quality and safety of the world's food.

by The Food Sector
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In April 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO), World Trade Organization (WTO) and Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) together estimated that nearly 600 million people fall ill with foodborne diseases every year.

Food safety was the theme of the 2020 World Accreditation Day organised by IAF and ILAC.



Of those contracting foodborne diseases some 420,000 die prematurely, with 30% being children under five years old. Accreditation aims to reduce the number of these incidents by driving up the safety performance of all organisations in the food chain.

UKAS accredits a range of laboratories, certification and inspection bodies, proficiency testing and reference material providers working within the food industry. From chemical and microbiological tests of food and packaging, to certification audits of feed and handling sites, to the inspection of farms and slaughterhouses, all aspects of the food supply chain from farm to fork can be accredited.

UKAS accreditation of these activities ensures that consumers, suppliers, purchasers and specifiers can have confidence in the safety of the goods and services they receive, and most importantly, be assured these products are safe for consumption.

Facilitating international trade

In addition to being essential for both human development and nutritional security, food safety is an important part of international trade. Food production is an increasingly interwoven international process, with ingredients and products being imported and supplied to all parts of the world.

The WTO estimates that the global trade of food is now worth \$1.5 trillion a year, having expanded threefold over the last 20 years.

Accredited standards play an important role in reducing technical barriers to trade by providing proof of conformity and helping producers gain acceptance for their foods in international markets.

For example, both primal cuts and manufactured beef can now be exported from the UK to Canada as it is subject to UKAS accredited microbiological testing, which meets the standards required by Canadian authorities.

UKAS is a signatory to the International Accreditation Forum's (IAF) Multilateral Recognition Agreement (MLA). As a result, UKAS accredited certification activity is

recognised as being equivalent to national accreditation arrangements in over 90 different economies across the world. This has many benefits for both food certification bodies and their customers that work internationally.

Kiwa Agri Food is a UKAS accredited certification body, specialising in product certification for the farm, animal feed and food sectors.

Alison Spencer, Quality Manager said: "Kiwa Agri Food UK is an integral part of the worldwide Kiwa Group and we do a lot of partnership work with divisions in areas such as Europe, Australia and Turkey. Many of our international divisions also hold accreditation from their home country's accreditation body but this may be for different schemes.

"However, the 'accredited once, accepted everywhere' nature of accreditation means that with the correct agreements and training in place, these divisions can achieve certification for their clients under Kiwa Agri Food's accreditation.

"In addition to offering an expanded market access for our internationally-facing customers, this delivers economies of scale and brings us closer together as a global organisation."

Supply chain integrity

Supply chains with the food industry are complex and coming under increasing pressure, particularly at times of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition to delivering value, accreditation helps demonstrate the integrity and robustness of food supply chains, giving purchasers confidence in the way food is both produced and delivered.

UKAS accredited certification body STS has developed its own Food Safety Standard for Food Suppliers & Distributors which is now widely recognised, particularly in the public sector supply chain.

Fiona Sinclair, Director, said: "Accredited certification provides a high level of confidence of safety in the food supply chain, that is externally and independently audited.

"For example, the STS standard, which we
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are accredited for, features specific requirements with regard to *Listeria monocytogenes*.

This standard is followed by hundreds of food manufacturers and distributors reducing the incidence and levels of *Listeria* present in the food chain, when compared to the supply chain without these bespoke standards.”

Recognition and customer confidence

Far from being a mere box-ticking exercise, accreditation is widely acknowledged as a robust and independent way to determine that internationally recognised standards of quality are being adhered to.

Fiona Sinclair said: “For manufacturers and other suppliers involved with the food supply chain, third party certification is designed to demonstrate compliance with global food safety standards, protecting customers and company reputation.

“The recognition of the accredited certification that we provide to our customers can deliver significant benefits for them.

“This includes new business opportunities through increased market access (as certification is often required or expected contractually to supply many organisations),

stakeholder confidence and business performance optimisation through reduced waste, complaints, recalls etc.”

Emphasising the importance of UKAS accreditation to scheme owners, Alison Spencer said: “The UKAS marque shows that we have been independently verified and are regularly checked by an impartial, world renowned accreditation body. That is why many scheme owners, such as BRCGS and AIC stipulate that audit bodies of their schemes must be UKAS accredited.”

Even where accreditation is not specified as a pre-condition of tendering for contracts, it can become a practicality of doing business in other markets, as Alison explains:

“All food sectors have different standards to work to, tailored to the specific risks of their product or channel. Ultimately these schemes are all interconnected and united in the aim of giving regulators, retailers and consumers the confidence that a food product is fit for human consumption. UKAS accreditation offers that necessary assurance.”

To help ensure this trust is maintained during the current Covid-19 situation, UKAS has been operating remote accreditation assessments since the middle of March, and has produced guidance and webinars to help all conformity assessment bodies prepare.

UKAS has also been closely working with

the IAF Working Group Task Force in production of specific guidance on remote auditing accredited food safety certification.

Sustainable accreditation

Consumers are increasingly ethically and environmentally aware, moving sustainability up both the corporate and regulatory agenda. Accreditation has a track record of contributing towards sustainable development goals in the food industry.

UKAS has been involved in LEAF Marque assessments (Linking Environment and Farming) since 2005 and is playing a key role in the European Accreditation's (EA) evaluation of the scheme.

This leading global assurance uses the principles of integrated farm management to recognise and encourage more sustainably farmed products.

UKAS is also working closely with developers of ethical trading schemes, including the new Ethical Trade and Responsible Sourcing standard which is being produced by BRCGS. ■

The United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) is the sole national accreditation body for the UK.
For further information please visit:
www.ukas.com