



Internal Audits – Verification of Food Safety Programs

Internal audits are an important component of any Food Safety Program. This Note provides information about what internal audits are and why they should be performed. It also includes some useful points to consider when preparing for and conducting internal audits.

Internal audits – what are they and why do them?

Ensuring the safety of food products being manufactured, processed or handled is vital for any food business. Every food business is required by law to have a documented and implemented Food Safety Program (FSP).³ In addition, the FSANZ Food Standards Code also states that “a food business must ensure that the food safety program is reviewed at least annually to ensure its adequacy”.¹

An internal audit needs to be a systematic, impartial and documented process to verify the implementation and effectiveness of the FSP. Internal audits give both the management and staff of the business a clear understanding of whether the FSP has been implemented correctly, is being complied with and is adequate to ensure the control of food safety.

Internal audits can also be used to identify areas for improvement and to demonstrate a commitment to ensuring safety and quality to customers.

Audit procedure

A procedure detailing information about internal audits should be included as part of the FSP. This procedure should contain information about the audit process including: the audit schedule, checklist, how to conduct the audit, documenting the audit and implementing follow-up or corrective actions as a result of the audit findings.

Audit Schedule

It is important that internal audits are properly planned and scheduled. An audit schedule is a useful tool to manage audits and to ensure each element or section of the FSP is audited

at least once per year. The audit schedule should be written to include all parts of the FSP and can then be used to determine the audit frequency, audit due dates and to appoint staff members to complete the audits. This allows staff to have time to prepare for the audit and the scheduling of daily operational changes to fit in with the timing of the audit.



Appointing Auditors

Those responsible for completing internal audits should be an appointed staff member(s) of the business. It is advisable that internal auditors be appropriately trained either internally or externally. It would also be advantageous for them to have a thorough understanding of the FSP and the manufacturing or processing operations that are being audited.

The auditor selected should not normally work in the area of the business that is to be audited. Depending on the size and complexity of the operations, more than one person may perform the audit.

Conducting the audit

The purpose of the audit is to examine objective evidence that demonstrates the actions described in the FSP have been implemented, and are adequate to ensure food safety.

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Auditors do this by reviewing records, inspecting factory premises (if required), observing operations, and interviewing relevant staff members.

The audit process can be broken into 5 main steps.

- 1) Audit Preparation
- 2) The Desk Audit
- 3) Inspection and Observation
- 4) Audit Findings and Follow up Actions
- 5) Audit Close Out

Audit Preparation

To prepare for the audit, the auditor should become familiar with the section of the FSP being audited. An audit checklist should be prepared prior to conducting the audit - this will contain prompts or questions that will allow the auditor to collect and assess evidence of compliance to the FSP. When preparing the checklist auditors should consider:

- What procedures are detailed in the FSP?
- What records show that the actions or requirements have been carried out or met?
- Were any Corrective Actions or findings raised at the previous internal audits?
- Have external or third party audits raised any actions regarding the section for the FSP being audited?

The Desk Audit

This stage of the audit involves the auditor reviewing all relevant records and documents to assess the implementation of and compliance to the section of the FSP being audited.

Auditors should consider:

- Is the required information as noted in the FSP contained on the records?
- Are records current and completed in full including, dates and signatures as required?

- Are out of specification results recorded and has the required action been carried out?



Notes should be made on the audit checklist indicating compliance or non-compliance to the checklist requirements and details of the records viewed.

Inspection & Observation

The next step in the audit process involves inspection and observation. This involves comparing how the operations are carried out in practice against what is stated in the FSP.

Auditors should consider:

- Whether the practices being observed conforms to what is stated in the FSP
- The condition and cleanliness of factory premises, equipment and operating processes.
- Assessing relevant staff knowledge by asking questions relating to their role, and actions they take when corrective actions are required.

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Notes should be made on the audit checklist indicating compliance or non-compliance to the FSP requirements.

Audit Findings and Follow-up Actions

The audit findings are generated by comparing the evidence collected or observed against the checklist criteria. These findings will indicate compliance or non-compliance to the FSP and any opportunities for improvements. It is important that both management and staff have a commitment to rectifying issues raised as a result of internal audits.

The audit findings are generally discussed with the supervisor and/or the section manager responsible for the area audited. Depending on the size of the food business, this can be done with a formal meeting to close out the audit or simply a discussion to communicate the audit findings and areas of improvements. Audit findings may also need to be communicated to senior management, ensuring that they are aware of and are committed to rectifying any issues that have been highlighted as a result of the audit.

Items that have been given a non-compliance rating will need to have an action put in place to correct the issue. Each corrective action to be implemented should be agreed to by both the supervisor/section manager and the auditor.

Notes should be made on the audit checklist detailing each corrective action, the person responsible and a date to be implemented or completed by.

Audit Close Out

The final step in the audit process is to close out the audit. After a designated period of time, the auditor should review the audit findings, the non-compliance issues identified, and the corrective actions that were to be implemented.

The auditor needs to verify that the corrective actions have been carried out, as agreed, and have effectively resolved the non-compliance issues raised during the audit.

If the non-compliance issues have not been rectified in the agreed time or the corrective action has not been sufficient to resolve the non-compliance issue, the auditor needs to discuss this with the relevant supervisor or section manager. This may also need to be communicated to senior management.

Once the auditor is satisfied that the non-compliance issues have been resolved then the auditor can note on the audit checklist that the corrective action is completed. This should include a note on the checklist, detailing the date of the review and the signature of the person completing the review.

The audit can only be closed out when all of the corrective actions are implemented and have been verified to ensure they have effectively resolved all non-compliance issues.

Records

Documented evidence (i.e. records) that internal audits have been completed must be kept by each food business. The internal audit checklist, findings and corrective actions should be kept and filed for each internal audit completed by the business. In addition, the Food Standards Code states that “a food business must retain written reports of all audits completed of the Food Safety Program within the last 4 years.”¹

Summary

An effectively implemented FSP that is being complied with is essential for any food business. By implementing a regular internal auditing program, both the management and staff of a food business can benefit from knowing that their FSP is operating effectively and that any areas that need improvement have been identified. This will demonstrate the food

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business' commitment to the safety and quality of their products.

References

1. Food Standards Australia New Zealand 'Standard 3.2.1 – Food Safety Programs' Available at: www.foodstandards.gov.au/srcfiles/Standard_3_2_1_FS_Programs_v92.doc
2. AS/NZS ISO 19011:2003 "Guidelines for quality and/or environmental management systems auditing."
3. Dairy Food Safety Victoria (2002) 'Code of Practice for Dairy Food Safety' Available at: www.dairysafe.vic.gov.au/pdf/DFSV_CodeOfPractice2002.pdf

Further information

Other Dairy Food Safety Notes are available at:

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