



safe food
CERTIFICATIONS

SQF Certification Guide

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INTRODUCTION

Safe Food Certifications, LLC provides certification services to clients in accordance with the requirements of the SQF Code. The latest code SQF Code, edition 8 was implemented in January 2018 and can be used for all sector of the food industry. Based on the sector you work in you will have a code in which you are graded against such as SQF Food Safety Code for Manufacturing.

“Certification to the SQF Code supports industry- or company-branded product and offers benefits to certified sites and their customers. The implementation of an SQF system addresses a buyer’s food safety and quality requirements and provides the solution for businesses supplying local and global food markets. Products produced and manufactured under SQF Code certification retain a high degree of acceptance in global markets. Further, it is a statement of the site’s commitment to

- Produce safe, quality food,
- Comply with the requirements of the SQF code, and
- Comply with applicable food legislation.”

Safe Food Certifications fully complies with ISO/ IEC 17065 requirements for bodies certifying products, processes, and services.

Safe Food Certifications is committed to maintaining the following throughout the application, audit, and certification process:

- Impartiality
- Independence
- Confidentiality
- Objectivity

When you chose to work with Safe Food Certifications you gain a partner who is able and ready to help you throughout the certification process.

Overview of SQF Certification Process

APPLICATION PROCESS

STEP 1: LEARN ABOUT THE SQF CODE

There are many accessible resources for you to use to learn about the SQF edition 8 code.

- [Get the Code](#) Begin your education by downloading the code. It's FREE!
- [Take an In-Person Course](#) Need more than the code? Get trained so you are ready to implement the system.

STEP 2: REGISTER WITH SQF AND SELECT SAFE FOOD CERTIFICATIONS, LLC AS YOUR CERTIFICATION BODY.

You can register [here](#) with the SQF Assessment Database

Registration Fees:		
Classification	Description of Classification	Fee USD
A	Primary Producers (farms, ranches, orchards, etc. or FSC 1, 3, 5, 6)	\$150
B	Suppliers with a gross revenue < \$5 million USD	\$300
C	Suppliers with a gross revenue > 5 million USD < 25 million USD	\$400
D	Suppliers with a gross revenue > 25 million USD < 50 million USD	\$550
E	Suppliers with a gross revenue > 50 million USD	\$850
M	Multi-site Organization	
	Central-site	\$1000
	Each Sub-site	\$25

STEP 3: CHOOSE YOUR SQF CODE AND MODULES

Each company is at a different point in their food safety journey. For this reason, SQF has created different modules and types of certification from beginner to advanced. Once you chose the type of certification that is right for your company, you will be able to see the modules that may be applicable to your company based on your production and processes.

Something to note is that no matter which module you choose, "all manufacturers are required to implement the manufacturing system elements plus the applicable Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) module".

STEP 4: WORK WITH AN SQF CONSULTANT (OPTIONAL)

When completing certification, companies can choose to work with a registered SQF consultant. All consultants are certified with SQFI and issued an identity card with the SQF categories they have experience in.

Safe Food Alliance has many qualified SQF consultants who would be happy to assist you with building your SQF system. To schedule a consultation with Safe Food Alliance, **click here**.

STEP 5: DESIGNATE AN SQF PRACTITIONER

As stated by SQFI,

“The SQF Practitioner must satisfy the below requirements as outlined in section 2.1.2.4 of the SQF Code:

- Be employed by the site as a company employee on a full-time basis
- Have completed a HACCP-based training course
- Be competent to implement and maintain Good Agricultural/Aquaculture/Manufacturing Practices
- Have an understanding of the SQF Code and the requirements to implement and maintain SQF System relevant to the site’s scope of certification

STEP 6: DOWNLOAD THE SQF GUIDANCE DOCUMENTS

SQFI has created helpful documents to provide additional information and templates for modules that are more challenging. Download the resources [here](#).

STEP 7: CONTACT SAFE FOOD CERTIFICATIONS FOR THE COMPANY PROFILE APPLICATION, COMPLETE, AND RETURN.

Upon application review, Safe Food Certifications shall:

- confirm scope of certification
- determine audit category and audit duration
- assign a qualified auditor based on risk and audit category
- suggest tentative dates for audit based on scope and recertification timeframes where applicable
- provide quote for certification services using the SQF Facility Audit Duration Table

STEP 8: RECEIVE YOUR AUDIT INFORMATION

Once the client accepts the quote for services and confirms date of audit, Safe Food Certifications shall inform the client of the assigned auditor and provide the Certification Service Agreement for approval by client.

Special Note: Clients are advised to read scope defined in agreement carefully and ensure accuracy as scope cannot be altered once the on-site audit begins.

Clients may object to the assigned auditor in writing within 7 calendar days from date Agreement is provided to client only where a conflict of interest exists and request assignment of an alternate auditor. Objections to an auditor after 7 days of providing Agreement cannot be honored. Conflict of interest is defined as the following:

- Auditor provided consulting for site within previous two years
- Auditor has a financial interest in site that would bias the auditor's ability for objective evaluation
- Auditor has a personal relationship with site personnel that would bias the auditor's ability for objective evaluation

Conflict of interest must be disclosed when objecting to assigned auditor.

STEP 9: COMPLETE YOUR AUDIT

AUDIT TYPES (ANNOUNCED AND UNANNOUNCED)

ANNOUNCED AUDIT

It is conducted at a time agreed between the supplier and the certification body; audits in this category include initial and recertification audits.

UNANNOUNCED RECERTIFICATION AUDIT

Within three (3) certification cycles, Safe Food Certifications will conduct one (1) unannounced re-certification audit of the supplier. The unannounced audit shall occur in the supplier's facility within the sixty (60) day re-certification window (i.e., the anniversary date of the initial certification audit + thirty (30) days). A defined black-out period will be established between the supplier and Safe Food Certifications.

The unannounced audit requirement went into effect from July 2014 with the introduction of SQF Code 7.2 (i.e., the unannounced audit cycle applies and begins for audits done with the SQF 7.2 edition).

INITIAL CERTIFICATION AUDIT

The scope of the audit- products produced and manufacturing processes – shall be agreed between the supplier and Safe Food Certifications in advance of the audit to ensure the allocation of an auditor with the correct food sector category. The audit scope and any exclusions shall be clearly defined both on the audit report and any certificate issued (please refer to sections Exclusion from Scope or Reduction of Scope and Extension of Scope at the end of this document for additional clarification).

The initial certification audit is comprised of a desk audit prior to moving forward with the facility audit. Safe Food Certifications requires 30-day separation between the desk and facility audit to close out non-conformances assigned during the desk audit before moving forward with the facility audit.

Both the desk and facility audits are an assessment of the site's food safety and/or quality systems according to SQF Code, edition 8. Compliance to the requirements of the standard is determined through the following activities. Objective evidence (i.e., procedures, records, interview responses, direct observations, etc.) resulting from activities described below shall be collected by the auditor for the purpose of documenting compliance or non-compliance to Code requirements in the audit report.

- opening meeting with key personnel
- document and records review
- site tour
- interviews with various staff at all levels in the organization
- direct observation of processes
- verification of the effectiveness of tests and records

An audit plan is provided to the client prior to the start of the certification audit.

NON-CONFORMANCES

Non-conformances against standard requirements are identified as opportunities for improvement, minor, major, and critical. Specifics regarding each category of non-conformity and are detailed in SQF Code edition latest version.

Additionally, grade criteria resulting from identified non-conformances during the on-site audit and corresponding action regarding recertification are also detailed in SQF Code edition 8.

A list of agreed to non-conformances shall be provided during the closing meeting.

Summary of Grading Criteria and Recertification Requirements

AUDIT SCORE AND RATING

The calculation uses the following factors or point deductions:

- aspect meet the criteria
- Minor non-conformity – minor variation
- 10 Major non-conformity – does not meet the criteria
- 50 Critical non-conformity – does not meet the criteria

CORRECTIVE ACTION

Clients are responsible for providing corrective action responses for each assigned non-conformance and uploading objective evidence in SQFI's database (Reliance) within 30 calendar days from the last day of the audit.

Where a major non-conformance is assigned, the client has 14 calendar days from the last day of the audit to respond and provide evidence of corrective action.

Corrective action responses must fully correct the non-conformance to the requirement and evidence of the correction must be provided. Evidence may include updated procedures, records, work orders, purchase orders, photos, or other physical evidence demonstrating implementation of the correction. The auditor and certification body shall verify all corrective actions before closing out the non-conformance.

Client may request an extension for corrective actions by Safe Food Certifications. Requests for extension shall be submitted in writing to the Executive Director of Certification Services. Safe Food Certifications' Review and Certification Decision Committee (RCDC) may approve or deny request for extension.

Where satisfactory evidence is not provided and extension is not granted, client must contract for a subsequent full audit.

What is a Corrective Action Request? What do you do? Check out our helpful resource on How to Write Corrective Actions

GET THE ARTICLE AND WORKSHEET. 

RE-CERTIFICATION AUDIT

Re-certification audits shall be conducted at twelve-month intervals for E and G ratings. Where a C rating is received, the client shall be required to undergo a six-month surveillance audit.

Re-certification audits are full audits performed according to SQF requirements for application, audit duration, evaluation, review, and certification.

Clients are responsible for re-registering with SQFI annually for continued certification and display of certificate of registration details on SQFI's website.

Clients are also responsible for contacting Safe Food Certifications 90 days prior to the start of the re-audit period regarding scheduling the re-certification audit. SQF Recertification audits must be completed within 30 calendar days either side of the anniversary of the last day of the initial certification audit.

Failure of the client to allow re-certification or surveillance audits to be conducted at required frequencies may result in suspension or withdrawal of certification.

SURVEILLANCE AUDIT

Surveillance audits refer to announced or unannounced visits initiated by Safe Food Certifications or SQFI, which may be conducted as a full or partial audit to validate continued certification.

These types of audits must be completed when a "C" grade is given during an audit and must be completed within 30 days of the 6 month anniversary of the initial audit.

Safe Food Certifications or SQFI shall notify clients directly where surveillance audits are required.

RELIANCE (SQFI DATABASE)

The SQF certification process requires certification bodies to assess conformity to the standard through SQFI's database, Reliance. Audit reports are generated and advanced for review by the certification body and upload of corrective actions responses and evidence by the client.

Guidance documents are available for suppliers (clients) regarding site registration in Reliance, corrective action response and upload of documents, and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) from SQFI's website.

CERTIFICATION DECISION

Safe Food Certifications' Review and Certification Decision Committee (RCDC) shall review the auditor's report and initial recommendation for certification. The RCDC shall perform an independent, objective, and comprehensive review of the audit report, all audit findings, and corrective actions.

The RCDC shall independently and impartially make the Certification Decision to grant or deny certification within 45 calendar days of the last day of audit. Within 10 days of the decision, Safe Food Certifications will provide the company with their certificate.

CERTIFICATE AND LOGO USE

Safe Food Certifications shall complete the audit in Reliance and grant or deny certification within 45 days of the last day of audit and generate the Certificate of Registration. Basic information pertaining to certification is made available for public display. The client may elect to allow customers visibility to specific details of certification.

Upon certification, clients receive:

- A final audit report
- An SQF Certificate of Registration and use of the SQF Logo
- Guidance documents regarding Terms of Certification
- Information on Safe Food Certifications' Complaints and Appeals process

Within the SQF code, you will find a full list of rules of use for the SQF logo.

EXCLUSION FROM SCOPE OR REDUCTION OF SCOPE

The entire site, including all premises, support buildings, silos, tanks, loading and unloading bays and external grounds must be included in the scope of certification. If the supplier elects to exempt processes, products, or areas of the site from the scope of certification, the request must be submitted to Safe Food Certifications in writing prior to the audit, and shall be listed in the facility description in the SQF assessment database. However, all parts of the premises and process that are involved with the production, processing and storage of product included in the scope cannot be exempted. Exempted products shall not be listed on the certificate, and must not be promoted as being covered by the certification.

Instances where promotion of exempted products or processes are identified and substantiated (either by regular audit or by other means) shall result in immediate withdrawal of the SQF certification.

All products produced, stored or processed on the site shall be included on the supplier certificate, unless exempted by the supplier.

EXTENSION OF SCOPE (CHANGING THE SCOPE OF CERTIFICATION) DURING CERTIFICATION SCHEDULING PROCESS OR AFTER THE AUDIT IS COMPLETED

The scope of certification, including site, food sector categories and products must be clearly identified and agreed upon between the supplier and Safe Food Certifications prior to the initial certification audit and included in the scope of the initial certification audit and all subsequent audits.

When activities are carried out in different premises but are overseen by the same senior, operational, and technical management, and are covered by the one SQF System, the site can be expanded to include those premises (e.g., off-site product warehouse). All premises must be listed in the facility description in the SQF assessment database.

When a supplier desires to add food sector categories or products to their scope of certification, the supplier shall request the increased scope of certification in writing to Safe Food Certifications during the scheduling process. Safe Food Certifications then will assign auditor with required FSCs (food sector categories) and determine whether or not an audit of the additional processes or products is required. This will depend on the product risk, similarities to the existing processes and products, and proximity to the next scheduled audit date. The following shall apply if supplier seeks to change the scope of certifications (For example, add/delete FSCs, add/delete product or processes, etc.) after the certification audit has been completed.

- Based on this determination, the certification body (Safe Food Certifications in this case) shall either issue a new certificate, or advise the supplier in writing why the new certificate cannot be issued, or advise the supplier in writing if a site visit / audit required.
- When a new certificate is issued, Safe Food Certifications shall make the appropriate changes to the supplier record on the SQFI assessment database.

Note* If a change in the scope is granted, the initial audit date and audit window will remain the same.

EXTENSION OF SCOPE (CHANGING THE SCOPE OF CERTIFICATION AUDIT) PRIOR TO THE AUDIT ON SITE

When a supplier elects to expand a scope of certification onsite prior to the beginning of an audit, including but not limited to, adding packaging material, add process step, etc. without requiring to adding an additional food sector category or HACCP plan, must be discussed with the auditor prior to the audit begins. Auditor then shall contact (if warranted) Safe Food Certifications to approve such changes or shall approve such changes and document on the audit plan. The auditor and a representative of the auditee shall sign the change made on the audit plan with the same date prior to beginning the audit or later (if needed) as the change was discussed and approved.

REFERENCES

- SQF Code Edition 8 (2017)

Ready to Get Started with SQF Certification?

Becoming SQF certified can be intimidating but you don't have to do it alone. We understand the liabilities and the worries. In order to smooth out your learning curve, contact Safe Food Certifications to help you establish a road map for pursuing GFSI certification for your facility. No matter your level of preparedness and scheme-specific requirements, we will help you meet your food safety goals.

SCHEDULE YOUR FREE CONSULTATION

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