

Food Safety: The Supermarket Perspective



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The most important goal of America's food retailers and wholesalers is to ensure that the products they sell are safe. As the purchasing agent for the consumer and the final link in the supply chain, the supermarket industry continually seeks ways to make the nation's food supply safer. As a result, the American consumer enjoys unmatched choice and convenience, as well as safe, abundant food year-round.

Retailers and wholesalers have a long history of anticipating and responding to food safety and defense challenges. They strengthen food safety on many fronts by working independently and collectively through the Food Marketing Institute (FMI).¹ For example, retailers and wholesalers work with suppliers globally, observe rigorous standards in supermarkets and warehouses, ensure that store managers and their associates follow the requirements of the *FDA Food Code* and through extensive public outreach campaigns help teach consumers to follow the most important food safety practices.

FMI's Board of Directors reconfirmed the industry's commitment to improving food safety by reinstating its Food Safety Task Force in June 2007. The Task Force identified the following priorities:

1. Strengthen consumer confidence in the safety of the food supply.
2. Develop programs to help reduce foodborne illness.
3. Educate consumers how to select nutritious and wholesome food.
4. Develop public policies to improve the safety of America's food supply.

In addition, the Task Force then identified five key operational areas on which to focus its attention:

- Improve the food recall system.
- Align food safety programs and priorities among retailers, wholesalers and suppliers.
- Identify and implement best practices.
- Improve produce safety with measures that include product traceability.
- Enhance customer education programs.

¹Food Marketing Institute (FMI) conducts programs in research, education, industry relations and public affairs on behalf of its 1,500 member companies — food retailers and wholesalers — in the United States and around the world. FMI's U.S. members operate approximately 26,000 retail food stores with a combined annual sales volume of \$680 billion — three-quarters of all retail food store sales in the United States. FMI's retail membership is composed of large multi-store chains, regional firms and independent supermarkets. Its international membership includes 200 companies from more than 50 countries.

1. Strengthen Consumer Confidence in the Safety of the Food Supply

Research shows that consumer confidence in food safety swings widely depending on events in the marketplace. Media coverage of recent outbreaks, recalls and food safety scares have contributed to a decrease in consumer confidence and revealed new challenges to ensuring the food supply is safe in an ever-changing marketplace. In 2007, consumer confidence in the safety of food they purchase in supermarkets reached its lowest point since 1989. FMI's survey of consumers, presented in the annual *U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends* report (*Trends*), found that consumer confidence dropped from 82 percent in 2006 to 66 percent in 2007. This same survey revealed that consumer confidence in restaurant food was even lower in 2007 at 42 percent.

In 2008, with the federal government and private sector working together to improve food safety, consumer confidence rebounded: 81 percent of those responding to the 2008 *Trends* survey said they are "completely" or "somewhat confident" in the safety of the food bought in supermarkets. Yet this confidence is fragile. Only 11 percent are "completely confident" and 70 percent are only "somewhat confident."

To secure high levels of confidence, the industry and government must address changes in the marketplace. These include handling new sources of food, advances in production and distribution methods, and the growing volume and diversity of imports. These changes call for a vigorous approach to protect our food from unintentional or deliberate contamination. The quality and safety of the U.S. food supply must be protected from farm to fork — throughout food production, processing, storage and distribution. This multi-sector effort requires the active participation and cooperation among producers, processors, manufacturers, retailers, government and the scientific community. FMI and its members are dedicated to improving food safety by working throughout the supply chain to ensure that consumers continue to receive the safe, high-quality and affordable food they have every right to continue to expect.

2. Develop Programs to Help Reduce Foodborne Illness

FMI members partner with their suppliers to ensure the food that consumers purchase is safe. One way to do this is through rigorous standards for the production and manufacturing of safe food, verified through independent, third-party certification systems. Using proven risk-assessment methods such as the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system, suppliers can implement and monitor their practices to ensure food production methods are safe. Conformance to these best practices can then be verified using a dependable auditing program that relies on accredited certification measures.

The Safe Quality Food Supplier Certification Program

To help the supplier community to reach this new, higher level of assurance, FMI offers the Safe Quality Food (SQF) Program. This is a leading, global food safety and quality certification program and management system, designed to meet the needs of retailers and suppliers worldwide. The SQF Program provides independent certification that a supplier's food safety and quality management system complies with international and domestic food safety regulations. This enables suppliers to assure their customers that food has been produced, processed, prepared and handled according to the highest possible standards.

Launched in 1994, the SQF Program is administered by the SQF Institute (SQFI), a division of the Food Marketing Institute (FMI). More than 10,000 certificates have been issued to companies operating in the Asia-Pacific region, Europe, Middle East and North and South America.

SQF certification is supported by an increasing number of U.S. and international retailers and foodservice providers that express a preference for SQF-certified suppliers. In addition, the SQF Program is part of a landmark agreement among seven global retailers on mutual acceptance of global food safety systems. This program offers the only system endorsed by the Global Food Safe Initiative (GFSI)² that provides certification for primary food production and for manufacturing, storage and distribution and agent/broker management.

The SuperSafeMark[®] Employee Training and Certification Program

Within the domestic retail setting, training store managers and workers in food safety is an important tool for protecting the public health. FMI offers extensive training programs on safe food-handling methods based on the model *FDA Food Code*. In 2003, FMI launched SuperSafeMark[®], the most comprehensive food safety and sanitation instruction and certification program ever offered to food retail employees. This program includes methods for combating foodborne illness with time and temperature controls, measures to prevent cross contamination, personal hygiene and cleaning and sanitizing best practices. Currently, SuperSafeMark[®] trains and certifies 15,000 store-level managers and their associates each year, along with thousands of employees who handle food in retail stores.

²Representing the world's leading food retailers and suppliers, GFSI recognizes food safety certification programs that require compliance with rigorous and commonly accepted international standards and that have independent accredited auditors to verify compliance.

An Initiative to Improve Food Recall Communications

FMI members are also working closely with their suppliers to improve communications in food recalls. While the industry responds quickly and efficiently in the event of a recall, FMI members believe that the system can be improved. In a year-long project, retailers, wholesalers and suppliers developed and are testing an electronic recall portal, the FMI Recall Collaboration Zone. This portal is powered by GS1, formerly the Uniform Code Council, which oversees the Universal Product Code (U.P.C.) and numerous technological standards and programs for industries worldwide. This portal provides an automated alert system that allows suppliers to send information to retailers and wholesalers rapidly and accurately, 24/7, so they can remove recalled product from the distribution chain and retail shelves as quickly as possible.

3. Educate Consumers How to Select Nutritious and Wholesome Food

FMI has long provided consumers with practical, science-based guidance on safe food-handling at home. As a founding member of the Partnership for Food Safety Education, FMI continues to support the development of meaningful food safety education programs for consumers. The Partnership brings together consumer advocacy groups, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), national industry associations and health and scientific groups. The Partnership created the award-winning Fight BAC![®] campaign to teach food safety to children in school. Its BAC Down! program urges consumers to use thermometers to ensure their refrigerators remain at safe temperature levels — no higher than 40°F. Most recently, the Partnership launched the Be Safe Food campaign in cooperation with USDA to provide retailers with a wide range of resources to educate their customers about safe food practices.

Approximately, 6,000 FMI member supermarkets serving some 81 million consumers, have volunteered to implement Be Food Safe through their in-store and external consumer communications programs. The campaign encourages the use of colorful, modular icons and photography to illustrate the basic and most important safe food-handling practices:

- Clean — Wash hands and surfaces often.
- Separate — Do not cross-contaminate foods.
- Cook — Heat foods to proper temperatures.
- Chill — Refrigerate foods promptly.

The Partnership for Food Safety Education — governed by a memorandum of understanding among the federal agencies, industry associations and consumer groups — has been extremely effective in educating Americans how to handle food safely.

4. Develop Public Policies to Improve the Safety of America's Food Supply

The food industry has a long and active history in protecting the food that consumers purchase, but the government must also provide strong leadership. To date, food safety regulation has been hindered by a patchwork of statutory authorities. FMI and its members believe that the following public policy actions are needed to strengthen our food safety oversight systems.

A. Designate a Lead Food Safety Agency

Food safety regulation in the United States is governed by an uneven mosaic of laws and regulations enforced by multiple federal, state and local agencies, which results in inefficient redundancies in some areas and gaps in others. This system must be redesigned to address the current and future challenges of our rapidly evolving food supply system. FMI believes it is time to designate a lead food safety agency with responsibility to coordinate the safety of our entire food system. The resources needed for such an agency already reside within multiple existing agencies. The challenge is primarily one of restructuring and reallocation. Eliminating the duplication that now exists could result in substantial budget savings, improve oversight performance and create a safer food supply.

B. Establish a More Uniform and Efficient Recall System

Recalls have long been carried out by the industry on a voluntary basis in a timely and efficient manner. Many consumers are surprised, however, to learn that neither USDA nor FDA has the legal power to mandate a recall of adulterated foods. We believe that these federal agencies should have the authority to compel a recall when a company refuses or delays to recall a product that FDA or USDA has determined poses an imminent and substantial risk of serious adverse health consequences or death to humans or animals. On November 16, 2007, the FMI Board of Directors approved a policy statement that supports providing these agencies with the authority to require a recall under these circumstances (copy attached).

C. Develop Traceback Systems for Each Commodity Group

The government should require systems that will improve the capability of commodity groups to trace back foods to their source. Such systems would enable USDA, FDA and the industry to prevent or contain foodborne illness outbreaks more quickly. Each commodity group should be required to create an automated traceback system that is cost-effective and complements current business operations.

D. Expand the Role of Third Parties

Given the breadth and reach of today's food supply chain, neither USDA nor FDA will ever have the resources needed to inspect all products domestically and globally to ensure that they are safe and to verify that supplier systems comply with all food safety regulations. Enhancing the government's role in assessing food safety systems in the future will require the prudent use of private sector auditing and certification programs. Both FDA and USDA should be given the authority to establish criteria for the recognition of accredited third-party food safety certification programs. The industry has already established independent, effective and credible private sector food safety certification systems such as FMI's SQF Program. FDA and USDA should be authorized to use private sector resources as part of their overall risk management and inspection system.

E. Permit Certification for Select Imports

FDA and USDA should also be allowed to use private sector certification programs such as SQF to assess the safety of imported foods. The government should be able to use private sector certification as a way to prioritize those products and facilities that pose the highest risk and focus resources where they are most needed. FDA lacks sufficient budget and personnel resources to perform its current functions, much less to set up a massive new overseas inspection and verification service. If food cannot be imported from a country or facility until FDA has approved it, the U.S. food industry's ability to import food products from abroad would be seriously crippled.

Conclusion

The retailers and wholesalers of FMI will continue to look for new ways to strengthen food safety to better protect our customers. Americans have the safest and most affordable, abundant and diverse food supply in the world, but more can be done to make it even safer. Just as the sources of the U.S. food supply are ever-changing, so must the focus of our safety standards and programs change accordingly. FMI members are committed to working with Congress, the White House, government agencies, all other industry sectors, and the scientific and consumer community to implement improvements in the system that are workable and based on sound food safety science. For FMI and its members, food safety will always be a paramount priority.