

Standardized audits top wish list

Redundancy can waste money and resources, grower-shippers say.

By Jim Offner
Special to The Packer

The calls are going up for a standardized — and less costly — system of third-party audits, according to growers and shippers in the produce industry.

Progress is being made toward some standardization, said Maureen Olewnik, vice president of audit and technical services. AIB International, Manhattan, Kan.

“Probably the standardization you’ve heard about is through the Global Food Safety Initiative and the impact it’s having,” she said.

“We’re seeing more of that certainly in the U.S. It started out of the European-based organization and were similar to (International Organization for Standardization)-type audits. We’re seeing more of those requested in the U.S.”

The GFSI is not a standard itself. Rather, it’s a program that benchmarks plans that have been developed, she said.

PrimusLabs, Safe Quality Food Institute, GlobalGAP and AIB are among the better-known plans.

“It’s hard to say how it will all play out,” Olewnik said. “The focus of GFSI is to have all or some of them accepted by all. If you do one of them, your customers ideally will accept any one of those.”

A common complaint is that audit requirements vary company by company.

Olewnik said that probably will never disappear completely.

“You’ll always have some companies that have their own

specific requirements,” she said. “It could be include in a separate audit or as an addendum to what’s being carried out.”

However, Will Sumner, director of food and agricultural programs with Emeryville, Calif.-based Scientific Certification Systems, said pending federal food safety legislation

Wish list C2 ▶ in the Senate and House, do address the issue.

“They have (only) elements of standardization in audits,” he said.

Meanwhile, growers and shippers juggle numerous audit requirements.

“It should be one audit per company,” said Jim Sanfillipo, vice president of Columbus, Ohio-based Sanfillipo Produce. “If you’re doing business with three different chains, they each require their own audit to their specification. It’s redundant, and they’re all basically looking for the same thing.”

Tony DiMare, vice president of the Homestead, Fla.-based DiMare Co., said his firm is all for a one-size-fits-all auditing system.

“Why wouldn’t you want

to standardize it, so you’re not having repetitive audits which are the same exact audits and all carry separate costs with them?” he said.

That frustration stretches across the industry, he added.

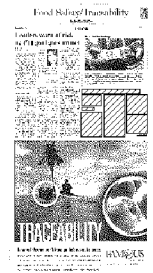
“There’s a tremendous amount of frustration in our industry among all of us who have to go through this,” he said. “When you’re vertically integrated, as our company is, the associated costs are tremendous.”

Kathy Means, vice president of government relations and public affairs for the Newark, Del.-based Produce Marketing Association, said she sympathizes.

“Certainly, when we take a look at audits we see more than 80% of them are the same, so there is a standardization out there in what is looked for,” Means said.

“Why aren’t there fewer? We see the burden on grower shippers, and it’s an unnecessary burden. But we also see that not all audits are created equal. Some buyers may see some audits as not adequate.”

PMA has filed comments with



the FDA to encourage more standardized audits, Means said.

“FDA is looking at what they need to do in terms of certifying those folks with schemes,” Means said. “There’s a lot going on in this area, and it’s something the whole industry has been talking about.”

Some buyers have tried to work with shippers on the problem, Means noted.

“There are some buyers are pretty good about this and say, ‘Here are five we trust and any one is great.’ That has actually been helpful,” Means said.

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