

Q1 SOLUTION BRIEF

AUDIT PREPAREDNESS

IS YOUR FACILITY AUDIT READY?

Every facility or QA Manager has heard horror stories about what happens when a facility fails or earns a low audit score. In extreme cases people are fired or demoted. Customers cancel orders or remove you from a preferred vendor list. Your brand reputation gets sacked. All because an audit didn't go the way it was supposed to.

What are the root causes of a failed audit? Aside from the obvious pest or food safety issues, there can be multiple reasons from poor recordkeeping and communications to staff turnover or inadequate resources – both financial and training. Regardless of the reason the result is not good.

According to the Safe Food Alliance, the tools for achieving a positive outcome on an audit are the same tools used to ensure safe food production in general, but one of these tools often goes overlooked. Preparing for an audit with an audit.

WHAT AUDITORS LOOK FOR

Not only do the frequency of audits differ by facility and what products are made there, but so does the personality and methodology of each auditor. It's akin to baseball players adjusting to the strike zone of the umpire.

"Auditors look for proactive steps to be taken by the facility to minimize risk," says Lance Gray, A.C.E., regional manager for Oregon and California for Sprague Pest Solutions. "Today's auditors are also more aware of consumer trends and what the consumer is saying."

The new generation of auditors is also more list and data driven but has less exposure to what the pest management industry brings to the table.

"Data and documentation are very important to auditors and you must adjust to that," adds Gray. "Auditors want to see facilities reviewing trend data and acting on it to reduce risk and continuously improve pest management programs."

In addition to getting to know your auditor, when facilities are dealing with risk-based audits standards like SQF and BRC, they must consider the following:

- You must be continuously improving your facility and processes.
- New product lines or new ingredients could cause additional risk.
- Make sure you are communicating this information to your pest management partner.

THREE QUESTIONS TO ASK

When preparing for an audit facility staff should ask the following three questions to make sure they are doing what it takes to avoid a poor or failed audit.

1. Are you documenting corrective actions?

Is there a work order system in place that documents the completion of corrective actions that your pest management service technician noted?

Responding quickly to correct and properly document the root causes (i.e. sanitation, cultural, maintenance, etc.) of a pest issue is a critical part of the audit readiness puzzle.

“Auditors want to see how you are improving and how you arrived at a decision and corrected it,” says Chad Rodgers, quality assurance auditor for Sprague.

Installing a new door sweep to prevent rodents and other pests’ access is a good example. A work order is generated, the work is completed and then attached to the original condition report your pest management service partner generated to start the process. Following this process closes the loop and provides documented proof to an auditor.

2. Are you continuously evaluating and improving your pest management programs?

Continuous improvement should always be the goal of any pest management and food safety program. Facility staff need to be proactive through the year when it comes to sanitation, cleaning, routine maintenance and employee training.

“Make sure you regularly review service reports and trend data and don’t let equipment repair and deep cleaning slide,” says Rodgers. “If you are going to be held responsible for it, review it, because the auditor certainly will.”

Rodgers says avoid “cramming” for audits and review 52 weeks’ worth of reports in the days before an audit.

“Don’t allow surprises to take place,” adds Rodgers. “Don’t hold back challenging something or asking a question of your pest service provider.”

One way to support continuous improvement of your pest management programs is to have an annual risk assessment done for your facility.

Risk assessments are emerging as one of the best tools in a QA or facility manager’s pest management and food safety toolbox.

A rigorous and thorough risk assessment will include information on the types of raw ingredients being brought in, how a facility’s sanitation protocols and inventory rotation are managed, the condition of the exterior landscape or types of neighboring facilities present, and more.

“Risk is temporal and is influenced by time, location and conducive conditions found within a facility,” says Jeff Weier, technical director for Sprague Pest Solutions. “Risk is not static; it is variable, and this must be considered when designing and implementing a pest management program.”

For example, a vegetable processing plant can be idle for all but three months a year, but this doesn’t mean that pests can’t be active or pose a threat during the offseason. If sanitation or exclusion protocols aren’t followed during peak processing times, food and waste products can be left behind in or under equipment, and pests will thrive.

Food processing facilities conducting regular risk assessments address these key operational areas:

- Pest-free environment
- Brand protection
- Food safety
- Audit/GFSI compliance
- FSMA compliance
- Reduces risk

A risk assessment is not meant as a “gotcha report” on a facility’s shortcomings but rather a business tool that can improve performance and mitigate risk from threats to the integrity of the food products produced, stored or shipped from the facility.

Typical risk assessments focus on collecting data for the following:

- Meeting applicable standards (FDA, FSMA, state, etc.)
- Control measures
- Monitoring procedures
- Corrective actions
- Records and documentation

“Auditors want to see tangible action and results and forward movement in pest management programs and risk assessments help with that,” adds Sprague’s Gray.

3. Are your documents in order?

Lawyers say if it isn’t documented, it didn’t happen. Auditors are no different. QA and facility managers (and their pest services providers) need to make sure documents (i.e. licenses, service reports, pest trend data, corrective actions, etc.) are in order and that facility staff understand all that’s in there.

Good documentation paints a picture for the auditor of what is being done to protect the facility from pests. Make sure there are no surprises.

“Auditors need to understand what is being presented to them,” says Gray. “Keep it concise, well organized and accessible.”

The trend data and information collected from devices, pest logs and visual sightings help QA and facility managers substantiate risk levels and allow facilities to make good decisions. It will also help them spend their pest management budget wisely and save money.

“Data and proper documentation help demonstrate the need for services and establishes its value to upper management,” says Rodgers. “It adds value to client without adding cost.”

STAYING ON YOUR TOES

In today's food safety climate, there are no days off. Food processors must be ready for an unscheduled audit at any time and that is why being able to answer the three questions referenced earlier in this document are critical to successfully passing an audit.

In fact, some audit firms are offering to perform unscheduled audits as an alternative to traditional scheduled audits. Why would a facility subject themselves to this?

"We are seeing some clients go the unscheduled audit route because it is better for business," says Rodgers. "It appears on their audit certificate as "unscheduled" and that is viewed as a business advantage for the client."

How can your pest services provider be assistance? They can serve as an extra set of eyes during the pre-audit walkthrough and when the staff is prepping for the audit. They can also help verify your documentation is in order and explain any corrective actions and how the issue was resolved.

Facilities with the correct answers to these questions, can feel confident that no matter when an auditor comes knocking at their door, they'll be ready.

The Sprague Solution

A successful audit is in the details. Sprague Pest Solutions will leverage cutting-edge data collection and reporting technology to prepare your facility and staff to successfully complete any audit. Our audit preparation and documentation protocols are accurate, thorough and comprehensive, and meet all leading audit firms' standards. Contact us today to help prepare for your next audit.