



Finding the balance between food safety and sustainability



As the global community recognises the urgency of addressing climate change, there is increasing dialogue around the relationship between environmental action and upholding the highest standards of food safety and quality.

In a recent webinar, industry experts from LRQA, Coca-Cola and Cargill discussed the importance of embedding Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) efforts into existing food safety strategies and the potential challenges. Here, key takeaways from the webinar are captured, including insights from:

Kimberly Carey Coffin
Supply Chain Assurance Technical Director at LRQA



Genevieve Taft-Vazquez
Senior Director of Responsible Sourcing and Human Rights Governance at The Coca-Cola Company



Fabian Smith
Global Head of Product Safety, Quality, and Regulatory Compliance at Cargill



Integrating food safety and sustainability

The food industry has demonstrated a longstanding commitment to addressing environmental issues, from reducing plastic packaging to improving water and land usage. These factors directly impact food safety and quality, influencing production processes and the integrity of products offered for sale, necessitating significant agility from food companies and their supply chains.

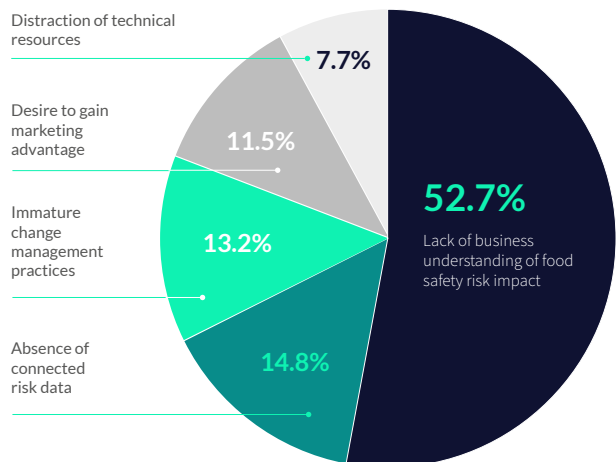
Whilst this is commendable progress, Kimberly Coffin of LRQA reminded us that further work is still needed. The pursuit of a circular economy for packaging, along with the recycling of materials, introduces challenges related to pest management and cross-contamination which need to be addressed. Further, the universal goal of carbon footprint reduction requires a careful examination of the transition to cleaner energy sources, ensuring that such changes do not compromise the cold chain integrity required for perishable products.

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In addition to changes to manufacturing processes, Kimberly emphasised the pivotal role of people – both within organisations and throughout supply chains – in aligning food safety and sustainability objectives. Historically, food safety and sustainability have been treated as distinct functions with separate teams for each, leading to a siloed approach to managing food safety and sustainability efforts. It is clear now that a robust, interconnected food safety culture, which incorporates sustainability at the core, is essential.

An audience poll revealed that more than 50% of respondents see a lack of business understanding of food safety risk impact as the greatest potential risk to food safety when delivering on ESG commitments. Genevieve Taft-Vazquez, of the Coca-Cola Company, echoed the importance of collaboration and a cohesive approach and emphasises the need for a mutually reinforcing strategy that aligns food safety requirements with responsible sourcing and sustainability requirements.

What do you think is the greatest potential risk to food safety presented by the need to deliver ESG commitments?



The Coca-Cola Company, with the assistance of LRQA, is piloting a process to align food safety audits with responsible sourcing and sustainability audits and verification. This harmonised strategy aims to create a win-win situation which contributes to sustainable and responsible supply chains, without forgetting essential food safety commitments.



Regulation and partnership

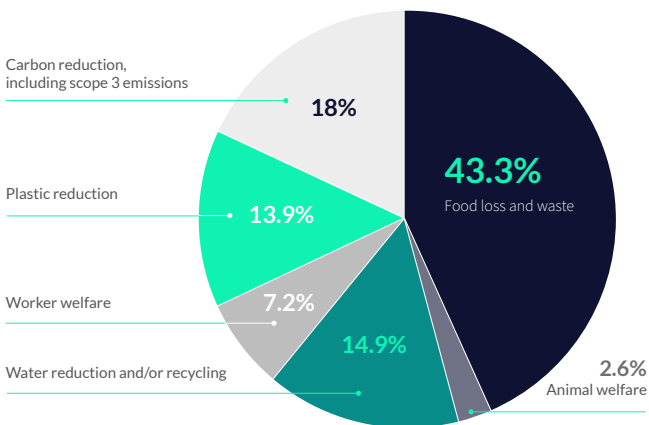
Economic disruption, climate change, technological advancements and rising consumer demands have each contributed to a rapidly changing regulatory environment. The increasing pressure to be compliant now extends beyond food safety, compelling food companies to consider their sustainability and broader ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) strategy in a bid to demonstrate commitment to sourcing responsibly and reducing environmental impacts.

Fabian Smith, of Cargill, highlighted the challenge of aligning food safety and sustainability due to the differing levels of standardisation. While food safety has a well-established framework, sustainability is in the early stages of standardisation, with opportunities lying in leveraging the proven frameworks of food safety to accelerate progress in the sustainability space.

Genevieve further emphasised the complementary nature of food safety and ESG frameworks; commenting that robust management systems for food safety and quality often mirror those necessary for addressing worker welfare and meeting ESG goals. Collaborative efforts, particularly across supply chains, can effectively manage these sometimes-competing priorities.

Another audience poll shed light on the top ESG priorities for 2024, with food loss and waste emerging as a high concern for many.

What is your company's top ESG priority for 2024??



Kimberly suggested that changes to Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) benchmark standards – acknowledging the importance of food loss and waste in the context of food safety – are influencing this heightened awareness. Fabian proposed a shift in perspective from discussing challenges to strategizing ways to overcome them and reiterates that

leveraging well-established food safety standards can accelerate progress in the sustainability space by benefiting from decades of experience in food safety.

Global supply chain management

The increasing complexity of risks is only exacerbated by the expectation for companies to not only take accountability for their own risk profile, but also that of their supply chain.

Kimberly underpinned the importance of end-to-end supply chain transparency as a fundamental element for success. Achieving sustainability and food safety objectives requires a comprehensive understanding of the entire supply chain. Kimberly further emphasised again that people are at the core of these efforts, and there is a need for horizontal integration and understanding of food safety culture as much as top-to-bottom focus.

Kimberly also acknowledged the need for evolution in the way the industry approaches verification processes. Traditionally, the food industry heavily relied on inspection and audit processes to demonstrate compliance. However, as the industry expands its focus to include social and environmental risks, a shift is occurring. The industry is now developing standards to manage these risks, moving towards a more holistic approach to compliance verification.

The integration of risk data will also be pivotal. Rather than viewing risk data in silos, the future lies in a holistic perspective that considers various indicators and types of data. Kimberly illustrated this with an example: assessing geographical risks related to worker welfare or human rights before deciding on new sourcing locations. By analysing risk data comprehensively, companies can make informed decisions that not only meet sustainability goals but also safeguard food safety and quality.

Looking forward

In the dynamic landscape of global food supply chain management, success requires a holistic approach, emphasising transparency, people-centric strategies, and a shift from compliance to proactive risk management, as highlighted by industry experts, Kimberly Coffin, Genevieve Taft-Vazquez and Fabian Smith. Simultaneously, in achieving ESG commitments, regulations guide sustainable practices, and partnerships are essential to meet goals without compromising food safety. Recognising the interconnected nature of ESG and food safety, the food industry has the potential to position itself as a leader in responsible and resilient supply chain management. Integrating sustainability and food safety is not just a necessity but an opportunity, fostering a collective effort for a sustainable food industry, today and in the future.

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Food and beverage

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