The accreditation of veterinary and phytosanitary inspection services

General Food Directorate
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CHOOSING ACCREDITATION

The General Food Directorate of the French Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries is responsible for management of the veterinary and phytosanitary inspection services deployed across French national territory and at the national borders of the European Union. Those services employ over 4,000 inspectors. They are charged with verifying the satisfactory sanitary state of foodstuffs from the production of animal and plant raw materials on agricultural holdings right up to the food on the consumer’s plate. Their inspections also cover fisheries products and imports.

**Accreditation** is the recognition, on the basis of an international standard, that an entity is capable of duly verifying the compliance of a product, a service, a process or an organisational system with a set of reference criteria. Accreditation certifies that the entity concerned is competent, independent and impartial. In the case of inspection bodies the standard of reference is NF EN ISO/CEI 17020. This lays down criteria for the organisation and management of the inspection body, requires documented inspection methods, defines the form of inspection reports and requires proof to be provided that the inspectors are competent.

**The advantages of accreditation**

Regulatory controls in the area of the safety for health of foodstuffs and the raw materials from which they are made (animal and plant products) require that industry professionals implement a process focused on health safeguards and in particular risk control of Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) type. For this reason, it is essential that inspection services should themselves be subject to a quality standard. Inspections, on condition that they are carried out competently, independently and impartially, are a cornerstone of customers’ and consumers’ trust in the French agrifood system. Accreditation aimed at demonstrating inspectors’ competence and providing guarantees of their impartiality is the best option for inspection bodies.

**MULTISITE ACCREDITATION**

The French Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries has opted for multisite accreditation for its inspection services. This means that all central administrative and decentralised inspection agencies in the French regions and territorial départements are accredited in a single process. Two aspects need to be taken into account: where safety for health is concerned, safety at the broadest level is often determined by the safety provided by the weakest link; uniform safety levels across the country are necessary. This option entails, firstly, a high level of operational and organisational harmonisation reflected in homogeneous procedures and documentation and, secondly, seamless integration of the central administration into the overall structure.
THE BASICS OF THE STANDARD

Standard NF EN ISO/CEI 17020
Standard NF EN ISO/CEI 17020 lays down requirements to be met for the accreditation of inspection bodies. It covers the functions of entities whose activities involve examination of equipment, products, facilities, factories, processes, working procedures and services, and verification of their compliance with certain requirements and, subsequently, the delivery to those inspected and, where appropriate, the public authorities, of a report on the outcome of those activities.

Organisation
An inspection body must be organised in such a fashion that the responsibilities of each individual in the execution of inspections is defined with perfect clarity. This includes of course the inspectors in the various sectors and their managers, but it also covers support functions such as secretarial services, training, equipment management and the administration of information systems. Such organisation must lead in the case of each actor to a job profile describing the duties incumbent on that individual. A flowchart (or organisational matrix) makes it possible to verify that all the necessary functions have been provided for and duly assigned. Provision must also be made for replacements in the event of individual absences.

Methods and scheduling
Inspection of a facility on a given date is determined either by the execution of specific orders from higher authorities or by a risk analysis conducted from time to time. The latter makes it possible to establish an inspection schedule in accordance with the resources available to the inspection body. When received, orders for inspection must be recorded to ensure that their execution can be justified at all times.
Facilities are inspected in accordance with a documented procedure with which the inspector must be completely familiar. Inspectors must have immediately to hand the actual standards – generally, the regulations plus the instructions for their application – on the basis of which the compliance of the facility is to be assessed.

The inspection report
All inspections are to be recorded in a written report signed and dated by the inspector and listing all the points verified and the level to which they were found compliant. The report must end with a judgement on compliance in light of the applicable regulations. The inspection report must be recorded and kept on file in a secure manner. There must in this way be a clear distinction between the report and the ruling to be issued on the basis of its findings.

Identification of responsibilities
The inspection body, both at the central level and in the local inspection bodies constituted by decentralised inspection services, must be led by a “general manager” responsible for the overall management of the organisation and devoting particular attention to ensuring that its resources match its allotted tasks. In the local inspection bodies, he or she schedules the inspections. The “technical manager” is the person with the knowledge and skills to make authoritative judgements in the organisation’s technical inspection domains. The “technical director” ensures that the inspection schedule is correctly implemented in light of resources available and particularly the skill levels of the organisation’s staff.
THE COMPETENCE OF THE INSPECTORATE

The ability of inspectors to carry out inspections in a given field is the keystone of standard NF EN ISO/CEI 17020. That competence must be demonstrated by the possession of titles and qualifications, initial training, attendance at further training and vocational courses. It must be assessed by the line manager at least once a year and at each change of post. Competence is verified by supervision: this involves accompanying the inspector during an inspection in order to evaluate his or her professional application of the methods and their professional knowledge in the context of the regulations with which compliance is to be verified. All new inspectors joining an inspection body must be subject to a mentoring process to enable them to bring their level of competence in line with what is needed. The inspection body must organise the training of its inspectors to meet identified needs for improvement or adaptation of the skills of its staff.

FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT

The inspection body must have available the facilities and equipment required for its proper functioning. This consists of inspection equipment necessary for the taking of samples in addition to vehicles for travelling purposes. It also includes secure premises for the filing of inspection reports, along with IT resources suitable for the drafting and recording of such reports. Proper upkeep must be provided for such premises and equipment.

THE QUALITY SYSTEM AND INFORMATION FEEDBACK

The inspection body must put in place a quality system of which the most notable components are a quality manual describing the system’s overall structure, a process for the feedback of information capable of recording and dealing with organisational failures, complaints and recourse, especially where these relate to non-performance of an inspection order. This system must be headed up by a quality manager attentive to ensuring that it is fit for purpose and that corrective steps are taken. The inspection body must organise internal audits aimed at verifying due adherence to the standard.

SUBCONTRACTING

Inspections or parts of inspections contracted out to third parties must be covered by verification procedures aimed at determining whether the service provided is of equivalent quality to that which would have been provided by the inspection body in terms of competence, impartiality and independence.
THE STAGES IN THE PROCESS

The network
Ensuring that the activities of over 4,000 inspectors across 127 directorates and nearly 500 physical locations conform to standard NF EN ISO/CEI 17020 requires a structured network. This is composed of a quality cell at central administration level, a network of twenty or so regional monitors and a quality assurance manager in each directorate.

MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE TOOLS
The progress made by each inspection body is assessed twice yearly by the network of regional monitors applying a rating table. The outcome of this quality indicator is shared with the whole working community and has been integrated into the management control indicators and annual performance project (APP). All inspection bodies submit every four years to an audit of the same type as that required for accreditation, and this is carried out by COFRAC-qualified auditors (Comité français d'accréditation / French committee for accreditation).

THE RESULTS OF THE PROCESS

Handbooks
Definition of a method of inspection necessarily means that harmonised procedures must be laid down for all inspectors and for each point to be inspected. Their assessment must then be guided by a description of what is expected in order to judge conformity and the limits of what defines non-conformity. These elements are set out for the various types of inspection in some fifty handbooks dealing with everything from the inspection of imported plant products, the protection of birds on poultry farms, inspection of refrigerated goods vehicles or inspection of egg packing plants.

RATING TABLES
The drafting of an inspection report requires that each point to be inspected must be identified and accompanied in each case by a determination of whether it has been checked and if so if it has been found compliant or non-compliant. Detected non-compliance must be documented. The harmonisation of inspections and the keeping of unified computer records has required the creation of tools to underpin inspection reports, otherwise known as ‘rating tables’.
Managing work orders

The inspections carried out by decentralised services are triggered by instructions from the authorities to which they are answerable. It is essential, both for these decentralised services, which need to manage the scheduling of their activities, and for central administration, which needs to verify that the orders given are aligned with the resources provided, that the orders should be identified completely unambiguously and recorded using procedures common to all.

It was with this in mind that a unified database was created (‘Galatée’) to which a work order management tool is connected. Each work order received is examined by the inspection body, which then informs the source of any difficulties that may apply to its execution. This feedback enables central administration to assess the precise degree to which its instructions can be carried out and to improve quality on a continuous basis.

WHAT COMES AFTER THE PROCESS

COFRAC

*The Comité français d’accréditation* or French Committee for Accreditation, which was set up in 1994, is a non-profit association formed under the auspices of the public authorities. Its main aim is to accredit, in accordance with French, European and International standards, all organisations such as laboratories, certification bodies and inspection bodies that contribute to the evaluation of conformity with a set of reference criteria.

ACCREDITATION

This process is conducted by a team of COFRAC auditors on the basis of an audit of the central administration and a sample of representative decentralised inspection services. The members of the audit team will be quality specialists and technicians who assess the technical appropriateness of the procedures implemented, particularly in terms of competence, methods, risk analysis and work scheduling.

Once accreditation has been awarded, an annual audit of a sample of sites will enable COFRAC to verify continuing adherence to standard NF EN ISO/CEI 17020.