

Audit of food safety supervision

Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office

Key facts

Food safety involves a multitude of stakeholders. Some 136,000 companies active in the food industry and in food production must ensure that their goods comply with the legal requirements and do not pose any health risks to consumers. These companies have a duty of self-regulation. The authorities are responsible for official risk-based inspections and the cantonal chemists are tasked with conducting them. They carry out around 40,000 inspections at businesses each year. The Federal Food Safety and Veterinary Office (FSVO), with the support of the Federal Food Chain Unit (FFCU), is responsible for monitoring and coordinating the implementation of the relevant legislation.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) examined the effectiveness and scope of the FSVO's supervision in the area of foodstuffs. It focused on the supervision of the cantonal enforcement authorities and its effects. The FSVO is committed to coordinating the enforcement of foodstuffs legislation and promoting cooperation between the various stakeholders. It issues directives, is involved in the training of inspectors and coordinates measures in the event of food safety risks. However, consistency between cantonal enforcement authorities could be further improved by developing common tools. The supervisory approach of the FSVO, based on audits and investigations by the FFCU, focuses on food safety issues in Switzerland as a whole rather than on implementation issues at the regional level. For example, a lack of complete and reliable data means that the FSVO does not ensure that the cantonal authorities comply with the prescribed intervals between official company inspections.

Scope of product inspections has not been set

The monitoring strategy for food safety is specified in the legal framework. Its implementation is detailed in the multi-year national supervisory plan. This ensures that official inspections encompass all sectors and all stages of the food chain. The scope of official inspections per business category is set out in an ordinance. However, no targets for product inspections (frequency of laboratory analysis of samples) have been set, despite the importance of this type of control for achieving the strategic objectives.

The cantonal laboratories are responsible for carrying out the sample analyses and the FSVO has no responsibility for the organisation of these laboratories. If there is a lack of expertise in a cantonal chemist's laboratory, another canton can be approached. There is no specific competency map for each cantonal laboratory. Therefore, it is not possible to determine whether the cantons' analytical skills meet their needs and whether the organisation is efficient.

Risk analysis should take into account the results of the cantons' inspections

The FFCU carries out audits and investigations on behalf of the FSVO to ensure that national requirements are correctly implemented by the enforcement authorities. It draws up a multi-year supervision programme with the topics to be monitored. The choice of topics deemed to be priorities is not transparent – this should be justified by a formal risk analysis

with defined criteria. The control data provided by the cantons should also be used to inform the FFCU's risk analysis. Although the quality of control data was not assured until 2022, from 2023 onwards this data will be interfaced and will meet more precise specifications. The data will then provide useful information for analysing the cantonal enforcement authorities' inspections.

The FFCU's supervision programme contains few activities related to the work of the cantonal chemists in foodstuffs control. The main focus is on primary production (plant cultivation and livestock breeding). In addition, the audits are intended to assess the overall system and not the implementation in the individual cantons. For example, there is no supervision of compliance with the intervals for official company inspections as prescribed by ordinance. The SFAO found that the average annual interval between inspections is always longer than that stipulated in the applicable legislation. Finally, the FFCU makes recommendations to the enforcement authorities and follows them up. The FFCU reports are not published and the legal framework does not provide for possible sanctions when a cantonal enforcement authority does not implement the necessary corrective measures.

The FFCU auditors are made aware of the principles of independence expected of them during their annual reviews. The SFAO considers this measure insufficient and recommends that they sign an annual declaration of independence that specifies the standards to be met.

Tools to be developed to ensure consistency

The training of inspection staff organised by the FSVO and the cantonal enforcement authorities is tailored to the needs. The challenges are mainly related to specialist skills, which are not always to be found in all the cantons, and collaboration is required. The FSVO wants to adapt the legal framework so that inspectors can work outside their own canton.

The FSVO issues directives to standardise the implementation of food legislation. There is potential for harmonisation of the tools used by the cantonal enforcement authorities, such as the checklist for official inspections and the report to businesses; standard models would improve consistency.

If a food safety risk is detected, the FSVO coordinates measures. Consumers can find out about warnings and product recalls on the RecallSwiss website. However, this is a new website and not yet well known.

Original text in French