

VOLUNTARY CERTIFICATION SCHEME FOR FOOD ESTABLISHMENTS

Certification Process

1. SCOPE OF THIS DOCUMENT

This document explains the process of certification under the Voluntary Certification Scheme for food establishments (hereinafter referred to as the Scheme) and the requirements that should be followed in order to obtain, operate and maintain the Certification.

2. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this document is to regulate the operation of the Scheme and promote uniformity in its operation between the Certification Bodies (from now on CBs), the food establishments seeking certification and the accreditation body, NABCB.

3. SCOPE OF CERTIFICATION

3.1 For the purpose of assessment under this Scheme food establishments are categorised on the basis of the nature and degree of processing of food before sale, into three categories as given below :

Category A	food establishments that process/cook and serve food
Category B	food establishments that serve food processed and cooked elsewhere
Category C	food establishments that only process/cook food for serving elsewhere

3.1.1 No part of the process or any food products being handled , procesed or served to the customer by a food establishment shall be excluded form the scope of certification.

3.2 For any food establishment to qualify for this certification, compliance to the domestic food regulations is a prerequisite.

3.3 The elements of the Certification process are:

- a) evaluation of the food establishments food processing and hygiene processes for compliance to the certification criteria, and the capability to process food products under hygienic conditions on a continuous basis,
- b) evaluation of the food product(s) for absence of pathogens for ensuring food safety through testing of products sampled from the food establishment and the market or any other source.

3.4 The food establishments shall be assessed as per a Food Safety Rating system (FSRS), which is based on;

- a) Category of requirement defined on the basis of its significance to food safety as Critical, Major must and Minor must in the certification criteria, and
- b) Level of implementation and compliance

3.5 Based on this the food establishments shall be rated into four classes of Platinum, Gold, Silver or Bronze under this scheme, as per the Food Safety Rating system (FSRS) defined in the Certification Criteria.

3.6 The Scheme is open to all food establishments that are legal entities in India.

3.7 FSSAI itself is not involved in the certification of food establishments. It is the owner of the Certification Scheme and the Certification Criteria. Certification is operated by independent product certification bodies duly accredited by NABCB and/or recommended by QCI.

3.8 The certification to the above mentioned criteria shall be carried out by the CBs duly accredited for the certification scheme as per ISO/IEC Guide 65, by NABCB and/or recommended by QCI. To operate under the Scheme the CBs will require an extension of scope within the accreditation for ISO/IEC Guide 65.

4. CERTIFICATION PROCESS

4.1 Registration of Application

4.1.1 The certification body shall maintain and make publicly available accurate information describing its certification processes for granting, maintaining, extending, renewing, reducing, suspending or withdrawing product certification, and geographical areas in which it operates. The information shall include

- a) reference to the Certification Criteria,
- b) procedure for obtaining Product Certification, a detailed description of the initial and continuing certification activity, including the application, initial evaluation, periodic surveillance evaluations, and the process for granting, maintaining, reducing, extending, suspending, withdrawing certification and recertification .
- c) an Application form;
- d) list of documents required to be submitted along with the application.
- e) information about the fee for application, initial certification and continuing certification
- f) documents describing the rights and duties of certified clients, and
- g) information on procedures for handling complaints and appeals

4.1.2 The CB shall respond to all enquiries received from prospective applicants for certification of food establishments with complete information for facilitating a registration of an applicant, within seven days of receipt of the query.

4.1.3 The prospective applicant food establishment shall apply to the Certification Body on the Application format prescribed by the CB, and provide as a minimum information on the name and address of applicant with contact details, proof of legal entity, location of the food establishment, category of food establishment, range of food products offered, description of production processes, own installed/existing food processing facilities, number of shifts of operation, number and competence of manpower, logistic support if any.

4.1.4 The prospective applicant food establishment shall declare whether it has been an applicant or certified under this Scheme by any other certification body, and if yes then shall provide the previous evaluation reports to the new certification body. The certification body may verify the information provided by contacting the earlier certification body.

4.1.5 The prospective applicant food establishment shall along with the application declare any judicial proceedings relating to their operations/ product, any proceedings by any Regulatory body or suspension/cancellation/withdrawal of any certification/ approvals under any Regulations or otherwise.

4.1.6 Certification is granted only against the current relevant certification criteria. The certification body shall review all applications for the above and ensure the same.

- 4.1.7 All applications for certification shall be reviewed by the certification body for adequacy and deficiencies observed, if any, shall be informed to applicant food establishment within seven days of receipt of application. Review of applications shall be done by a competent person. Records of review shall be maintained.
- 4.1.8 Only applications found to be completely filled and supported with all documents sought shall be accepted and registered in order of receipt with a unique identification number, acknowledged and records maintained. Registration should be done within seven days of receipt of application or deficiencies communicated as per 4.1.6 above.
- 4.1.9 Antecedents of applicants shall be verified in relation to the Scheme. If the licence has been suspended / cancelled for a product or the establishment during the last one year, the application from the same food establishment will not be entertained.
- 4.1.10 Applications from food establishments who have earlier misused the Food Safety Rating System, or been implicated / convicted by the court, or whose earlier certificate was cancelled because of violation of terms & conditions shall not be registered within one year of conviction/stricture by the court/cancellation of the certificate by any CB.
- 4.1.11 Applications from food establishments found to be violating the terms and conditions of the Scheme while their application is being processed for grant of certificate, shall not be processed any further, and rejected after a due notice of 15 days.
- 4.1.12 Requests for grant of certificates from ex applicants shall be processed like a fresh applicant and the entire procedure for grant of certificate be adhered to subject to clause 4.1.8, 4.1.9 and 4.1.10 above.
- 4.1.13 Certification Bodies shall reject or close all Application under the following conditions;
- a) if Initial Evaluation is not carried out within six months of registration of application
 - b) If hygienic facilities are observed to be deficient during the Initial Evaluation and/or during the follow up Evaluation carried out after food establishment has confirmed necessary corrective actions are not completed within one month of Initial Evaluation,
 - c) Non acceptance of internal quality assurance protocol within a month of Initial Evaluation;
 - d) Lack of competent personnel for food processing,
 - e) If food establishment shows no progress towards completion of corrective actions within one month of Initial Evaluation and six months of Registration of application.
 - f) Misuse of Certification Mark
 - g) Evidence of malpractice
 - h) Voluntary withdrawal of application.
- 4.1.14 In the event of a closure/rejection of an Application, the application fee submitted with the application may be refunded as decided by the certification body.

4.2 Initial Evaluation

- 4.2.1 Initial evaluation shall be carried out in two stages by a competent evaluation team.
- 4.2.2 The certification body shall communicate the composition of the teams and duration of Initial Evaluation to the applicant food establishment for identification of conflict of

- interest, if any. Any objections to the team by the applicant should be examined on merit.
- 4.2.3 Timings and date of Initial Evaluation shall be fixed in consent with the food establishment ensuring that food production processes representative of normal business operations will be open for witnessing during the planned Evaluations.
- 4.2.4 Initial Evaluation of the product and the processes at the site of the food establishment shall be conducted within one month of registration of application and or satisfactory fulfilment of all application requirements.
- 4.2.5 During the Stage 1 evaluation the certification body shall review the Self Inspection Report submitted by the prospective applicant to ascertain the status of compliance to food safety regulation and applicant's state of preparedness with respect to the requirements of the certification criteria for the Stage 2 evaluation, and prepare a report. CB shall ensure that the Self Inspection Report is structured around the certification criteria providing adequate information for reaching an informed judgement prior to proceeding to Stage 2 evaluation. This review shall be carried out off site.
- 4.2.6 Deficiencies observed with respect to the certification criteria during the Stage 1 evaluation shall be informed in writing to the applicant.
- 4.2.7 The Stage 2 evaluation by certification body shall take place only after necessary actions on the identified deficiencies have been taken and confirmed by applicant. The CB may seek documentary evidence to verify the implementation of corrective actions.
- 4.2.8 During the Stage 2 evaluation of the applicant, the team shall
- a) Witness the food production processes covering as many products applied for as possible;
 - b) Check for practices and process controls being exercised for ensuring food hygiene and safety and conformance to regulatory requirements and undertake verification of all records;
 - c) List the applicable regulations and check compliance on sampling basis, need to cover all in certification cycle,
 - d) If satisfied with b) above, draw samples of food products being processed and or provided to customers by the food establishments, as per sampling plan given below for testing in an independent laboratory for absence of pathogens;
 - e) Take care that Sample is drawn in such a manner so as not to contaminate the product while sampling and packing.
 - f) Pack and seal the samples(s) such that the product integrity is maintained for its intended shelf life.
 - g) Clearly identify the samples with their name, date of processing, unique/Batch identification if any and suitable identification to enable traceability to the applicant and the Initial Evaluation visit
 - h) Mask the identity of the sample if packaged, with respect to the name of manufacturer as depicted on the original packing.
 - i) Draw Samples in quantities adequate to facilitate their testing for microbiological criteria specified in the domestic regulation

- j) Ensure that if the product is affected by the conditions of temperature, handling and storage, the sample is drawn and maintained under those conditions for testing its conformity to specified criteria.
- 4.2.9 The certification body shall draw sample of at least 25% of the products being manufacturing / handled / served by the food establishment, which are representative of various process like washing and preparing for consumption without any cooking, baking, cooking, chilling / freezing, food held hot / cold prior to serving to customer, drinking water etc for independent testing.
- 4.2.10 Any non conformities to the certification criteria observed during Stage 2 evaluation with respect to the certification criteria shall be informed in writing to the applicant for taking necessary action. The non conformities shall be classified as per the classification in the certification criteria. .
- 4.2.11 Based on the level of implementation and compliance observed during the evaluation, the Food establishment shall be rated as per FSRS as either Platinum, Gold, Silver or Bronze.and an on site evaluation report prepared.
- 4.2.12 Samples of food products drawn for independent testing shall be forwarded to a testing laboratory either compliant to or accredited to ISO 17025 – whether inhouse or external - for ascertaining conformance to certification criteria/absence of pathogens. The sample(s) shall be so despatched that they do not get damaged and or contaminated, undergo deterioration, and the product integrity is maintained.
- 4.2.13 Certification Body shall maintain records of all certification activities – application registration, documents provided by applicant, on site evaluation report, Test reports of sample sent for independent testing.
- 4.2.14 A Brand Name declaration shall be obtained from the applicant indicating the Brand names the food establishment intends to use on its packaged food products, if any, covered under this Certification Scheme. The applicant shall have to provide proof of ownership of the Brand name, and to facilitate any product recall if such a situation were ever to arise during the operation of the certification of scheme..

4.3 Grant of Certificate

- 4.3.1 The certification body shall ensure the following prior to processing the application for grant of certificate :
 - a) The availability of all relevant processing equipment required for the production of food products.
 - b) Availability of authorized and/or adequate power and water supplies, where such supplies are required for processing, production, storage and serving of food.
 - c) Competent and qualified personnel for production of food product(s) and management of the facility.
 - d) Compliance to the applicable food regulation.
 - e) Conformity of the food establishment with requirements of the certification criteria as relevant to the specific category of food establishment; and the rating done;
 - f) The Rating score for the food establishment, as per FSRS defined in the certification criteria, is not below the rating for Bronze;
 - g) Conformity of the food product with microbiological requirements of the food regulations;
 - h) Necessary documentation for proof of legal entity and authentication of premises of manufacture where certification is being sought.

- i) Acceptance from the applicant for other certification requirements like the fee, Brand name declaration, etc .
 - j) Verification of implementation of corrective actions through a follow up evaluation on site of major and minor Non conformities , and
 - k) Any other requirements prescribed by the Certification Body.
- 4.3.2 There shall be no conditional grant of certification and any rating below Bronze shall not be processed for grant of certification.
- 4.3.3 On grant of certification, the Certification body shall inform the food establishment and issue a Certificate, uniquely identified, to the organization indicating the category of food establishment, Rating under FSRS, type of products, the certification criteria, effective date, validity date, and the name and address of the food establishment site where certified as a minimum..
- 4.3.4 No Brand names of the food products shall be mentioned on the Certificate document or any other document intimating grant of certification.
- 4.3.5 The effective date of certification shall not be before the date of decision to grant the product certification to the food establishment.
- 4.3.6 The certificate for product certification shall be for a maximum period of 3 years from the date of decision to grant the product certification.

4.4 Surveillance Evaluation

- 4.4.1 Surveillance evaluations of the certified sites shall be carried out at a frequency of once in three months, ensuring that the gap between two surveillance evaluations does not exceed three months. The Certification Body may allow a grace period of one month based on valid grounds beyond which delays shall lead to suspension of the certificate.
- 4.4.2 The certification body shall ensure that production operations and their controls are witnessed, and samples drawn for independent testing during the surveillance evaluation. Planning for surveillance evaluations shall ensure this.
- 4.4.3 Compliance to food regulations shall be checked on sampling basis and reported during each surveillance, ensuring that all requirements are addressed within a certification cycle. Microbiological requirements shall be checked I each evaluation.
- 4.4.4 In case where the certified food establishment processes a number of food products, the certification body shall plan for surveillance evaluation with a view to covering as much of the entire range of food products during the certification period through independent testing of samples drawn from the establishment as well as from the market in case of packaged products.
- 4.4.5 During the surveillance evaluation, the evaluators shall as a minimum check and report on the following;
- a) Status of hygienic conditions and compliance to the requirements of the certification criteria ,
 - b) Rating of the food establishment as per FSRS, and that displayed by the food Establishment;
 - c) Compliance to the applicable food regulation
 - d) Handling and disposal of non conforming products
 - e) Actions taken on discrepancies observed during the previous evaluation, failure of samples if any reported and informed to the food establishment;
 - f) Draw samples for independent laboratory

- g) The continued availability of the food processing and production equipment and infrastructure and changes since the previous evaluation. In the event of changes the evaluator shall ascertain if they are adequate, comply with certification requirements and ensure control of processes.
 - h) In case of Category C of food establishments, information on production of food products and the names of consignees to whom they have been despatched for the purpose of market sampling.
- 4.4.6 If any non conformity is observed, the same shall be categorized as per the classification of the certification criteria. The non conformity report shall be provided to the food establishment in writing, generally on site, for correction and corrective action. Details of the same shall be reported in the Surveillance evaluation report.
- 4.4.7 Based on the prevailing level of implementation and compliance the CB shall determine the current rating as per FSRS. In the event of non compliance to a requirement classified as Critical, or if the rating score for the food establishment is below the rating for Bronze the certification shall be suspended (**see Cl 4.10**).
- 4.4.8 The Food Safety Rating as evaluated shall be communicated to the food establishment for public display in the Establishment.
- 4.4.9 The certification body may increase or decrease the frequency of surveillance evaluation based on the Rating under FSRS and the performance of the food establishment inclusive of independent test reports on pathogens testing.
- 4.4.10 The frequency of surveillance evaluation maybe reduced to once in six months provided the food establishment has continued to achieve a rating of Platinum/Gold during the last one year and there have been no non conformities, failure of samples or complaints during this period. The certification body shall revert
- 4.4.11 If the surveillance evaluation results in an infructuous visit due to any reason, and neither the operation is witnessed nor products drawn for testing independent testing, the CB shall conduct another surveillance evaluation. Such additional evaluations may be charged to the certified unit as decided by the Certification Body.
- 4.5 Market samples for Category C Food Establishments**
- 4.5.1 Samples of food products processed and provided by category C certified food establishments shall be purchased from the market or procured from outlets where despatched and tested in independent laboratories for ascertaining compliance to regulatory requirements including absence of pathogens.
- 4.5.2 The certification body shall draw a minimum of 2 samples from the market for each such food establishment in a year.
- 4.5.3 In case where the certified food establishment is processing a wide range of food products, the certification body shall attempt to draw the market samples in a manner so that practically the entire range is covered within a certification cycle.
- 4.6** As far as possible, sample integrity shall be maintained by drawing market samples in the original packaging.
- 4.7** In the event of a failure of sample of food product, drawn from the food establishment or the market, the CB shall advise the food establishment to suspend the certification, till adequate and effective corrective actions are taken. If the products involved have a shelf life of greater than the time taken for testing and reporting, the CB shall advise the food establishment to

- a) Stop despatches of the failing Batch if stocks are available either at the site or in their warehouses;
 - b) Recall the failing Batch from the market;
 - c) Identify all the other products manufactured with same raw materials, or those manufactured during the same time under similar controls, and examine their processing records.
- 4.8** The failure of sample(s) shall be communicated to the certified food establishment for investigation, root cause analysis and proposed corrective actions within 15 days of intimation. The CB shall respond to the proposed corrective actions within 5 days and the food establishment shall implement the corrective actions within one month from acceptance of the corrective actions by the CB.
- 4.9 Suspension**
- 4.9.1 The certification body shall issue instructions to the certified food establishments for suspension of certification without any notice, when;
- a) Any sample of food product , drawn from the food establishment or market, fail to conform to the microbiological criteria / requirements of the certification criteria;
 - b) Unsatisfactory performance during on site evaluation with a rating of less than Bronze when determined as per FSRS.
- 4.9.2 On receipt of instructions for suspension of marking, the certified food establishment shall suspend the display of the certification mark in its premises with immediate effect.
- 4.9.3 The manufacturing unit shall be advised to undertake a root cause analysis and identify the necessary corrective actions for resolving the same.
- 4.9.4 .The certification body shall revoke suspension only when ;
- a) Corrective actions have been taken and verified by the certification body.
 - b) Reports of Samples of food products processed and manufactured after corrective actions on independent testing confirm compliance to Criteria requirements with respect to microbiological criteria.
- 4.9.5 Suspension shall not exceed a period of three months and provided it is still within the validity period of the certificate. The food establishments inability to resolve issues relating to suspension within this period shall lead to cancellation of certification.
- 4.10 Renewal**
- 4.10.1 The certification body shall send the Renewal notice to the certified food establishments at least four months prior to expiry of certificate validity period.
- 4.10.2 The food establishment shall apply for renewal in the prescribed format along with fee, if any prescribed by the CB at least 3 month before expiry of the certification..
- 4.10.3 The certification body shall review the performance of the certified food establishment who has sought renewal of the Certificate, with respect to compliance to certification criteria during the entire certification cycle, prior to a decision on the renewal of the certificate.
- 4.10.4 The review shall be based on
- a) The surveillance evaluation reports,
 - b) The variations in Ratings during different evaluations carried out;
 - c) Handling and disposition of non conforming products
 - d) Test reports for samples drawn from the establishment and the market,

- e) Any suspension of certificate during the previous validity period;
 - f) corrective actions taken
 - g) complaints if any received,
 - h) Adverse information, if any.
- 4.10.5 Renewal of certificate shall be based on the satisfactory performance of the certified food establishment.
- 4.10.6 The certification Body shall not renew certification with conditions for compliance to be verified subsequently. There shall be no conditional renewal of certification. The CB shall not renew any certification where certification is under suspension.
- 4.10.7 When performance of the certified units is not satisfactory and the rating is below Bronze, the certification body shall withhold the renewal of the certificate to the food establishment clearly stating the reasons and give time for effecting corrective actions. The verification and decision on renewal should be taken within one months of the expiry date.
- 4.10.8 The corrective actions shall be verified on site .
- 4.10.9 The renewal shall be effected from the date of the expiry of the previous certificate and the intervening period shall be treated as period of suspension and clearly stated on the Certificate . The food establishment shall not claim certification during this period and shall not display any Food Safety Rating during the said period.
- 4.10.10 In case the food establishment does not complete satisfactorily actions within three months, the certificate shall stand expired from the date of expiry of previous validity.
- 4.10.11 When a certificate is not renewed it expires at the end of validity period.

4.11 Cancellation

- 4.11.1 Certification body shall cancel the certificate when ;
- a) Certified food establishment contravenes the terms and conditions of certification and provisions of this certification scheme like repeated failures of samples, suspension of certificate, inadequate corrective actions, etc
 - b) The corrective actions taken are not ensuring compliance, or the proposed plan for corrective actions will take a considerable time beyond 3 months for implementation;
- 4.11.2 Certification body shall cancel the product certification certificate at the request of the certified food establishment, if the operation(s) in the certified premises can no longer be carried due to reasons of natural calamities such as flood, fire, earthquake etc, lock out declared by the management, or closure of business operations etc.

4.12 Change of location / Ownership / Name

- 4.12.1 The certified organization shall inform the CB of any change in the location of the food establishment.
- 4.12.2 On receipt of such information , the certification body shall issue instructions to the certified food establishment for suspension of certification with immediate effect.
- 4.12.3 The food establishment shall be subject to an evaluation at the new site like an Initial Evaluation of an applicant.
- 4.12.4 If the evaluation is satisfactory the CB shall transfer the Certificate to the new location .
- 4.12.5 The CB shall endorse the change of premises on the Certificate.

4.12.6 In the event of change of Ownership, the food establishment shall submit their acceptance to the agreements for Certification with the CB regarding the operation and payment of fees. CB shall ask the food establishment for proof of legal entity afresh. The same process shall be followed as and when an existing applicant undergoes a change in management. Such changes shall not call for a visit to the production site.

4.12.7 In case of change of Name, the food establishment shall inform the change in the name to the CB supported with documentary evidence, and if satisfied the CB shall endorse the Certificate in the new name.

4.13 Extension of scope

4.13.1 Extension of scope of certificate for inclusion of additional Categories of activities under the same certificate shall be done after ascertaining;

- a) Availability of requisite infrastructure, manufacturing machinery, logistic support and technical skills .
- b) Availability of authorized and/or adequate power and water supplies, where such supplies are required for processing, production, storage and serving of food.
- c) Competent and qualified personnel for production of food product(s) and management of the facility.
- d) Compliance to the applicable food regulation.
- e) Conformity of the food establishment with requirements of the certification criteria as relevant to the specific category of food establishment; and the rating done;
- f) The Rating score for the food establishment, as per FSRS defined in the certification criteria, is not below the rating for Bronze;
- g) Conformity of the food products for which extension is sought with microbiological criteria requirements of the certification criteria; These samples shall be drawn for independent testing as are being drawn for initial evaluation.

4.13.2 The extension of scope shall be clearly mentioned in the certificate document by way of an additional Category of food establishment along with its date of inclusion for avoiding any misrepresentation or misinterpretation. Irrespective of the date of inclusion, the validity of the Certificate shall remain unchanged.

4.14 Certificate

4.14.1 The CB shall provide a certification document to the certified client that clearly conveys, or permits identification of:

- a) the name and geographic location of the food establishment that has been certified
- b) the dates of granting, extending or renewing certification;
- c) the expiry date or recertification due date consistent with the recertification cycle;
- d) a unique identification code;
- e) the certification criteria, including issue number and/or revision, against which the product(s) are certified;
- f) the scope of certification with respect to category of food establishment, range of product (s) as applicable at the identified site;
- g) the name and address of the certification body; other marks (e.g. accreditation symbol) may be used provided they are not misleading or ambiguous;
- h) any other information required by the certification criteria used for certification;
- i) in the event of issuing any revised certification documents, a means to distinguish the revised documents from any prior obsolete documents

4.14.2 The effective date on a certification document shall not be before the date of the certification / recertification decision.

4.14.3 The formal certification documentation shall include the signature of the individual(s) of the certification body assigned such responsibility.

4.15 Fee

4.15.1 A fee to be charged to the food establishment without any discrimination between units, geographical location, size of the unit.

4.15.2 The CBs fee structure shall be publically accessible and also be provided on request.

4.15.3 CB shall notify and obtain consent to its fee structure from the food establishment prior to grant of certification. As and when the fee undergoes a change, the same shall be communicated to all including applicants and the food establishment certified under this scheme of certification for their acceptance.