

# The IFS approach and measures regarding COVID-19



# IFS COVID-19 Approach

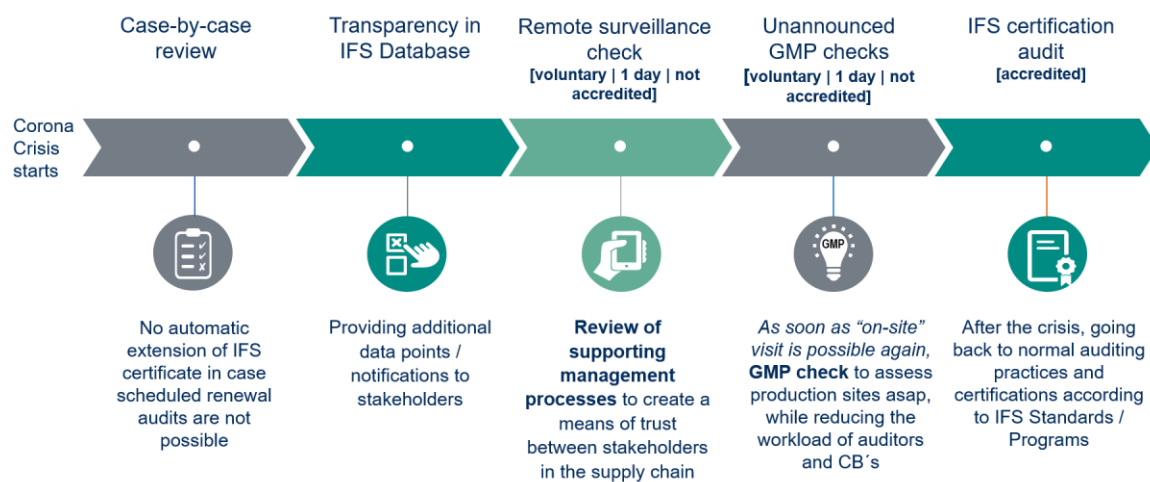
COVID-19 is challenging everyone. Also, food businesses everywhere are trying to continue to produce safe food for everyone.

The restrictions that apply to the spread of the Corona virus in large parts of the world inevitably also present challenges to cooperation between industry, logistics and commerce, as well as food services. This includes how on-site assessments are conducted and what role certifications play in risk management.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, IFS has published a clear strategy and the necessary tools to provide answers to the challenging situation for all stakeholders in the supply chain. The IFS approach was developed by experts from industry, logistics, retail and food services in the IFS committees.

## IFS COVID - 19 measures

### Timeline of actions taken and strategy



The entire IFS network is guided by the fact that the core message of an IFS Food Certificate "This certified company can produce a safe product according to customer specifications" must be maintained during the certificate period.

The maximum duration of an IFS Certificate is 12 months. After that, a new on-site assessment must take place in order to get a new certificate.

The core of the on-site assessment is, among other things, the answer to the question of whether hygiene and GMP are followed by the certified company. If no on-site visit can be made, no reliable statement can be made about the points "Hygiene and GMP".

Therefore, if the standard procedure cannot be adhered to, IFS allows the following options:

### **1. Case-by-case review**

IFS does not extend the IFS Certificate if a scheduled renewal assessment is not possible.

In this case, IFS strongly recommends that the company whose certificate expires contacts its customer and certification body to discuss how to deal with the situation.

### **2. Transparency in the IFS Database**

IFS supports this process by establishing the necessary transparency about the status of the IFS certificate in the IFS database. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, IFS implemented a COVID-19 notification function in the IFS database to identify assessments that did not take place and have been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 notification is carried out by the certification body responsible for the assessment. This provides transparency about the certificates and assessments affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3. Risk assessment by IFS Remote Surveillance Check**

In the event that a certificate expires, IFS recommends that suppliers and customers carry out a risk assessment and decide, on the basis of the risk assessment, how they wish to maintain cooperation and maintain the supply chain. Another important point in carrying out the risk assessment, whether the cooperation between supplier and customer will continue without an IFS Certificate, is the overall consideration of the business relationship. The number of recalls, the basic quality of the cooperation and many other points that only suppliers and customers can answer together. The IFS Certificate is an important part of the collaboration, but it is not the only criterion for whether a delivery relationship works.

After a thorough risk assessment, there is an option to add a COVID-19 notification to an expiring certificate. The expired certificate will still be visible.

Additionally, IFS offers an IFS Remote surveillance check tool for this risk assessment. It is a voluntary option that is not accredited and is not recognised by the GFSI, where the most important documents of the management system are reviewed on a remote basis.

## **4. Unannounced GMP Check**

The crucial question of whether a producer can produce a safe product according to customer specifications is and remains the focus of GMP and hygiene in food production.

The vast majority of food producers maintained their production in the COVID-19 pandemic. Raw materials are being delivered and external personnel have access to the production facilities to maintain the equipment or perform pest control activities. So in general it is possible that facilities can be visited, taking necessary precautions into consideration. In such cases, also an auditor can perform a visit in order to get an idea of the production facilities and to check whether GMP and hygiene are complied with.

For this purpose, IFS offers the IFS Unannounced GMP check tool. It is a voluntary option that is not accredited and is not recognised by the GFSI, where compliance with GMP and hygiene in production is checked. This gives an answer to the question of whether the production is safe. For the execution of the IFS Unannounced GMP check, only the personnel in the production area, who manage the production and the employees in the production, must be present.

The IFS Unannounced GMP check is an option if a complete IFS certification assessment cannot take place for example, as key employees with access to documents and records are working from home.

## **5. IFS Certification Assessment**

As soon as normal audit practices and certifications according to IFS standards/programs are possible, IFS strongly recommends that a full IFS certification assessment be performed.

## **What remote checks and assessments does IFS offer?**

In addition to the already described IFS Remote Surveillance Check, IFS offers a full-remote assessment for the IFS Broker. The IFS Broker checks only the performance of brokers, traders and agent who not produce or handle the product itself. Which means, there are no requirements for Good Manufacturing Practise (GMP) and hygiene in the scope of the assessment.

In addition, IFS is developing a split approach on-site/remote for all IFS Standards where there is Good Manufacturing Practise (GMP) and hygiene in the scope of the assessment. The IFS Committees has already decided that in the split version, the on-site assessment must always take place first and the remote part is always the second part of the assessment. It can be expected that IFS will launch the split approach beginning of 2021.

## Why is IFS not offering a full remote certification audit option?

The entire IFS network is guided by the core message of an IFS Food certificate "This certified company is capable of producing a safe product according to customer specifications" which must be maintained during the certificate period.

From the point of view of the IFS network, an on-site assessment is absolutely necessary in order to make a sound judgement. The core of the on-site assessment is, among other things, the answer to the question of whether hygiene and GMPs are followed by the certified company. A reliable check of the production processes, equipment and employee behavior with remote technology is simply not possible

In addition, a significant increased number of food safety issues notified within the RASFF portal based on microbiological contamination, problems with foreign body management, chemical migration etc. especially during the last weeks should alert everybody to investigate the root cause, e.g. increasing problems in the production plants and/or the lack of corrective action due to missing pressure from external assessments.

The IFS network wants a clear separation between an IFS Certificate and the various tools for IFS checks. An IFS Certificate is always associated with the fact that all criteria of the respective IFS Standard have been checked on the premises of the manufacturer. **A certificate issued on the basis of a "full remote certification audit" is a misleading signal from the point of view of the IFS network.**

***When an IFS Certificate is presented, everybody can be sure that the award of the certificate has always been preceded by an on-site assessment.***