

Explanatory notes

Conducting Remote Checks



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1 Fundamentals

On-site audits may be difficult or impossible to conduct for a variety of reasons (e.g., pandemics such as the spread of coronavirus as well as the spread of African swine fever or avian influenza). In order to uphold the eligibility of delivery of operations and the integrity of the QS scheme, certification bodies will be afforded the option to conduct remote checks in compliance with the following guidelines.

Nevertheless, it is still the aim for all relevant audits within the QS scheme to be conducted on site. In doing so, all instructions published on the respective information portals at www.q-s.de/en/, especially the "Guidance for conducting audits while taking into account the current coronavirus situation" are to be considered.

The possibility to conduct remote checks as described in this document is an exceptional regulation, which validity is regularly reviewed. QS reserves the right to repeal or limit the validity of this exceptional regulation prematurely at any time.

2 Remote checks

2.1 Scope

Remote checks can be conducted for all production scopes provided the audit is not exclusively able to be carried out in the form of a document check (see note below). On the basis of a remote check, the QS head office can issue a **QS eligibility of delivery but not a QS certification**. Issuing a certificate on the basis of a remote check is not possible.

Remote checks may only be conducted in risk areas or restricted areas and only when an on-site audit is not feasible.

Before conducting a remote check, the permitted time frame for bringing forward an audit per the certification guideline must be fully utilised and a certificate extension entered in the QS database. Only then will the certification body decide on whether to conduct a remote check.

Remote checks that are conducted to uphold recognition in external schemes/ standards are excluded from the obligation to enter a certificate extension in advance.

Note:

*In the case of **production scopes** that are audited **exclusively in the form of a document check**, regular audits may be conducted in the short term using the complete checklist as a simple document check without an on-site audit. If on-site auditing is waived, this must be documented in the audit report. On this basis, a QS certification or confirmation relative to the current QS inspection system can be issued by the certification body as before. The approval duration corresponds to the time frames illustrated in the certification guideline. The procedures for conducting remote checks as described in this document do not apply to these production scopes.*

2.2 Principles

In addition to the **QS inspection system** fundamental regulations, the following guidelines in particular must be considered when conducting remote checks:

- **IAF MD 4:2018**

IAF MANDATORY DOCUMENT FOR THE USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT) FOR AUDITING/ASSESSMENT PURPOSES

as well as the recommendations of the:

- **IAF ID 3:2011**

IAF Informative Document for Management of Extraordinary Events or Circumstances Affecting ABs, CABs and Certified Organizations

On this basis, it is the **responsibility of the certification body** to implement remote checks. They are to decide on a case-by-case basis whether a remote check is workable and justifiable. In addition, a location-specific

- Risk assessment
 - → content check
(e.g. in relation to the relevant production scopes, the previous “certification history”)

and

- Feasibility assessment
 - → technical check
(e.g. internet access, competence of auditor/farm manager to conduct a remote check)
 - → data privacy check
(e.g. transfer of documents, security of transfer methods, creation of records)

are to be conducted.

Scheme participants do not have any entitlement to a remote check being conducted.

The farm/location to be inspected is to be kept informed in full and in writing about the remote check process. Written agreement must be obtained from the scheme participant to conduct a remote check.

Suitable evidence must be submitted to QS upon request.

Deliberately providing false information or misusing remote checks may lead to sanction procedures being initiated.

Remote checks can be carried out a maximum of two times in succession at one site. Should it become necessary to conduct another remote check at the site, the written consent of the QS office must be obtained in advance.

2.3 Prerequisites for conducting remote checks

2.3.1 Use of Information and Communications Technology

The use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is required for conducting remote checks (see also IAF MD 4:2018). Beyond the specified principles, the following prerequisites must be guaranteed in this regard.

The use of ICT is to be mutually agreed between the certification body and the location to be inspected.

It must be ensured that both the certification body and the location to be inspected have access to the necessary infrastructure to support the use of the proposed ICT.

When using ICT, auditors must possess the requisite skills and abilities to understand and use the as-signed ICT in order to achieve the desired audit results.

The auditor must be aware of the risks and opportunities of using the assigned ICT as well as any effects it may have on the validity and objectivity of the information that is gathered.

If no agreement can be reached on the use of ICT to conduct a remote check, or if the certification body decides that a remote check is not workable or justifiable, either the audit must be conducted on site or the QS approval/eligibility of delivery will expire.

2.3.2 Exclusion criteria for remote checks

Remote checks are not permitted

- for initial audits
- if an audit is to be conducted for the first time after a change in certification body or switch from another certification scheme to the QS scheme
- for scope expansions
- for food retailer and butchery branches (retail shops only)
- if a complete regular audit is to be conducted as a follow-up audit (of a failed audit) to reinstate QS eligibility of delivery

If in doubt, the certification body arranges in advance with the QS head office for a remote check to be conducted.

2.4 Implementing remote checks

2.4.1 Scope of inspection and checklists

In conducting a remote check using the appropriate ICT (see above), the aim is to obtain as much information as possible, i.e. as much detail as is required to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the farm situation.

Special checklists for conducting remote checks are provided in the QS database. To conduct a successful remote check, the minimum requirements to be checked are marked with "remote" in the checklists.

2.4.2 Preparing for a remote check

The basis for carrying out a remote check is comprehensive preparation, including a test run with regard to the virtual plant inspection (→ *technical check*).

Due to the preparation required, a remote check may be announced in advance, even if a complete regular audit should be conducted unannounced on site per the certification guideline.

In preparation for a remote check, the farm/location to be inspected is to be kept informed in full and in writing about the check process.

Suitable actions must be taken to ensure that security and confidentiality are preserved throughout the entire inspection proceedings.

It is advisable to test the functionality of the technical prerequisites during preparations for a remote check in conjunction with the farm to be inspected.

Where possible, a remote check should be conducted by the same auditor who conducted the last on-site audit at the location.

2.4.3 Conducting a remote check

Analogous to audits performed on-site, the performance of a remote check also obligatorily includes several parts/sections:

- **Documentation check**

The documentation check can be carried out in advance of or during a remote check. To reduce the volume of the remote check, it is recommended to review documents in advance. The documentation check may take place a maximum of four weeks prior to the discussion with the respondent.

- **Discussion with the respondent**

The discussion with the respondent(s) can take place either online via a video call or by telephone.

- **Virtual plant inspection**

During the virtual plant inspection, all relevant plant areas are viewed via live video. The tour is guided by the auditor. It is recommended that the auditor reviews the site map of the plant/site in advance in order to guide the plant inspection in a targeted manner during the inspection. It is the responsibility of the certification body to define the hardware and software to be used.

Should the plant inspection provenly due to technical problems (no or no stable reception) to be incomplete or not possible at all, other visual evidence must be provided by the contact person of the inspected site immediately during the inspection, maximum 24 hours later (ideally offline video, alternatively photographic evidence).

The remote check report can only be released in the QS database after receiving and checking this evidence.

2.4.4 Post-inspection tasks for remote checks

The reason for conducting a remote check must be explained in the remote check report. Furthermore, the extent to which ICT was used to conduct the audit must be specified. In particular, it must be explained whether and to what extent a virtual farm tour was conducted (see above). In particular, it must be explained to what extent a virtual plant inspection (as live video) was carried out (see above). If no or only an incomplete virtual plant inspection was carried out, a justification for this must be given.

2.5 Inspection result

A remote check result of "Pass" denotes that no K.O. evaluation was assigned and no general K.O. is present.

A result of "Remote check with K.O." denotes that at least one K.O. requirement was evaluated as D.

A result of "Fail" denotes that a general K.O. is present.

If any requirements are evaluated as K.O. during a remote check or a general K.O. is assigned, the certification body must contact the QS head office immediately to discuss and agree on the possibility of a reinspection.

If this is considered possible, the inspection result can be changed from "Remote check with K.O." to "Remote check with corrected K.O." by implementing the agreed corrective actions and corresponding administration in the QS database.

The inspected location must be informed of the remote check result in writing.

Violations against QS requirements that are identified as part of a remote check may lead to the initiation of sanction procedures.

2.6 Approval/Eligibility of delivery and reinstatement of QS certification

On the basis of a successful remote check, a farm/location retains its current QS status and is granted an extension of its QS approval for a maximum period of one year, but no longer than it would have received in accordance with its current QS status. The duration of a newly obtained approval is added onto the end date of the existing approval.

The certification body is therefore urged to conduct a complete regular audit on site as soon as possible to reinstate a QS certification.

If the regular audit is conducted within the six months – or nine months for companies in the fruit, vegetable and potato production stage – prior to the expiry date of the "remote" approval, the duration of the approval generated from the regular audit is added onto the expiring "remote" approval. For locations with QS status III, the regular audit may be conducted up to a month prior to the approval expiry without the time being lost.

If the audit is conducted sooner than the aforementioned time scales, the duration is recalculated taking into account the audit date and the targeted status.

2.7 Remote checks for QS-GAP

For the QS-GAP standard there is also the possibility to perform a remote check. In compliance with the following conditions, it can be used for the GLOBALG.A.P recognition.

- All requirements of the remote checklist QS-GAP have to be checked (analogously to a regular audit on site). The requirements are therefore not further identified in the checklist.
- The virtual plant inspection (see above) is also obligatory. For the visual assessment including the plant inspection, the same requirements apply as for the GLOBALG.A.P. remote procedure (see "[GLOBALG.A.P Remote](#)", Version 1.2 of 15.05.2020).
- The certification body is obligated to perform a regular audit on site as soon as possible to re-establish a regular QS-GAP certification. The on-site audit is considered as certification for the current certification cycle and not for the subsequent certification cycle, thus no extension of the eligibility of delivery as in the case of remote check in the rest of the QS scheme.

A further QS-GAP regular audit on site is therefore required for the subsequent certification cycle.

- In the GLOBALG.A.P. database, the attribute "remote" must be selected.

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QS Qualität und Sicherheit GmbH

Managing Director: Dr. A. Hinrichs

Schwertberger Straße 14, 53177 Bonn

T +49 228 35068 -0

F +49 228 35068 -10

E info@q-s.de

Photos: QS

q-s.de