

Smuggling, Interdiction, and Trade Compliance Program

Safeguarding History

In today's global marketplace, the borders between countries are beginning to disappear. International travel and trade take place in larger numbers and with fewer restrictions than ever before, bringing an average of 435,000 people into the United States each day. However, this huge volume of people and products often brings with it real threats to American agricultural and natural resources. These threats include foreign pests and diseases that could devastate these resources.

While Americans have grown accustomed to seeing healthy varieties of food at supermarkets, diverse selections of plants at their local nurseries, and marvelous animals, trees, and ornamental plants at local zoos and parks, people do not always realize the protective measures the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and other agencies take to preserve these environmental and agricultural resources.

APHIS wants to ensure the availability of domestic and imported foods in the marketplace, facilitate the exportation of agricultural commodities to foreign countries, and preserve the health and diversity of our agricultural resources. In response to the growing volume of smuggled and improperly imported agricultural products entering the United States, APHIS created Plant Protection and Quarantine's (PPQ) Smuggling, Interdiction, and Trade Compliance Program (SITC). The SITC program's mission is to identify the unlawful entry and distribution of prohibited agricultural products. These products may harbor harmful exotic plant and animal pests, diseases, or invasive species that could seriously damage America's crops, livestock, and environment.

SITC History

In the mid 1990s, Asian fruit growers from the Homestead, FL, area complained to PPQ's Deputy Administrator about illegally imported specialty crops from Thailand, specifically lichee and longans, flooding the New York markets. The agricultural products in New York eliminated the commodities' shipping costs from Florida and adversely affected many growers in the region. PPQ and APHIS Investigative and Enforcement Services (IES) formed a team that determined the prohibited items from Thailand were

being smuggled through the Canadian border in enormous quantities. These prohibited products were being offered for sale in the New York City market areas and were definitely competing with domestic and legal production.

PPQ team members intercepted the prohibited material crossing the Canadian border, and IES agents prosecuted the violators taking part in the shipping operation. In the first 2 years of the program, more than 68 tons of prohibited Asian fruit were seized and destroyed.

Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands SITC Work Unit

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The success of this operation led to the expansion of the program and development of specific position descriptions for PPQ liaison officers. A PPQ liaison officer is a PPQ officer who, in addition to their regular PPQ officer duties, works with IES investigators to identify and close the pathways of the unlawful entry and domestic distribution of prohibited foreign agricultural products into the United States. These positions were established nationwide in small numbers and organized into a network of officers whose main function was to detect and close smuggling pathways.

With new positions and a growing challenge, PPQ established two additional satellite programs: Closing the Los Angeles Marketplace Pathway (CLAMP) and Florida Interdiction and Smuggling Team (FIST). State and Federal officials in the CLAMP program were tasked to detect smuggled fruit-fly host material and close the pathway of that harmful pest. FIST, on the other hand, had objectives much larger in scope. Both programs effectively sealed off pathways for potential exotic pest introductions into the United States. As the organization became more successful and was recognized as an additional regulatory force within PPQ, it was reorganized into the current Smuggling, Interdiction, and Trade Compliance program.

SITC Partners

SITC officers nationwide shut down illegal pathways and agriculture distribution points in many ways. The unit routinely works with agents from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) during agricultural antismuggling and cooperative interdiction efforts at air, land, and sea ports-of-entry.

Besides port operations, teams of officers conduct local domestic market surveys, canvassing markets and grocery stores around the country seeking prohibited agricultural commodities. When agents have evidence a regulation has been violated, they turn the case over to APHIS' IES unit and USDA's Office of the Inspector General for prosecution. If warranted, APHIS will pursue civil and criminal penalties. The agency's efforts have led to grand jury indictments and Federal sentencing, hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines, and seizures of prohibited agricultural products valued at several million dollars. If vendors aren't aware they're selling prohibited items, the onsite official will explain Federal regulations and begin the importation trace to find the illegal pathway.

Domestic market surveillance and port inspections are highly effective methods to deter smuggling, but there are times when the unit resorts to other measures. As needed, SITC officers and other PPQ employees conduct trade verification operations and stepped-up inspections of cargo, passenger vehicles, and mail packages to seal off the flow of goods into the United States. Working with each State's department of agriculture, and other Federal agencies such as CBP, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, the SITC unit achieves compliance with regulations through comprehensive investigations, sound enforcement, and strong outreach efforts. The education and outreach campaigns target importers, market owners, transportation companies, retailers, and the general public.

SITC At Work

In fiscal year (FY) 2004, the SITC program was responsible for seizing and destroying 213,980 pounds of prohibited agricultural material. Its effectiveness in shutting down smuggling pathways has supported its main mission of protecting American agriculture and protecting our agriculture export industry.

What You Can Do

If you become aware of potential smuggling of prohibited exotic fruits, vegetables, or meat products, you can help by contacting the confidential Hotline number at 1-800-877-3835 and leaving a detailed message and contact telephone number. USDA protects the confidentiality of all information sources.

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