

Questions and Answers: Importing Irradiated Fruit into the United States

Q. When did APHIS approve the use of irradiation?

A. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) approved the use of irradiation as a quarantine treatment for fruits and vegetables in October 2002. Then, in January 2006, APHIS published another rule approving a minimum generic dose (400 gray) of irradiation for imported fruits and vegetables.

Q. Which countries can currently ship irradiated fruit into the United States?

A. Currently, irradiated mangoes from India; litchis, longan, rambutans, pineapples, mangoes, and mangosteen from Thailand; dragon fruit from Vietnam; and guavas from Mexico are allowed entry into the United States.

Q. What are the general requirements for exporting irradiated fruits to the United States?

A. To ensure plant pests of quarantine significance do not enter the United States through the importation of these fruits, they are inspected for the presence of pests by an APHIS preclearance officer in the country of origin. If there are no pests found during inspection, the shipment is then authorized to be treated at an APHIS-certified facility with specified doses of irradiation prior to export. If, however, APHIS officers find pests during the preclearance inspection, the shipment will be refused treatment and not be eligible for export to the United States.

Fruit that is inspected and treated must be packed in pest-proof boxes and safeguarded after treatment to prevent reinfestation. It must also be accompanied by a phytosanitary certificate issued by the national plant protection organization (NPPO) of the country of origin with an additional declaration certifying that the treatment and inspection of the fruit were made in accordance with the regulations.

Q. How do I begin importing approved irradiated fruit into the United States?

A. First, you need to apply for an APHIS permit. You

can apply by completing and submitting the Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program Form 587, "Application for Permit to Import Plants or Plant Products." The form can be completed online using the APHIS ePermits system at www.aphis.usda.gov/permits. The ePermits system is a Web-based tool that allows you to apply for a permit, check its status, and view it online.

You may also submit your application to PPQ's Permit Services unit. The address is: Permit Services, PPQ, APHIS, USDA, 4700 River Road, Unit 133, Riverdale, MD 20737. The permit application form is available for downloading at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/> or by calling (877) 770-5990. The permit is valid for 1 year from its issuance date.

Q. Are there any other requirements to import approved fruits and vegetables into the United States?

A. Yes. In addition to USDA requirements, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have specific requirements to import approved irradiated fruit into the United States. For information about FDA's requirements, please contact an FDA official by e-mail at industry@fda.gov. For more information on CBP's requirements, please visit www.cbp.gov. You may also contact an international customs broker who will help you with inspection and shipping logistics as well as the various agency approvals.

Q. What happens when my shipment arrives in the United States?

A. When your shipment arrives at a U.S. port of entry, CBP inspectors will verify three documents accompanying the shipment to ensure it was properly treated and inspected.

- PPQ Form 203—foreign site certificate of inspection—signed by an APHIS officer in the exporting country
- Phytosanitary certificate, issued by the country of origin's NPPO to certify that the shipment has been treated
- APHIS import permit, verifying that the shipment has been authorized by USDA to be imported into the United States

If these entry requirements are not met, the shipment will be prohibited entry. In addition, CBP inspectors may further inspect precleared commodities at the port of first arrival.

Q. Can I carry fresh irradiated fruit to the United States on my next flight?

A. No. The regulations only apply to commercial shipments of irradiated fruit. Individuals traveling to the United States cannot bring these fruits in personal baggage, even if the fruit has been treated. Fruit must enter the United States via commercial channels (air or ship), where quarantine security can be assured. Boxes of fruit leaving that chain of custody are prohibited entry into the United States.

Q. Can I send irradiated fruit to the United States through the mail?

A. No. As stated above, these fruits can only be commercially shipped to the United States. The fruit must be sent directly from the irradiation facility to its means of commercial conveyance (air or ship) and then exported directly to the United States. This ensures a strict chain of custody in the event the imported fruit shows signs of pest infestation.

Q. What is food irradiation?

A. Irradiation involves briefly exposing food to ionizing energy for a specific length of time in order to destroy or sterilize bacteria, microorganisms, or other pests of concern. Food is irradiated in a special processing facility and never comes in direct contact with the energy source.

Q. How does the process of irradiation affect the pests?

A. The energy waves produced during the irradiation process physically breaks the molecular structure of the pests' DNA, and either kills or sterilizes them. However, at specified doses, the structure of the atom is not affected.

It is important to note that irradiation does not necessarily always kill pests; however, it does sterilize them, rendering them incapable of reproducing or emerging from a host stage to become adults. Accordingly, there may be instances where you see insects on fruit; however, if they've been treated, they are not harmful to you or the fruit.

Q. Is it safe to eat irradiated fruits and/or vegetables?

A. Yes. The FDA has evaluated the safety of this technology over the last 40 years. It has found irradiation to be safe under a variety of conditions and has approved its use for many foods. The agency determined that the process is safe and effective in decreasing or eliminating harmful bacteria, insects, and parasites. In certain fruits and vegetables, it inhibits sprouting and delays ripening, which allows for a longer shelf life.

Food irradiation is currently used in over 50 countries to control plant pests and is approved by the World Health Organization, the American Medical Association, and many other organizations around the world. Although food irradiation has been in existence since the 1950s, scientists have just recently begun focusing on its ability to control harmful pests and diseases associated with fruits and vegetables.

Q. How do I know if my food has been irradiated?

A. The FDA requires that irradiated foods include labeling with either the statement, "treated with irradiation" or "treated by irradiation" along with the international symbol for irradiation, called the Radura.

Q. Why is the use of irradiation technology important in today's global marketplace?

A. Irradiating fresh fruits and vegetables allows them to be imported into the United States without risking the introduction of exotic plant pests. Irradiation, as a standalone technology or in conjunction with other treatments, is an effective way to resolve trade issues in many foods and agricultural products.

Although certain chemical fumigants, such as methyl bromide, are very effective against a wide range of plant pests, APHIS is trying to mitigate pest risks using methods that are less detrimental to the environment and to the fruit or vegetables being shipped. In both domestic and international agricultural markets, the use of irradiation may help reduce the need for methyl bromide.

Q. Where can I find out more information on this subject?

A. To learn more about the importation of approved irradiated fruit into the United States, please visit http://www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/manuals/ports/treatment.shtml. To learn more about food irradiation, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/DBMD/diseaseinfo/foodirradiation.htm> or the National Food Safety and Toxicology Center at <http://www.foodsafe.msu.edu>.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, age, disability, and where applicable, sex, marital status, familial status, parental status, religion, sexual orientation, genetic information, political beliefs, reprisal, or because all or part of an individual's income is derived from any public assistance program. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotope, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD). To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, 1400 Independence Avenue, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20250-9410, or call (800) 795-3272 (voice) or (202) 720-6382 (TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.