

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service and DHS' Customs and Border Protection: Working Together to Protect Agriculture

On November, 21, 2002, President Bush signed legislation creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to unify Federal forces and protect our Nation from terrorist threats. More than 22 Federal agencies were consolidated into the new department, including portions of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

After a long and distinguished history in USDA, approximately 2,500 employees from APHIS' Agriculture Quarantine and Inspection (AQI) force became part of DHS' Customs and Border Protection (CBP) on March 1, 2003.

Border Security

Since 2003, CBP has carried out the Nation's critical port-of-entry inspections. CBP is responsible for conducting inspections to protect our borders from foreign pest and disease introductions, and APHIS continues to set the regulations governing agricultural imports. The cooperation between the two agencies has enabled the AQI program to advance and meet new challenges in the growing global marketplace. This unique arrangement has increased the overall inspection force that ensures compliance with USDA/APHIS regulations, and it also has enabled APHIS to focus on strengthening its other activities in the safeguarding system.

CBP's agricultural specialists receive the same amount of agriculture-specific training as the specialists who were previously part of APHIS' workforce. An 8-week training program, conducted by APHIS instructors, ensures that they are fully prepared for their role at the border.

In addition to traditional agricultural enforcement, CBP agricultural specialists play a crucial role in educating other CBP officers about the agriculture inspection process, thus enhancing the agricultural knowledge of all personnel at U.S. ports of

entry. The deployment of both agricultural specialists and cross-trained CBP officers to search for agricultural threats has increased the field force available to the AQI program.

Agricultural Policy

Through risk assessments, pathway analyses, and rulemaking activities, APHIS continues to set agricultural policy concerning what agricultural products can enter the country and what products pose a risk and should be kept out. In addition to setting policy, APHIS also conducts technical and risk-based agricultural functions, including:

- Gathering pest and disease information overseas and analyzing the data;
- Negotiating protocols with trading partners;
- Performing preclearance inspections of certain goods destined for the United States from certain countries;
- Conducting inspections of passengers, baggage, conveyances, and cargo to prevent the movement of pests from Hawaii and Puerto Rico into the continental United States;
- Inspecting living plants imported through 17 APHIS-operated plant inspection stations located at various ports-of-entry;
- Conducting fumigation and other treatments when protocols require;
- Performing pest identification of USDA as well as CBP finds;
- Taking enforcement actions against violators of U.S. agricultural import regulations;
- Conducting a smuggling, interdiction, and trade compliance function to trace and close pathways for illegal imports that evade the existing agricultural protection system; and
- Training CBP inspectors, front-line CBP inspectors, and CBP agricultural canine teams.

Continued Cooperation

APHIS and CBP are committed to working in partnership to safeguard American agriculture by detecting and preventing harmful plant and animal pest and disease introductions. As part of this commitment, APHIS and CBP have formed a task force to address the concerns of agricultural stakeholders, as well as issues raised about the AQI program in reports from the Government Accountability Office and USDA's Office of the Inspector General. The joint task force developed 10 comprehensive action plans that contain

recommendations for both agencies that are already strengthening the delivery of the overall agricultural mission.

APHIS and CBP both take very seriously the shared mission of protecting the United States from foreign plant pests and animal diseases, as well as securing our country against unintentional and intentional threats to our agriculture and food supply. Through the efforts put forth by the joint task force and the plans that have been established, APHIS and CBP will make significant strides, not only in the near future, but in the long term, to further protect U.S. agriculture.

Additional Information

To learn more about APHIS or CBP, please visit the APHIS Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov or the CBP Web site at www.cbp.gov. For more information on the activities of the APHIS–CBP joint taskforce, go to www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/aqi_mission.shtml.

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