ePermits: Providing Online Access to Permit Applications

As part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) overall eGovernment initiative to transform and enhance the delivery of its programs, services, and information, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has implemented an electronic permitting system called ePermits.

The ePermits system is a Web-based tool that gives customers the ability to apply for a permit, check its status, and view it online. APHIS customers save a tremendous amount of time and effort by submitting applications and receiving permits via the ePermits system. The system also enables Federal regulatory officials to issue, track, and rapidly verify the validity of import permits, thus reducing the time and expense for processing and delivering permits.

Current Release

The ePermits system is a large initiative that has been in development for several years, and it is being implemented in multiple phases. Currently, ePermits customers can apply for the following Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ), Veterinary Services (VS), and Biotechnology and Regulatory Services (BRS) permits online:

- PPQ Form 525—Application for Permit to Receive Soil
- PPQ Form 526—Application for Permit to Move Live Plant Pests or Noxious Weeds
- PPQ Form 546—Agreement for Post Entry Quarantine State Screening Notice
- PPQ Form 585—Application for Permit to Import Timber or Timber Products
- PPQ Form 586—Application for Permit to Transit Plants and/or Plant Products through the United States
- PPQ Form 587—Application for Permit to Import Plants or Plant Products
- PPQ Form 588—Application for Permit to Import Plants and Plant Products for Experimental Purposes
- PPQ Form 621—Application for Protected Plant Permit to Engage in the Business of Importing, Exporting, or Reexporting Terrestrial Plants
- VS 16-3—Application to Import or Transport Controlled Material or Organisms or Vectors
- VS 16-7—Additional Information for Cell Cultures and Their Products (Supplement to VS 16-3)
- VS Notification of On-Hold Shipment
- Biotechnology Notifications
- Biotechnology Permits

In addition to online applications, ePermits also features a payment engine that allows customers to pay permit application fees—when applicable—online using a credit card. The payment feature is designed and operated securely to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of applicant information. The system collects, maintains, uses, and disseminates information only as authorized by law and, as necessary, to carry out agency responsibilities.

Another feature of ePermits includes its ability to handle—via online communications—the State review process for PPQ and BRS-issued permits. Using the ePermits system, PPQ and BRS officials can send permit applications to applicable States for their review and comment. In some cases, for example if a State is experiencing a plant disease outbreak, State officials may review an application and request that APHIS place special conditions on a permit, such as restricting the importation of specific items from other States. Using ePermits to manage communications online helps expedite the State review process, which previously relied upon officials communicating by fax or overnight mail.

The ePermits system also includes a feature that generates and prints shipment labels with barcodes. When scanning a barcode label created by ePermits, a Federal inspector can immediately confirm that the permit associated with that label is valid. Barcode labels improve turnaround time and reduce the chance that an inspector will reject a shipment because a permit cannot be verified.

For BRS permits or notifications that are issued, the ePermits system also features a compliance component to help manage the inspection of biotechnology field tests. Using this feature, BRS officials can enter and have access to up-to-date information concerning inspections, reported compliance incidents, and corrective actions. Having timely access to this information helps BRS officials promptly resolve potential problems and compliance incidents.

More Advances Underway

As part of the continuing evolution of ePermits, additional services and functions will be added to accommodate APHIS customers and to improve the agency's efficiency. In the future, APHIS plans to offer ePermits

users the ability to submit reports required under bio-technology notifications and permits, including planting reports, field termination reports, and planting notices. APHIS also plans to use ePermits to monitor compliance conditions for biotechnology field tests when bad weather strikes by combining inspection data with real-time weather data.

User Registration
To comply with government-wide initiatives, ePermits users are required to complete a registration process called eAuthentication. USDA's eAuthentication is a system used by USDA agencies that enables individuals to obtain user-identification accounts and to access certain USDA Web applications and services through the Internet.

The eAuthentication system identifies and validates USDA customers before they can use participating USDA Web-based business applications. This system provides a unique user-identification code that a USDA Web user can present to any participating USDA Web site, therefore reducing the burden on customers to register for and maintain separate identities for every online system. To learn more about USDA's eAuthentication, please visit http://www.eauth.egov.usda.gov.

For More Information on ePermits
The ePermits system was developed in an effort to improve citizens' knowledge of and access to USDA by enhancing service delivery and improving internal efficiency through technology-based solutions. You can learn more about ePermits at http://www.aphis.usda.gov/permits.