

Importing Food and Agricultural Products into the United States

Many agricultural pests and diseases exist worldwide that could be introduced into the United States through commodities such as meats, animals, animal products, fruits, vegetables, plants, soil, seeds, and plant-based handicrafts, among others. Because of these risks, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) regulates the entry of certain foreign agricultural products into the United States.

Before importing these kinds of items or obtaining them from an importer or broker, you'll need to find out what entry requirements apply to them. Learning the requirements can help you minimize confusion, prevent costly delays, and avoid penalties and merchandise loss.

General Information

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Customs and Border Protection (CBP) enforces APHIS regulations at ports of entry. CBP agriculture specialists inspect shipments of imported products and ensure that the required permits, sanitary certificates (for animal products), and phytosanitary certificates (for plant products) accompany each shipment.

Sanitary and phytosanitary certificates are legal documents issued by an exporting country to certify that a shipment meets U.S. plant and animal health standards. For example, a phytosanitary certificate may confirm that certain fumigation treatments have been performed or that the shipment was inspected prior to export and found free of pests and diseases of concern.

Importers should keep in mind that APHIS regulates plants and animals, as well as all products derived from plants and animals; for example, seeds for planting and seeds used in decorative craft items are both regulated items. To enter the United States legally, even commercially processed and packaged products may require a permit or documentation from the country of export, certifying that the products meet U.S. animal and plant health standards. Importers should also be

aware that some products from certain countries or regions cannot be imported at all due to the presence of pests and diseases that do not occur in the United States.

Plants and Plant Products

To find out general import requirements for certain plants and plant products, go to the APHIS Fruits and Vegetables Import Requirements (FAVIR) database at www.aphis.usda.gov/favir/. The FAVIR database allows customers to search for fruits and vegetables by commodity or country, providing a quick and easy way for users to determine basic entry requirements for their specific products.

Simply select the type of fruit or vegetable in the "Approved Name" field and choose the country of origin in the "Country/Region" field. You will then receive one of the following results:

- "0 entries found"—this means that the fruit or vegetable is NOT allowed into the United States.
- "# entry(ies) found [followed by the name of the commodity and the name of the country]." If this text appears, click on "CIR" to view the commodity import report.
 - o If the import requirements say "1 Subject to Inspection...," the fruit or vegetable is allowed into the United States pending inspection.
 - o If the import requirements say "Condition of entry treatment," the fruit or vegetable is subject to additional treatments at the port of entry in order to enter the United States.

APHIS also regulates the importation of plants and plant products, including plants for planting (i.e., nursery stock and small lots of seed); agricultural products (i.e., timber, cotton and cut flowers); handicraft items made from plant parts (i.e., baskets); protected plants and plant products (i.e., orchids); and threatened and endangered plant species.

To import foreign fruits and vegetables, plants, seeds, and plant products, an importer must apply for an agricultural import permit from APHIS and obtain a phytosanitary certificate from the exporting country. Phytosanitary certificates verify that plant quarantine officials from the exporting country have examined the plants for pests and diseases prior to export.

Certificates also identify the plants by their scientific names and confirm that the shipment meets U.S. regulations for importation.

U.S. importers should obtain agricultural permits for shipments far in advance of their transport. To request an import permit, contact APHIS at:

USDA-APHIS, Plant Protection and Quarantine
Permit Unit
4700 River Road, Unit 133
Riverdale, MD 20737
Phone: (877) 770-5990 or (301) 851-2046
Email: permits@aphis.usda.gov
www.aphis.usda.gov/plant_health/permits/index.shtml

Meat, Animal Products and By-Products, and Live Animals

APHIS regulates the importation of meat, animal products and by-products, and live animals in order to ensure that exotic animal diseases are not introduced into the United States. A veterinary permit may be required to import certain meat and meat products (e.g., meat pies and prepared foods), poultry, milk, eggs, and dairy products (except butter and cheese) from countries with livestock diseases exotic to the United States. The importation of food products containing even small amounts of meat, poultry, or processed egg product ingredients may also require a permit. In addition, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) regulates the importation of meat, poultry, and egg products intended for human consumption. When imported into the United States, these products require a health certificate that meets both APHIS animal health requirements and FSIS public health requirements.

Importers can check listings of eligible countries and products at www.fsis.usda.gov/pdf/Countries_Products_Eligible_for_Export.pdf.

To determine general U.S. import requirements for animal products and live animals, go to the APHIS Veterinary Services Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/animals/animal_import/animal_imports.shtml.

Importers can also contact APHIS' National Center for Import and Export (NCIE) for more information:

USDA-APHIS-NCIE
4700 River Road, Unit 39
Riverdale, MD 20737
Phone: (301) 851-3300, option 5
Fax: (301) 734-8226
Email: AskNCIE.Products@aphis.usda.gov

APHIS also regulates the importation of most livestock species (e.g., cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, horses, and poultry), as well as some non-livestock animals. USDA import permits may be required for these live animals. In addition, a health certificate is generally required for most APHIS-regulated animals that are either imported or transported through the United States to another country. An entry or post-entry quarantine may also be required for some species.

APHIS offices are located in most States and can offer additional assistance in importing live animals. For a list of APHIS offices and for more information about the types of animals regulated, permit applications, and other requirements, visit our Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/animals/animal_import/animal_imports.shtml.

The ePermits System

APHIS also offers the ePermits system, a Web-based tool that allows importers to apply for a permit, check its status, and view it on the Internet. The system minimizes the time it takes to complete permit applications, process data, and issue permits. To find out how to apply for a permit online, please visit www.aphis.usda.gov/permits/learn_epermits.shtml. To register for the ePermits system, go to www.aphis.usda.gov/permits/eauth_epermits.shtml.

(Note to Importers: Certain imports may also require a State permit or other documents from local agriculture, fish and wildlife, or environmental agencies. Additionally, State agencies may have supplemental permit requirements.)

Agricultural Smuggling and Trade Compliance

Each year, the volume of smuggled and improperly imported agricultural products entering the United States grows. In response, APHIS works 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.

APHIS officers canvas local markets and grocery stores around the country and monitor Internet commerce to seek prohibited agricultural commodities. If they find an illegally imported product or regulatory violation, APHIS may seize the item and pursue civil and criminal penalties, if warranted.

Therefore, it is important for distributors and market owners to purchase products that have been imported through legal channels. Likewise, it is important to verify and maintain shipping documents and invoices

associated with agricultural commodities. If vendors are not aware that they are selling prohibited items, the APHIS official onsite will explain Federal regulations and begin an importation trace to find the illegal pathway.

Market owners should report suspected agricultural smuggling to APHIS. For more information about APHIS' efforts to prevent the entry or distribution of prohibited agricultural products, please call (800) 877-3835 or go to www.aphis.usda.gov/international_safeguarding.

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