



United States Department of Agriculture  
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service  
Program Aid No. 1829

# Smuggling, Interdiction and Trade Compliance Program



## Responding to a Changing Global Marketplace

With international trade agreements in place, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization agreements, more international travel and trade are taking place than ever before, and cargo volumes are up. Annually, the United States imports more than \$40 billion worth of agricultural commodities, and each day, more than 430,000 people travel to the United States to conduct business, tour historical sites, and visit friends and family.

Unfortunately, illegal agricultural imports and smuggled prohibited products have proliferated with the boom in global commerce and steady stream of visitors arriving daily. Many of these restricted agricultural commodities place America at great risk. Foreign plant and animal pests and diseases may be introduced into the United States through banned agricultural products and unchecked foreign goods. These pests and diseases could devastate America's crops, livestock, and environment; and eradicating a single pest could cost millions of dollars.



*A ship laden with goods from abroad docks at a west coast port. An agricultural inspection is one of many inspections the onboard commodities will undergo before entering the marketplace.*



*Inspectors at the SITC work unit in San Juan, PR, open boxes of imported meat products to verify that the contents match what is listed on documents accompanying the shipment. (APHIS photo by R. Anson Eaglin.)*

In response to the growing volume of smuggled and improperly imported agricultural products entering the United States, officials from the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service's (APHIS) Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) program created the Smuggling, Interdiction and Trade Compliance (SITC) unit. The SITC program conducts risk-management and antismuggling activities to prevent the unlawful entry and distribution of prohibited agricultural commodities and products that may harbor harmful exotic plant and animal pests, diseases, or invasive species.

## **SITC's Defense of America's Bounty**

SITC officers nationwide shut down illegal pathways and agricultural distribution points in many ways. The unit routinely works with U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS)



*Bird's eye view: A SITC officer demonstrates how exotic birds can be smuggled into the country in containers strapped to the smuggler's legs. (APHIS file photo.)*

Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) agents during agricultural antismuggling and cooperative interdiction efforts at air, land, and sea ports-of-entry.

Besides port operations, teams of SITC officers conduct local domestic market surveys,

canvassing markets and grocery stores around the country to check for prohibited agricultural commodities. When SITC officers have evidence that a regulation has been violated, they turn the case over to APHIS' Investigative and Enforcement Services and USDA's Office of 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 SITC 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, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Food and Drug Administration, and USDA's Food Safety



*A SITC inspector at the Los Angeles work unit operates imaging equipment from the unit's specially equipped van. (APHIS file photo.)*

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.

## **How APHIS Facilitates Agricultural Imports**

Over the years, Americans have come to count on a diverse array of agricultural products for their dinner table. In order to fulfill the ever-changing tastes of Americans, the United States imports commodities from around the globe. Local grocery stores now carry everything from Mexican artichokes to Italian zucchini. Some foreign countries have agricultural pests and diseases that do not exist in this country. These pests and diseases can cause devastating damage to U.S. agriculture if introduced. Consequently, PPQ strives to ensure that imported products are free of harmful pests and diseases. PPQ does this by regulating the importation of agricultural products with phytosanitary (plant health) certificates, importation rules, and inspections.

A phytosanitary certificate is an official document issued by an exporting country, which certifies that the phytosanitary status of a shipment



meets the phytosanitary standards of the United States. Anyone wishing to import certain plants and plant products into the United States is required to have a phytosanitary certificate. PPQ employees advise importers on phytosanitary restrictions and provide information (including regulations, policies, and procedures) on bringing agricultural commodities into the United States.

The intended purpose of a phytosanitary certificate is to expedite the entry of plants or plant products into the United States while protecting American agriculture. Through its issuance of a phytosanitary certificate, an exporting country is verifying that the shipment has been inspected and conforms to the phytosanitary import requirements of the United States. In addition, the phytosanitary certificate indicates that the shipment is free of pests and diseases that do not exist in the United States. Importers may obtain information or import permits by contacting:

**USDA-APHIS-PPQ**

Permit Unit

4700 River Road, Unit 136

Riverdale, MD 20737

Telephone: (877) 770-5990

Fax: (301) 734-5786



*This team randomly selects pallets of imported agricultural products for inspection*



*A SITC officer slits a spice sack to examine its contents. The exterior labeling must represent what's inside. (APHIS file photo.)*

## Additional Information

If you have any questions about the SITC program or if you want to report smuggling activity, please e-mail your concerns to [sitc\\_mail@aphis.usda.gov](mailto:sitc_mail@aphis.usda.gov) or call the National Hotline at (800) 877-3835. For the local SITC unit near you, visit our Web site at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ppq/trade> and follow the links.

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*Cover photos:* Smuggling Interdiction and Trade Compliance (SITC) officers come up against smugglers of agricultural contraband all the time. At an agriculture checkpoint, a SITC officer examines the undercarriage of heavy equipment on a flatbed truck. SITC inspectors (right) canvass domestic markets around the country, looking for prohibited agricultural commodities. And after hands-on inspection, SITC officers reseal boxes with USDA-labeled tape to deter theft and inform the importer of the inspection.

*Photo credits:* Unless otherwise noted in figure captions, all photographs were taken by USDA photographer Bob Nichols.

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APHIS' Veterinary Services (VS) regulates the importation of live animals, poultry, pet birds, and animal products, such as meats, cheeses, casein, gelatins, certain animal hides and racks, and germplasm—both semen and embryos. VS carefully monitors all of these commodities in case they are infected with foreign animal diseases, such as avian influenza or foot-and-mouth disease, that could threaten U.S. livestock populations. For example, countries that have outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease are not allowed to export fresh, chilled, or frozen meats to the United States. However, such meat products can be shipped into this country if they have been heat-processed or cured according to APHIS standards. VS establishes similar requirements for countries where other animal diseases exist. Certain live animals, including pet birds, imported from foreign countries may have to be quarantined in USDA animal import centers located in New York, Miami, or Los Angeles before entering the United States.

For permit applications and information about import requirements and user fees related to importing animals, birds, and animal products, contact

**USDA–APHIS–VS**

National Center for Import/Export  
4700 River Road, Unit 40  
Riverdale, MD 20737–1231  
Telephone: (301) 734–3277/8364  
Fax: (301) 734–4704/8226

## Other Threats

American agriculture is also threatened by alien noxious weeds. Each year, farmers and ranchers spend billions of dollars to control invasive noxious weeds. Homeowners spend millions more each year trying to control these weeds. Yellow starthistle, exotic bur reed, giant salvinia, tropical soda apple, and water spinach are just a few foreign weeds damaging our agricultural resources today.