



Fresh Products Grading and Certification

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Program Information

If you are part of the vast U.S. fruit and vegetable market, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) official grading services can make your farm or company more profitable. For sellers, these services ensure that their products meet specified grade or contract requirements; for buyers, grading services ensure that they get the quality that they expect.

How Is Grading Performed? Grading is paid for by user fees and is voluntary except for commodities that are regulated for quality by a marketing order or marketing agreement, subject to import or export requirements, or purchased by USDA or certain other Government agencies. Grading may be conducted as the produce is being packed for shipment to market or at destination, either for the receiver's use in handling the lot or to settle questions that may arise between the shipper and the receiver.

To provide grading service nationwide, USDA maintains cooperative agreements in 48 States and Puerto Rico. Under Federal-State agreements, federally licensed graders work throughout the country at points of origin, often working in fields as crops are harvested. In addition, grading services are provided at 37 Federal terminal markets and approximately 100 Federal-State terminal markets.

How Are U.S. Grade Standards Used? As a basis for its fresh products grading, USDA has developed 158 official grade standards for 85 fresh fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, peanuts, and related commodities. They describe the quality

requirements for each grade of commodity, giving industry a common language for buying and selling. USDA works to ensure that the standards are uniformly applied throughout the country. If a request for official grading is based on U.S. grade standards, the official certificate covering the shipment will show which USDA grade the product meets. These certificates are accepted as legal evidence in all Federal courts. Grade standards are available on the Internet at www.ams.usda.gov/standards/stanfrfv.htm.

How Can the Grading Service Benefit You? **Shippers** of fresh produce can have their commodities graded for quality and condition at shipping point locations to establish the quality of the product. **Receivers** can determine whether a shipment meets contract terms. **Institutional buyers and government agencies** use services to ensure deliveries meet required specifications. **Processors** have their raw commodity deliveries inspected using grading services to determine payment to growers. Industry members also find grade reports useful in determining produce storage life and choosing the best use for particular lots.



Alternative Inspection Programs: USDA has created additional grading and inspection services for fresh fruits and vegetables. The programs help industry customers minimize costs and can be tailored to meet the individual needs of the particular industry and commodity.

- Under “Partners In Quality,” USDA inspection personnel audit documentation-intensive systems used by packinghouses to ensure the quality of the commodities passing through them. As the systems employed by the packinghouse determine the product’s final quality, packinghouse management and personnel are held accountable for ensuring that the systems produce quality output. USDA develops quality specifications for the industry, assists each packinghouse involved in developing its own unique quality procedures manual and audits each packinghouse’s system to ensure compliance with its own manual.



- Under the “Good Agricultural Practices and Good Handling Practices (GAP and GHP) Audit Verification Program,” Federal and State inspectors review participating fresh fruit and vegetable packing facilities and practices according to the Food and Drug Administration’s *Guide to Minimize Microbial Food Safety Hazards for Fresh Fruits and Vegetables*. Various states developed the program, with USDA involvement to ensure nationwide uniformity.

- Under the “Customer Assisted Inspection Program” (CAIP), USDA inspection personnel oversee the in-line sampling and inspection process performed by trained company staff. Once procedures are established, USDA-licensed inspectors train company staff in performing inspections (including sampling, defect identification and scoring, and note keeping) and, if they qualify, authorize them as “CAIP inspectors.” USDA-licensees monitor the participant’s activity by examining in-line samples, note sheets, and that day’s stored product. When the oversight activities demonstrate compliance with program requirements, USDA-licensees issue daily certification documents. The level of USDA oversight ranges from periodic visits throughout the day to a continuous on-site presence.

Contacts

For further information, contact the Fresh Products Branch, Fruit and Vegetable Programs, Agricultural Marketing Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Room 1661-S, Stop Code 0240, Washington, D.C. 20250-0240. Telephone: (202) 720-5870. FAX: (202) 720-0393. Internet: www.ams.usda.gov/fv/fvstand.htm. E-mail: leanne.skelton@usda.gov.

Information is also available from the Federal or Federal-State grading office nearest to you.

Notes

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