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Flexible, Innovative, and at Your Service

USDA — providing standards on
canned, frozen, and dried foods

BY TERRY BANE



When the fruit and vegetable industry processes fresh produce into canned, frozen, or dehydrated products, it can turn to the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Processed Products Branch (PPB) for a wide variety of grading and auditing services.

The PPB's mission is to facilitate the marketing of processed fruit and vegetables and related products in domestic and international markets. To fulfill this mission and provide quality services

responsive to customer needs, the PPB has developed a variety of innovative programs tailored to meet evolving industry trends.

The PPB is responsible for the grading, inspection, and certification of canned, frozen, and dehydrated fruit and vegetables, as well as other related products. The Branch also develops and maintains U.S. grade standards, grading manuals, inspection aids, and color guides for these products.

Grade Standards, Grading, and Certification

Developed in collaboration with the produce industry, the USDA's PPB develops grade standards for a variety of processed commodities that provide a common language for trading and are internationally recognized tools for assessing product quality. Utilizing the standards, trained inspectors provide an impartial, third-party service to grade and officially certify products in accordance with the appropriate standard or, in some cases, to buyer specifications. The resulting USDA Certificates of Quality



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Key Elements

The United States Department of Agriculture's Processed Products Branch provides a wide variety of grading and auditing services to the produce industry. Some of these services are:

- 🔑 Developing grade standards for a variety of processed commodities.
- 🔑 Independent third-party certification of products or processes.
- 🔑 The Quality Monitoring Program.

To learn more about each key element, look for the 🔑 throughout the article.

and Condition can be used by buyers and sellers of processed products and are considered prima facie evidence in U.S. courts of law. The PPB's grading services are available upon request to anyone who has a financial interest in a processed product. They can provide in-plant product grading at a processing plant during production, or post-production lot grading. These services can also be tailored to meet customer requirements.

For processors, the grading service can enhance quality control programs and provide impartial final product grading and certification. If quality levels meet requirements, several approved grade and inspection marks can be included on container labels as an additional marketing tool.

Evolving with Industry Needs

🔑 Through close collaboration with the processed fruit and vegetable industry, the PPB has developed a variety of services designed to enhance product marketability for processors, brokers, and anyone else involved in providing the best product possible.

These services provide independent third-party certification of products or processes and include:

- plant surveys to evaluate a processing facility's compliance with current good manufacturing practices (recommended annually)
- verification of product formulation
- condition of container examinations
- check loading or case stamping to verify lot identity and quantity
- export certification to facilitate entry of processed fruit, vegetables, and miscellaneous products into foreign countries

The PPB's pioneering auditing programs include the following:

The Plant Systems Audit Program provides an unbiased, third-party audit of a processor's quality assurance system. The audit includes a review of a processor's food safety controls, quality management system, personnel policies, good manufacturing practices, pest control, packaging/labeling/warehousing systems, recall/return procedures, and food defense pro-

gram. Plant systems audits are conducted during production periods, and product quality grading can also be included in the service. This voluntary auditing service is available upon request, and the recommended frequency and scope of the audits depend on such plant factors as complexity of the operation, what product is being packed, and condition of the facility.

The Qualified Through Verification (QTV) Program is a voluntary audit and verification service for fresh-cut produce based on the principles of Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP). The QTV program was developed in 1995 at the request of the International Fresh-cut Produce Association (which merged in 2006 with the United Fresh Fruit & Vegetable Association to create the United Fresh Produce Association), and is a dynamic approach to identifying deficiencies in a produce plant's HACCP plan. Under this program, PPB technical specialists review and assess a facility's documented food safety plan. Once the plan meets the program requirements, PPB personnel verify that the plan is being followed by conducting unannounced on-site audits of facility operations, including its production processes, HACCP program, sanitation procedures, and documentation.

The Food Defense System Survey Program was developed to address the need to protect the domestic food supply for consumers. Using guidelines suggested by the Food and Drug Administration, the Food Defense System Survey program verifies an organization's food defense system for preventing malicious tampering of the food products under its control. A successful Food Defense System Survey is mandatory for companies that sell food to the USDA for the school lunch program or other feeding programs. The PPB can

perform these surveys at any processing, storage, or off-site warehouse facility handling processed fruit, vegetables, or related products.

Recent Innovations

🔑 The PPB's new Quality Monitoring Program was developed in response to the fresh and processed fruit and vegetable industry's need to supplement internal quality control programs. This program permits companies to submit specific processed product samples to trained inspectors for impartial review. Products not conforming to the standards established by the company are immediately reported back to the company after inspection.

Whether via grading inspections, audits, or certifications, the Processed Products Branch of the USDA has implemented programs that help give the produce industry peace of mind regarding the forms its products eventually take.

