

Questions and Answers: New Risk-Based Sampling Protocol and Propagative Monitoring and Release Program at Plant Inspection Stations

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) is charged with safeguarding agriculture and natural resources from the risks associated with the entry, establishment, and spread of exotic plant pests, diseases, pathogens, and noxious weeds. To carry out this mission, APHIS' plant health safeguarding specialists inspect shipments of imported plants and plant materials at 17 plant inspection stations located at ports of entry throughout the country, including major international airports, seaports, and key crossings along the U.S.-Mexican border.

In order to better protect against the introduction and spread of invasive plant pests and diseases, APHIS is implementing a new sampling protocol for inspecting shipments of imported plants and plant materials at its plant inspection stations. The new protocol will maximize efficiency while maintaining a statistically robust approach to sampling and inspecting plants and plant materials.

Q. How does the new sampling protocol compare with APHIS' old method of sampling shipments of plants and plant materials?

A. In the past, APHIS inspectors have inspected a minimum of 2 percent of every consignment of propagative plants (i.e., plants that will be planted) that were presented for inspection. The new approach standardizes inspection rates—based on risk categories—and allows APHIS to better allocate inspection resources for target plants that are known to present a higher risk.

Q. What is the Propagative Monitoring and Release Program?

A. For those taxa of propagative plants that APHIS has determined pose an extremely low risk, the

agency has established a Propagative Monitoring and Release Program (PMRP). APHIS has identified certain plants and plant materials from certain countries that qualify for the PMRP, based on a close evaluation of the pest interception histories for specific country/commodity combinations. Under the PMRP, consignments of these taxa will be periodically monitored, but not every consignment will be inspected. Consignments that are inspected will be inspected using risk-based sampling to confirm the taxon's continued eligibility for PMRP.

APHIS will periodically evaluate volume and pest inspection data and update the list of qualifying country/commodity combinations accordingly. At this time, 25 country/commodity combinations qualify for the PMRP. The PMRP list is available online at www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/plant_imports/pmrp.shtml.

Q. How is APHIS categorizing plants by risk?

A. APHIS is using a risk-based sampling protocol, which provides a scientific tool to statistically measure the pest risk of plant materials. With information gathered using the sampling protocol, APHIS is able to evaluate volume and pest interception data independently for each country/commodity pair to determine the level of potential risk for introducing any associated quarantine pests.

Each country/commodity pair will fall into one of the following risk categories: high, medium, or low. Country/commodity pairs with higher interception rates of actionable pests will be placed into higher risk categories. APHIS will use the assigned risk category to determine the total number of sample units from a shipment to be inspected at the plant inspection station.

At this time, all country/commodity combinations, except those qualifying for PMRP, fall under the high-risk category. As APHIS gathers sufficient data to establish that specific country/commodity combinations present lesser risk, the agency will use this information to update which risk category is assigned to country/commodity pairs. APHIS will periodically evaluate all categories in response to data collected from all inspections and recategorize as needed.

Q. How will APHIS conduct inspections under the new sampling protocol?

A. Under the new sample selection protocol, inspectors determine the number of plant units to inspect based upon both the number of sample units and the total number of plant units in the inspectional unit.

The new sample selection protocol also categorizes shipments of plants and plant materials from other countries based upon the potential level of risk for the introduction of invasive pests and diseases. Thus, a greater number of samples will be selected and inspected from larger, higher risk shipments of plants and plant materials. The protocol is based on the hypergeometric probability distribution, which determines the probability of finding a pest within a certain number of independent samples from a shipment. The new protocol calculates how many sample units (bags, boxes, crates, etc.) and which ones an APHIS inspector should select from each shipment, as well as the number of plant units (stems, cuttings, plants, etc.) to inspect from each sample unit. More samples may be inspected at the discretion of the APHIS inspector.

Q. What if APHIS has not yet evaluated a country/commodity pairing?

A. Country/commodity combinations that have not yet been evaluated by APHIS will automatically be categorized as high risk.

Q. Where can I look up the country/commodity combinations before importation?

A. For the most recently updated list of country/commodity combinations qualifying for the PMRP, visit www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/plant_imports/pmrp.shtml.

Q. As an importer, what changes will I see at the plant inspection station?

A. The protocol changes may reduce waiting times for importers of PMRP materials, due to less frequent inspections for these plants and plant materials. Conversely, the changes may also result in additional wait times for importers of higher risk plant materials, as these shipments will be subject to more rigorous sampling.

The new protocol requires inspectors to select certain sample units from each shipment of plants and plant materials. Importers should properly label and number shipments and sample units before arriving at the plant inspection station in order to reduce waiting times. In addition, importers should ensure that an adequate number of staff is available to unload sample units for inspection. APHIS inspectors do not provide loading/unloading services.

Q. What if my shipment contains more than one type of plant or plant material?

A. If a shipment contains some clearly labeled plant materials and some commingled or mixed general plant material that are not separated and not readily located, APHIS inspectors will apply the following procedure:

- Clearly labeled plant material will be inspected using the new sampling protocol.
- Commingled or mixed taxa plant material that is not separated and not readily located may require a 100 percent inspection.

If an entire shipment contains commingled or mixed general plant materials that are not separated and not readily located, APHIS inspectors will perform a 100 percent inspection of the shipment.

Q. What types of items does the sampling protocol change apply to?

A. The new sampling protocol applies to all imported plants and plant materials that are subject to inspection at an APHIS plant inspection station at the first port of entry into the United States. For more information about plant inspection stations and a complete listing of locations nationwide, visit www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/plants/plant_imports/plant_inspection_stations.shtml.

Q. Where can I go for more information about the changes?

A. For more information about these changes, you may contact your local plant inspection station. To learn more about the admissibility and entry requirements for plants and plant materials, call the APHIS Permits Unit toll free at (877) 770-5990, or email permits@aphis.usda.gov.

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