

Date: 03/27/08

Standardization Section, Fresh Products Branch
Fruit and Vegetable Programs
Agricultural Marketing Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW., Room 1661
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Re:

U.S. Standards for Grades of Table Grapes (European or Vinifera Type)
Docket # AMS-FV-07-0140
Federal Register, Vol. 73, No. 38, February 26, 2008, pages 10185-10187

Dear Sirs,

As a retail grocery chain and seller of table grapes, I must express my opposition to the USDA proposal that would establish a special 5% allowance for shattered table grapes in consumer containers for en route, or at destination. In addition to shatter, this proposal also raises the tolerance level by 5% for other defects, like scarring and discoloration. Recent scientific research indicates that shattered table grapes are more susceptible to higher bacterial counts, resulting in reduced shelf life. Overall, this proposal will significantly weaken the U.S. No.1 Grade.

PACA Good Delivery Tolerances

Under this proposal, shattered berries would not be scored against the current 12% total tolerance for defects in the U.S No.1 grade until the amount of shattered berries first exceeds the special 5% allowance, thus increasing tolerance to 17%. An additional tolerance of 3% would be added to the total in situations where PACA “good delivery” tolerances apply, for a grand total of 20%. It is entirely possible that shatter could far exceed 20% by the time the grapes are purchased by a consumer.

Tolerance Increases for Other Defects Too

Currently, in order to meet “good delivery” standards, the tolerance allows for 15% defects. Grapes arriving with 5% shatter can also have up to 10% scarring and discoloration and still pass “good delivery” standards. Under this proposal, up to 5% shatter wouldn’t be scored, which means that up to 15% of the grapes could also have defects such as scarring and discoloration, and the load would still qualify for “good delivery.”

More Susceptible to Microbiological Growth and Reduced Shelf Life

In my experience, shatter table grapes have a shorter shelf life than those remaining firmly attached to the stem. Grapes that naturally detach from the cap stem are past their prime and beginning their slide toward spoilage and decay. As shatter berries age, we now know they are more susceptible to microbiological contamination, which further reduces their shelf life.

A 5% Allowance Weakens the Standard

Adding a 5% allowance for shattered berries to an existing tolerance of 12%, amounts to a whopping **41.7%** increase in allowable shatter/defects for the U.S.No.1 Grade. An earlier proposal to create a special 10% allowance for shatter was withdrawn by USDA on 6/29/07. In its own statement in the Federal Register at that time, USDA, AMS indicated that a 10% allowance for shatter would “weaken the standard and reduce consumer confidence of the grade.” Although a 5% allowance would only weaken the standard half as much, it still weakens it - by up to 41.7%.

I don't believe proponents of this proposal intended for the proposal to increase the tolerance for defects other than shatter, but those are the consequences. No one benefits by trying to force consumers to accept containers of table grapes with 20%, or more, rolling around the bottom of bag. We all lose when the integrity of the grade is weakened.

Sincerely,

Jerry Clingerman
Produce Procurement Manager
K-VA-T Food Stores, Inc.