

SERVING YOU EACH DAY

By Robert C. Keeney



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We are pleased each day to have the opportunity to provide services that support the marketing of fruits, vegetables, nuts, and other specialty crops. In an effort to continuously provide valuable and updated information to companies and organizations along the produce supply chain, we publish “AMS Fruit and Vegetable Programs News.” In this issue, we discuss customized services, share program updates, and provide relevant information resources. Other program highlights include:

Increasing Efficiency. In 2010 both the Fresh and Processed Products Branches undertook a rigorous business process review, each identifying new approaches to increase efficiency and ultimately reduce costs, which is a priority overall for USDA and AMS. Through consolidating similar training services, improving financial management tools,

consolidating information technology shops, and further automating inspection processes, we have become a more efficient operation and, more importantly, we hope we have improved our customer service.

2009-2011 Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee. The Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee met for the last time February 28 to March 1. After numerous detailed discussions, the committee prepared and submitted to the Secretary of Agriculture recommendations on issues ranging from purchasing, food safety, and agricultural labor to the “Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food” initiative. To learn more about committee discussions, visit our home page at www.ams.usda.gov/fv and click on “Fruit and Vegetable Industry Advisory Committee.”

Social Media. Increasingly, we are utilizing various social media tools such as blogs and “Twitter” to relay information to you and invite feedback. On “[USDA.Gov/Open](http://www.usda.gov/open),” we recently initiated a discussion about our Specialty Crop Block Grant Program webinar to solicit feedback about

the event. Find the posting under the “Discuss” heading at this web address <http://www.usda.gov/open/blog.nsf>.

Web Site Enhancements. We are working to improve the information available on our Web site, www.ams.usda.gov/fv, adding online libraries of: “AMS Fruit and Vegetable Programs News,” our past webinars, and articles we have written for numerous trade journals. In addition, a narrated overview of our services is now available.

Webinars. To provide practical information to help your business each day, we continue to conduct interactive webinars. Recent subject matter has included the fresh produce inspection process, the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act, Market News reports and information, how to sell fruits and vegetables to the USDA and an overview of the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program. These webinars have attracted more than 1,500 attendees. Check our home page for the latest webinar invitation.

As always, we look forward to your ideas and feedback on these and other subjects.

Inside this issue:

- Mediation and PACA
- Avocado Variety Enforcement Programs
- Revisions to U.S. Standards for Grades of Olive Oil and Olive-Pomace Oil
- Additional Resources for the produce Industry

We want to hear from you. What topics would you like to see covered in the future editions of the newsletter? Are there any questions you can't find answers to on our website? Send your questions and suggestions to

FVInfo@ams.usda.gov



Jeffrey Spradlin is the Central Region Director of the PACA Branch. He can be reached at (817)978-0780 or jeffrey.spradlin@ams.usda.gov.

Mediation is a voluntary, confidential process in which an unbiased third-party mediator facilitates a conference between private parties that are involved in a dispute. Within the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act (PACA) Branch, a reparation complaint program exists in which one party may file a complaint against another whose operations are covered under PACA and involve a perishable commodity. These disputes can become subject to a mediation session.

In 1996, the PACA Branch began offering mediation services to perishable fruit and vegetable dealers involved in disputed complaints and has since developed a staff of experienced mediators. The mediation sessions can be conducted by telephone or in a face-to-face setting at a mutually agreed-upon neutral location.

The mediation process focuses on the solution to the dispute and not on who may be right or wrong. Other benefits to mediation include: participants control the

outcome, the possibility of increasing future business relations, and eliminating the costs of litigation or processing a formal complaint. Participants are generally more satisfied with the agreement and are more likely to uphold the agreement. There is no additional administrative cost to the parties to participate in a mediation session.

If you would like more information on mediation, contact one of our regional offices at (800) 495-7222.

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS FOR INDUSTRY CHALLENGES: AVOCADO ENFORCEMENT PROGRAM

By Chris Nissen
& Lillie Zeng



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Over the years, the Marketing Order Administration Branch (MOAB) has developed numerous innovative solutions to address issues facing the commodities it services. One such solution was developed and implemented by MOAB and other branches within AMS to address a compliance issue facing Florida avocados.

With more than 50 different varieties of avocados in existence, a maturity schedule was developed to appropriately indicate when each variety was mature enough to ripen

properly and enter the marketplace. This maturity schedule is incorporated into the “Federal Marketing Order for Avocados Grown in South Florida” and is utilized throughout the Sunshine State industry to ensure that only mature avocados are shipped to consumers.

Accompanying this maturity schedule was a photo book, developed by industry and USDA, depicting various avocado varieties along with weights and dimensions to assist inspectors in identifying the fruit presented for inspection. While the book was

helpful, there were still concerns being expressed by the industry that some shipments were being intentionally mislabeled as to variety, resulting in immature fruit making it to the fresh market. So, in 2004, three AMS Fruit and Vegetable Programs branches--PACA, Fresh Products Branch, and MOAB--collaborated and developed the Avocado Variety Enforcement Program (AVEP).

In addition to using the photo book, AVEP incorporates DNA testing as a way to positively identify the variety of avocado. Working with the USDA laboratory in Gastonia, N.C., it was determined that variety could be identified using DNA taken from small slices of avocado. Under AVEP, samples are taken from random avocado shipments and sent overnight to the laboratory for testing to

see if it’s a DNA match for the variety declared at the time of inspection. If it is a match as to variety, it is free to enter the chain of commerce. If it tests as a variety other than that declared, the shipper is given direction on how to dispose of the fruit. If the avocados have already entered the chain of commerce, then MOAB’s compliance team would consider enforcement actions in the form of fines and penalties, and the shipper may also face compliance actions from PACA.

Alan Flinn, manager of the Avocado Administrative Committee, said that AVEP serves as “an important tool” to ensure only mature avocados enter the market place and “ultimately protects consumers’ confidence in green-skin avocados.”

RESPONDING TO CHANGING INDUSTRY NEEDS: REVISIONS TO U.S. STANDARDS FOR GRADES OF OLIVE OIL

By Terry Bane



Terry Bane is the Branch Chief of the Processed Products Branch. He can be reached at (202)720-4693 or terry.bane@ams.usda.gov.

The Processed Products Branch (PPB) of AMS's Fruit and Vegetable Programs has been working with the processed fruit and vegetable industry since 1931 to help buyers and sellers establish recognized quality levels for their products. PPB has done this by responding to industry requests for U.S. grade standards covering a range of products – most recently for olive oil.

In October 2010, the newly revised “U.S. Standards for Grades of Olive Oil and Olive-Pomace Oil” became effective. Under the newly revised standards, producers, brokers, and buyers can have their olive oil graded and the quality level, such as “U.S. Extra Virgin Olive Oil,” or “U.S. Virgin Olive Oil,” officially determined. In revising these standards, PPB staff worked closely with industry shareholders and researched and re-viewed existing standards, including the International Codex Standard for Olive Oils and Olive Pomace Oils and the International Olive Council’s (IOC) trade standard applying to Olive Oils and Olive Pomace Oils. The end

results are standards that establish quality levels and provide a means, through prescribed analytical testing, of verifying the authenticity of the olive oil.

Through the course of developing more than 150 U.S. grade standards with the industry, PPB has found that there are unique characteristics or factors which affect a product or commodity. These unique characteristics must be addressed in the development or revision of a standard. For olive oil, these included associating the terms “U.S. Extra Virgin” and “U.S. Virgin” with different quality levels and identifying the chemical characteristics

that distinguish between the quality levels. Authenticity of olive oil has also been an area of concern, and the newly revised “U.S. Standards for Grades of Olive Oil and Olive-Pomace Oil” provide detailed analytical tests and tolerances which can differentiate between olive oil and oil derived from other sources.

The new olive oil standards are the most recently revised grade standards developed by PPB. For information on these standards or any others standards for processed fruits and vegetables and related products, visit us on the web at www.ams.usda.gov/processedinspection.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR THE PRODUCE INDUSTRY

We often receive requests for information about services important to the produce industry, but not necessarily within AMS Fruit and Vegetable Programs area of responsibility. As a service, here are a few USDA resources that you might find helpful.

Country of Origin Labeling. Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) is a labeling law that requires grocery stores and other retailers licensed under the Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act (PACA) to label certain commodities for country of origin and, in some instances, the method of production. There are approximately

4,000 PACA licensees that operate about 37,000 retail stores in the United States. As a result of this new law, each of these stores are required to notify its customers of the country of origin of perishable agricultural commodities (fruits and vegetables); peanuts, pecans, and macadamia nuts; ginseng; and a variety of meat, shellfish, and poultry products.

AMS partners with State governments to carry out compliance activities. Through a random selection process, retail store surveys are conducted in each State to measure store facilities’ levels of compliance. Since the regulations for COOL

became effective in 2009, USDA has conducted more than 13,000 store reviews to verify that the required products are being labeled and that the labeling information is accurate.

If you would like more information on COOL requirements, go to the AMS Web site at: www.ams.usda.gov/cool. In addition, questions about any aspect of COOL can be submitted to Julie Lewis, COOL marketing specialist, via email to COOL@usda.gov, or via phone at (202) 720-4486.

Fruits and Vegetables Import Requirements (FAVIR) Database. If you import produce, you may

want to take a look at the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service’s Fruits and Vegetables Import Requirements (FAVIR) database available online at <http://www.aphis.usda.gov/favir/info.shtml>.

The FAVIR database allows customers to search for authorized fruits and vegetables by commodity or country, and quickly and easily determine the general requirements for their importation into the United States. For additional information about FAVIR, contact Donna West, senior import specialist, at (301) 734-5298, or email donna.l.west@aphis.usda.gov.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Research & Promotion Programs – The softwood lumber and Christmas trees industries submitted proposals to AMS Fruit and Vegetable Programs to develop research and promotion programs for their respective commodities. Research and promotion programs help maintain and expand markets for agricultural commodities in the United States.



On October 1, 2010, a proposal requesting comments on the softwood lumber proposals was published in the “Federal Register.” Fifty-five comments regarding the proposal were received, and AMS is in the process of publishing a second proposal and referendum procedures to allow the industry to vote on whether it supports this effort. If supported, the program will become effective shortly after the referendum.

A Christmas tree industry proposal was published in the “Federal Register” on November 8, 2010. The comment period initially ended on February 7, 2011, but was reopened and extended until March 9, 2011.

USDA AMS Fruit and Vegetable Programs – Serving the produce industry since the early 1900s, AMS Fruit and Vegetable Programs’ fee-for-service offerings are delivered via a network of trained and experienced staff. Our customers include growers, shippers, brokers, receivers, distributors, processors, retailers and restaurants, among others. Our services include:

- Audit-based programs
- International representation
- Commodity purchases
- Markets News reports and information
- Establishment of U.S. grade standards
- Perishable Agricultural Commodities Act (PACA)
- Inspection and grading
- Self-help marketing programs
- Industry training
- Specialty Crop Block Grants

More information can be found at www.ams.usda.gov/fv, or by contacting Christopher Purdy at (202) 720-3209 or christopher.purdy@ams.usda.gov.

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