



U.S. GRADE STANDARDS for Fruits, Vegetables, Nuts, and Other Specialty Products

The USDA Agricultural Marketing Service’s (AMS) Specialty Crops Inspection Division is a team of professionals who provide quality assurance reviews and inspections, conduct food safety auditing, and develop national standards for fresh and processed fruits, vegetables, nuts, and other specialty products—all in support of America’s food industry supply chain.

WHAT ARE STANDARDS?

Recognized by the fruit, vegetable, nut, and specialty crop industry as an essential element in resolving disputes of product quality.

- Provide the foundation for domestic and international trade.
- Promote efficiency in marketing and procurement.
- Determine levels of quality and value as a basis for:
 - Sales quotes,
 - Damage claims,
 - Loan values,
 - Futures trading,
 - Military and other government purchases, and
 - Market reporting.
- A common language for trading where the commodity cannot be readily displayed or examined by the prospective buyers.
- Guide processors to: purchase suitable quality; utilize raw products effectively; and pack products for a diverse domestic and international markets.
- A means of stating quality levels to be used on labels for official USDA marks as to quality.

DEVELOPMENT/REVISION

Generally initiated through an interested party request, such as a Commission or Association representing a specific commodity.

- Should demonstrate broad based support.
- Based on sound technical and marketing information.
- The official request should outline the reason for the request by:
 - A draft of how the party would like to see the standard revised or developed; or
 - A detailed summary of the specific areas that the party would like to see addressed in the U.S. grade standard.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING OR REVISING U.S. GRADE STANDARDS

All official requests are evaluated; if valid, a Standardization Specialist is assigned to manage the project. U.S. Grade Standards are developed through guidance in the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 7 (Agriculture) Part 36, “Procedures by Which the Agricultural Marketing Service Develops, Revises, Suspends, or Terminates Voluntary Official Grade Standards.” Copies of the procedures are available on the Government Printing Office Internet site at www.ecfr.gov. These procedures include publication in the Federal Register by USDA to ensure that any interested party has the opportunity to comment.

DISCUSSION DRAFT

If developing a new standard, or a revision that involves major changes, the Specialist will use the information they have gathered to develop a working draft for discussion purposes. The draft is sent to interested parties for input and comment prior to being published as an official notice in the Federal Register.

RULEMAKING

With all comments received and reviewed, an official proposal is compiled. The proposal goes through a clearance process within USDA before publishing in the Federal Register.

Part 36 requires USDA to provide public notification of actions taken to develop new or revise existing U.S. grade standards. After developing the proposal:

- AMS publishes a notice in the Federal Register describing the new U.S. grade standards or revision to existing standard, or decisions to suspend or terminate existing standard.
- AMS issues a news release about these actions.
- AMS also posts the proposals on the Internet. Other than minor editorial or technical changes, the notice provides at least 60 days for interested parties to submit comments to the Agency.
- Based on the comments received, AMS evaluates all the inputs and decides whether the proposed actions should be implemented. If AMS concludes that the actions as proposed, or with minor modifications, should be adopted, AMS will publish a description of the changes or actions in the Federal Register.
- If AMS determines that the proposed changes are not warranted, or they are not in the public interest, the Agency will either publish a notice withdrawing the proposal in the Federal Register or revise the proposal and again seek public input.

FINAL ACTION

Is dependent on the comments received. Comments are reviewed based on their content and not on a majority rules basis.