



GENERAL POULTRY GRADING PROCEDURES

Purpose

This instruction defines policies and general poultry product grading procedures.

Procedures

I. General Requirements and Conditions

A. General Procedures

Each carcass, part, or further processed product must be correctly graded prior to consumer grade identification. Consumer Grades A, B, and C may be assigned to ready-to-cook poultry only when each carcass or part has been graded individually in an unfrozen state (70.240). Additionally, grading must be performed in a manner that all surfaces of the carcass or part are visible during sampling. Note: Tolerances for cuts, tears, and discoloration outlined in Part 70 of the Regulations are cumulative provided specific tolerances are not exceeded.

The grading of poultry shall be performed by authorized graders then check graded by licensed commodity graders. When the commodity grader personally grades all the product, verification checks are not necessary. Grade determination shall be made according to the U.S. grade standards. It is the responsibility of the grader to immediately advise management as soon as excess under grade product is found in any given sample.

In order to grade accurately, graders and authorized graders must have sufficient time to grade each carcass, part, or further processed product presented at an approved grading station. Each unit shall be graded at reasonable speeds. It is plant management's responsibility to ensure that poultry is presented at the grading station in such a manner that graders can accurately grade the poorest lot the firm will process. Additionally, graders must be available to frequently sample product both on the line and from containers prior to their closure and preparation for shipment. The grader shall assure that grade-identified poultry represents the marked grade prior to shipment from the plant.

Listed below are some reasons that difficulty may be experienced in maintaining grade lines:

1. The lot of poultry presented to the graders may not meet the ready-to-cook requirements or may be of excessively low quality. Product may also not have been tempered properly.
2. Authorized graders may not be grading according to standards or following grading instructions.
3. Poultry presented to graders at a speed that will not allow proper grading.



4. Unsatisfactory grading facilities, spacing of product on belts, presentation of carcasses in shackles, inadequate lighting, limited working space, etc.
5. Computer controlled lines may malfunction altering proper segregation of product.

B. Ready-to-Cook Factors

Carcasses and parts must meet the definition of ready-to-cook (7 CFR Part 70.1), including scabs and contamination with gall or fecal material, prior to assigning a grade. However, occasionally such product will inadvertently pass inspection. When this occurs, the affected product must be removed from the pack and, if detected during an official sample, recorded as a defect. Additionally, the following procedures and tolerances apply:

1. Discolorations that are not readily identifiable as scabs, gall, or fecal contamination shall be classified as discoloration and the applicable defect tolerances applied.
2. The interior of whole carcasses shall not be examined for lungs or other ready-to-cook factors that are not readily apparent during the normal grading process. On breast parts, lungs are counted as grade defects since they are readily observable and otherwise detract from the product quality. For these parts, the presence of more than one-fourth of one lung is considered a defect.

C. Product Adulteration

Occasionally, product may be adulterated even though all plant operations are in compliance with the regulations. These situations can include chemical contamination or willful product tampering. In these instances, immediate coordination is required between the grader, FSIS officials, and the supervisor.

Graders are to continually be on alert for any possible product contamination, either accidentally or intentionally. Although processors may have extensive preventative and food defense measures in place, graders may encounter product that may be suspected of or found to be contaminated. Contamination may be from various sources such as:

Chemical Agents – These agents are usually delivered as airborne droplets, liquids, aerosols, or solids. Additionally, they can include toxic industrial chemicals such as pesticides, rodenticides, and heavy metals.

Biological Agents – These agents are generally in the form of bacteria, toxins, viruses, and parasites and are usually delivered through liquids, aerosols, or solids.

Physical Agents – These agents are materials that could cause adverse health effects if eaten. They would include bones or hard-like materials, glass fragments, and metal pieces or filings.



When graders encounter possible instances of contamination or tampering, the affected product is to be retained to prevent it from moving into marketing channels. Additionally, graders are to immediately notify plant management, the appropriate FSIS representative, and the supervisor and provide them with the specific details pertaining to the incident. The supervisor will report the incident to the Regional Director who will, in turn, report it to the National Office.

Once notified, FSIS will be responsible for the handling and disposition of the product and graders will remove any retain tags previously applied. After review by all applicable parties, the supervisor will provide the grader guidance in determining if any further action is needed.

If product tampering is suspected (not confirmed), the grader shall immediately inform the FSIS representative with all of the details. The FSIS representative will handle further disposition of the suspect product.

When the possibility of product adulteration exists because of an industrial accident or environmental contamination, the grader shall immediately report all details of the situation to the supervisor. Reportable situations include information the grader might receive regarding ground water contamination, roadside spills of hazardous chemicals, etc.

D. Consumer Grade-Labeled Product Which Was Not Officially Graded

Poultry which is consumer labeled with the official grade mark normally has the label applied immediately after the authorized grader sorts the product. In spite of the controls which have been established by firms and the Quality Assessment Division, product has on occasion been released for distribution or sale before it is officially graded. If this occurs, the grader shall adhere to the following procedure:

1. To protect the consumer, immediately inform the highest plant management official available and insist that all product is returned to the plant for official grading.
2. Have the verbal request confirmed in writing.
3. The written notice given to the company should be acknowledged by obtaining the signature of the highest plant management official available.
4. The written request, together with a complete account of the quantity of product involved, date, plant, actions taken by the company, etc., shall be mailed to the State and regional offices.
5. Request plant management to write a letter to the supervisor with copies to the regional and national offices and the grader. The letter should explain how the product happened to be shipped without official grading and what specific steps the company intends to take to prevent a recurrence.



6. Notify the supervisor via telephone as soon as the details are known.
7. If there is any resistance on the part of the company to recall product, notify the regional office immediately by telephone. Such calls, if at all possible, shall be made from the plant so regional office personnel may also speak with plant management.
8. The above procedures shall also be followed when grade-identified product is out of compliance with program requirements and shipped.

E. State Inspection Status

Product from State-inspected plants considered "equal to" by FSIS may be officially graded and identified.

II. Graders

A. Federal-State Grader

A Federal-State grader, hereafter referred to as "grader," may be a Federal or State or municipal employee. Licensed graders shall limit their activities to grading and related grading work as described in the 500 and 600 series and in their job description at each location assigned.

B. Federal-State Grader-in-Charge (GIC)

In resident plants which require the services of more than one grader, the supervisor will designate in writing one grader as the GIC who will be responsible for all grading activities in the plant. Each additional grader in the plant will be informed concerning the authority of the GIC. The GIC will receive the mail, be the official contact between the grading service and the company, and assume the initiative in any resolving problems in connection with rendering grading service. He/she is responsible for seeing that authorized grading personnel are qualified and making certain that other graders have access to all instructions. While the GIC maintains overall responsibility for the grading activities, in multiple shift plants, each grader working independently will be responsible for the grading activities on his/her shift(s).

C. Authorized Grading Personnel (Plant)

"Authorized Grading Personnel," hereafter referred to as "Authorized Graders," are plant employees selected and trained by plant management according to the poultry grade standards. All officially identified product graded by these employees must be checkgraded by a grader before the product can be shipped from a plant. Authorized graders have no authority to issue official grading certificates, grading memorandums, or other official documents.

Plant management must provide the grader with a letter, on company letterhead, certifying that all personnel performing authorized grading activities have received adequate training



and understand the duties and responsibilities associated with these activities as outlined in applicable instructions and the Regulations, Part 70. This certification shall be placed in file 2b of the Poultry Graders Filing System.

D. Automated Grading

The detection and removal of many undergrade factors can now be accomplished through automated means. Subsequently, the installation and use of such technology may allow for a reduced number of authorized graders necessary on a processing line. Firms may utilize this “digital grading” technology and reduce their authorized graders provided the integrity and quality of the end product offered for official identification is not jeopardized. Facilities with processing equipment unable to automatically identify and remove undergrade product must continue to have sufficient authorized graders to remove carcasses with defects not meeting the grade criteria. Supervisors will review the parameters of this program with each applicable facility.

Each plant utilizing this program must establish and provide to the supervisor a documented procedure for assuring that program requirements are met. This procedure must include maintenance and testing protocol for the system(s) responsible for identification and removal of defects. Along with the documented procedure, a letter is to be provided to the USDA grader (**Exhibit 1**) certifying that the processing equipment is capable of removing undergrades as effectively as authorized graders. The letter must also document that plant management will continuously monitor the procedure and equipment to assure that all officially graded product meets the applicable U.S. Grade Standards. In the event of an equipment problem, breakdown, or product found significantly out of grade, the plant must have qualified authorized graders available to maintain grade integrity. The documented procedure and letter provided by plant management are to be placed in file 2b.

Facilities meeting these requirements will be evaluated for six months from the date of program approval. Resident USDA graders will provide copies of their retention logs to the Federal-State office monthly during the test period and upon request thereafter. At the end of the test period a copy of all logs are to be forwarded to the Regional Office. If significantly “out-of-grade” product is detected during the pilot period, the grader will notify the supervisor and request that authorized graders return to the processing line to assure product quality. If there are no substantial problems encountered during the test period, the program may continue and will be evaluated on a yearly basis. A facility failing the six-month evaluation will be allowed an additional six-month pilot period. Failure to meet requirements after the second pilot period will require the full use of authorized graders.

All requests are to be forwarded to the Regional Office for approval. Regional Directors will keep a record of plants in their regions operating with reduced authorized graders. Notification of a plant’s continued participation in this program shall be forwarded to the National Poultry Supervisor upon completion of the test period.



E. Information for Relief Graders

Since many poultry plants are large and complex operations processing multiple products, there may be several grading station locations. Pertinent information of the kind listed below must be developed by the GIC and placed in file folder 2a for the use of relief graders.

1. Write a description of the area or areas where official grading is performed.
2. Prepare a sketch to show the location of each official grading station.
3. List the names of cross-licensed personnel.
4. List the products which are usually graded and grade identified. Also include a description of the system used to identify product between each sampling interval.
5. Company's procedures approved by the supervisor for handling and maintaining control of retained product including the location where retained product is held.

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