



What are Fruit and Vegetable Grade Standards?

U.S. Grade Standards provide the fruit and vegetable industry with a uniform language for describing the quality and condition of commodities in the marketplace. In partnership with industry members, Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) develops and revises these documents so that they reflect modern business practices.

When an industry group wishes to have a U.S. Grade Standard developed or revised, it may contact AMS to discuss the most appropriate means of accomplishing its goals. Any action taken on a U.S. Grade Standard should reflect the broad interest of either individuals, an industry involved in manufacturing, producing, packaging, distributing, testing, consuming or using the product, or a federal, state, or local agency.

An official request to develop or revise a U.S. Grade Standard for fruits or vegetables, or related products, should be in writing and sent to the Division using the contact information provided below.

What are U.S. Grades?

Grade marks for fruits and vegetables and certain other food products are single, sequential letters for processed commodities such as—A, B, C, D, and Substandard, and descriptive terminology and sequential numbers for fresh commodities such as—Extra Fancy, Fancy, No. 1, Combination, No. 2, and No. 3 and commercial grades. This is not a comprehensive list of all available grade marks as they are numerous. Not all grades apply to all commodities; the U.S. Standards for Grades for each product will specify the commodity specific language for the grade designations as applicable.

What is the meaning of U.S. Grades?

The quality of fruits and vegetables is determined by various factors. The assignment of a quality grade (A, B, C, D, or Substandard or Extra Fancy, Fancy, No. 1, Combination, No. 2, and No. 3) depends on individual factors as specified in each product standard. These factors may be color, consistency, absence of defects, character, uniformity of size, flavor and odor, or other factors as specified in the product standard.

For processed commodities the letter grade "A" is the highest quality level. Grades "B," "C," and "D" contain increasing amounts of product with less desirable characteristics in appearance and/or edibility. Substandard grade may contain an unlimited amount of these less desirable characteristics, but is still edible food. For fresh commodities the terminology or number grade "Extra Fancy, Fancy or No. 1" is the highest quality level depending on the commodity.

Grades “Fancy, No. 1, Combination, No. 2, and No. 3” contain increasing amounts of product with less desirable characteristics in appearance and/or marketability.

How are U.S. Grade Standards used?

Marketing

Fruits and vegetables are sold on the basis of a quality level, either "generic," brand name, buyer's specification, or "U.S. grade." These quality levels help establish the price that the buyer is willing to pay the seller. Lower quality grade products normally sell at lower prices than higher quality grade products.

For processed products, the amount of solid food in the primary container, style, variety, packing liquid (water, juice, or syrup), and condition of the primary container also help establish the value of a product.

Financing

Fruits and vegetables supported by Federal grading certificates have an established net worth as collateral when they are used to negotiate bank loans.

Quality Control Programs

U.S. Grade Standards can be used to meet special situations. Special sampling plans allow a product to be accepted or rejected based on a specified quality level during its production.

Research

Quality levels established in the U.S. Grade Standards help with research into the appearance and nutritional content of traditional foods, as well as research into consumer buying patterns.

Labeling

Through labeling, the grade names in the U.S. Grade Standards may be used to convey information about the quality of a product to the consumer.

For processed products, the term "U.S. Grade ___" may be used only if the product is packed in an "approved plant," is officially graded, and meets the requirements for the labeled grade. Exceptions to this apply to Maple Syrup and Honey.

Grades are not required on fresh products unless specified by the grade standard or State regulation. If used however, the product must be of the stated quality.

Government Buying

The acceptance or rejection of deliveries of fruits and vegetables for government purchases, as well as the price paid for the commodities, are based on quality descriptions established by U.S. Grade Standards.

Import Regulations

The minimum quality of several fruits and vegetables that may be imported into the U.S. is based on the grade defined in the U.S. Grade Standards. The Marketing Order Administration Division (MOAD) assists importers in complying with fruit, vegetable and nut import requirements as mandated by Section 8e of the Agricultural Marketing Agreement Act of 1937 (AMAA). The law requires that imports of certain products meet the same or comparable standards as products covered under Federal marketing orders in the United States. Information on the MOAD may be found on the following site: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/8eImportCompliance>.

The Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) regulates the entry of certain foreign agricultural products into the United States. Before importing these kinds of items or obtaining them from an importer or broker, you will need to find out what entry requirements apply to them. Learning the requirements can help you minimize confusion, prevent costly delays, and avoid penalties and merchandise loss. Information on the APHIS may be found on the following site: http://www.aphis.usda.gov/import_export/index.shtml.

Grading Programs

Official Federal grading programs are based on established U.S. Grade Standards.

How are U.S. Grade Standards developed?

Whether upon request from the public, under formal petition of financially interested persons, or at the initiative of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Grade Standards for fruits and vegetables must meet formal procedures for rulemaking before they can be changed.

The steps to develop amend or revise grade standards are as follows:

1. Notice of Proposed Rulemaking published in the FEDERAL REGISTER;
2. Appropriate comment period for the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking;
3. Final Rulemaking published in the FEDERAL REGISTER; and
4. Effective U.S. Grade Standard.

Integrity of the U.S. Grade Standards

The U.S. Grade Standards for fresh fruits, vegetables and other products (inspection, certification, and standards) and the U.S. Grade Standards for processed fruits and vegetables, processed products thereof, and certain other processed food products are government regulations found in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), 7 CFR 51, and 7 CFR 52 respectively, and may be found at the following internet address:

<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/collectionCfr.action?collectionCode=CFR>. The standards are voluntary except when required by a marketing order, or reference is made to specific quality criteria, usually a label statement such as "U.S. Grade A" or "U.S. No. __" or other official mark as defined in the Regulations Governing Inspection and Certification of Fresh or Processed Fruits and Related Products.

How to request a change to U.S. Grade Standards

Suggestions that might aid in improving the standards in future revisions are welcome. Comments may be submitted to:

Director, Specialty Crops Inspection Division
Fruit and Vegetable Program, AMS, U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW, STOP 0240
Washington, D.C. 20250
Phone: (202) 720-5870 Fax: (202) 720-0393

Inspection Instructions

Many U.S. Grade Standards are supplemented by Inspection Instructions. These instructions discuss special grading situations, expand on descriptions of quality requirements, outline grading procedures, and cover other related topics. Inspection Instructions may be found by utilizing commodity and process specific drop down selections on the SCI Division Standardization page at the following internet address:

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/SCIResource>.

Visual information

Special photo guides, models, color standards, and other visual interpretative guides are available for reference to specific U.S. Grade Standards. This information is made available on the SCI Division Standardization Branch Equipment Catalog at the following internet address:

<http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/getfile?dDocName=STELPRDC5091320>, and by utilizing commodity and process specific drop down selections on the SCI Division Standardization page at the following internet address: <http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/SCIResource>.