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Qatar

Food and Agricultural Import Regulations and Standards - Narrative

FAIRS Country Report

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Report Highlights:

This FAIRS Country Report contains detailed information of laws and regulatory requirements governing imports of food products to the State of Qatar.

Section I. Food Laws: GCC-Wide Developments

The State of Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. With the exception of Saudi Arabia, the USDA's Office of Agricultural Affairs (OAA), Dubai, covers the rest of the countries collectively known as the GCC-5.

Food Standards: The Gulf Standards Organization (GSO) is comprised of senior standards officials from the six GCC member countries in addition to a representative from Yemen which joined the GSO early last year. It is responsible for developing food and non food standards for the seven countries (GCC + Yemen). The GSO food standards committee has been actively updating food standards over the past few years. Based on the WTO notifications that have been reviewed thus far, the committee is working to harmonize existing standards with the guidelines of the Codex Alimentarius and other international food regulatory organizations. However, in some cases, differences still exist between some of the proposed new standards and existing international guidelines.

In theory, each GCC member should notify the WTO of any new proposed standard. However, typically one or two member countries usually submit the notification. Interested parties who review these notifications should bear in mind that while a notification may be submitted by a single GCC member, the proposed standard will eventually apply to all GCC member countries. Once a new standard is approved by the GSO food standard committee, each member country is expected to officially adopt the standard, thus making it a domestic standard as well as a GSO standard.

In June 2007, GSO members approved two new standards for food shelf life and labeling. They replaced the old versions that were in dispute among GCC member countries, as well as other foreign countries. The new standards bring the GCC into closer compliance with the guidelines of Codex Alimentarius and, for the most part, offer more flexible requirements for importing foods from foreign markets. GCC-5 countries except Bahrain, have officially adopted the new standards. Bahrain is applying the standards provisionally pending its final approval by the government.

The GSO has created subcommittees to follow-up on other food related issues.

1. Bio-technology subcommittee that is chaired and hosted by the UAE
2. Labeling subcommittee that is chaired and hosted by Oman.
3. Additives subcommittee that is chaired and hosted by Saudi Arabia

The GSO also, when the need arises, forms working groups to address specific issues. A working group has developed two Halal standards. The first standard outlines general Halal requirements and was notified to the WTO by Bahrain. The second standard outlines requirements for approving foreign halal centers, certifications and Halal labeling.

The GCC countries are currently working to update their food additive regulations. This new project will consolidate all Codex standards for all types of food additives (colors, sweeteners, emulsifiers, etc.) into one GSO standard. This project is expected to be complete in the near future.

Customs and Tariffs: In January 2003, the "GCC Unified Customs Law and Single Customs Tariff" (UCL) was released. The UCL established a unified customs tariff of five percent on nearly all processed food products. Under the UCL, live animals, fresh fruits and vegetables, some seafood, grains, flour, tea, sugar, spices and seeds for planting are exempt from tariffs. It also established a single entry point policy, which provides that a product entering any GCC member market would be charged the appropriate duty only at the point of entry, and would then be accorded duty free transit treatment by GCC member countries. In practice, this policy is employed only with unopened containers transshipped between GCC markets. Partial shipments are subjected to five percent import duty in the country of destination. However, the GCC countries have postponed full implementation of the UCL and the single entry point until 2015, to allow members time to address disputed issues. It is expected that all goods, even partial shipments from opened containers, will eventually receive single-entry treatment once customs procedures are fully unified.

Food Import Procedures: In 2007, the GCC Food Safety Committee developed a "Guide for Food Import Procedures for the GCC Countries." This guide is meant to unify both the applied procedures for clearing food consignments and required import certificates for different types of foods. The intent is to help facilitate the movement of food products within the GCC

once customs unification is fully implemented. GCC member countries have decided to postpone the application of the guide to ensure that it complies with the guidelines of international organizations such as Codex Alimentarius, World Animal Health Organization and International Plant Protection Consortium.

Qatar Developments:

Qatar, which chairs the GSO Food Standards committee, adopted the new labeling and shelf life standards (GSO 9/2007) and GSO (150/2007) respectively on March 13, 2008. The standards simplified labeling and shelf life requirements.

Qatar currently requests that food products marked with shelf life longer than that recommended in the “voluntary shelf life section” of GSO 150/2007 be accompanied by a proof confirming that the extended shelf life is supported by either a government office, accredited laboratory, university study, food processing association or any similar organization. This request was initiated by Qatari health authority effective April 1, 2010. The requirement was initiated to curb the unrealistic long shelf life of some products that started to enter the Qatari market.

Qatari officials, for the most part, will work with companies to ensure that food and agricultural imports are not unduly disrupted or delayed at port of entry. Food labels can be approved through a pre-approval process prior to import. Pre-import approval is strongly encouraged, particularly for new-to-market products.

The National Health Authority (NHA), part of the Ministry of Health, carries out most functions related to food imports and safety. The National Health Authority (NHA), in coordination with the General Organization for Standards and Metrology and the Ministry of Economy & Commerce, (MOEC), is responsible for establishing food safety regulations. The Food Control Committee (FCC), an interagency committee, headed by the Assistant Undersecretary of NHA for Technical Affairs, which includes representatives from NHA, Doha Municipality and the Agricultural Development Department, decides on all food safety and control issues, including import bans.

The Department of Commercial Affairs, MOEC, is responsible for trademark and agency laws. The Customs and Ports Authority is responsible for enforcement of agency laws at the time of import.

The Food Safety Department is responsible for the enforcement of food safety regulations. Health inspectors visually inspect all imported food products, verify compliance with label regulations and, if necessary, draw samples for analysis by the NHA Central Laboratories.

Not all shipments are subject to laboratory analysis. In general, new-to-market products and products that failed a previous inspection are targeted for thorough examination. Poultry and meat products are routinely inspected for Salmonella and other pathogens. According to NHA officials, laboratory analyses could take one week to ten days, depending on the nature of required tests. The Health Department of the Doha Municipality is responsible for ensuring that all foods sold in the country are fit and conform to health requirements. Areas of inspection include retail outlets, food processing, hotels and catering companies.

The Agricultural Development Department of the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Agriculture is responsible for inspecting live animals and plants, animal feed and horticultural products at the port of entry.

Section II. Labeling Requirements:

Food labels must include the following information in Arabic on the original label or primary packaging:

- Product and brand name
- Country of origin
- Ingredients, in descending order of proportion
- Additives, if any
- Origin of animal fat (e.g., beef fat), if applicable 1/
- Net content in metric units (volume in case of liquids)
- Production and expiry dates
- The name and address of the manufacturer, producer, distributor, importer, exporter or vendor shall be declared on the label
- Special storage, transportation and preparation instructions, if any.

1/ Animal fat should be sourced only from Halal slaughtered animals. Pork products are banned in Qatar.

Original labels should be printed in Arabic. However, bilingual labels are permitted, provided Arabic is one of the languages

(e.g. Arabic/English) and all the required information printed in the foreign language is also printed in Arabic.

Arabic language stickers are permitted in lieu of original Arabic or bilingual labels provided the sticker:

1. Is extremely difficult to remove.
2. Includes all required label information.
3. Does not cover required information on the original label.
4. Does not contradict information on the original label. In fact, local officials consider such stickers to be labels.

Labels/stickers must be applied prior to importation. No change to label information is permitted after importation.

Labeling of nutritional value is voluntary. The U.S. nutritional panel is acceptable. Labeling of recommended daily intake RDI is not required.

Labels for specialty foods, such as diet and health foods, foods for diabetics and infants, must contain detailed information about the product's vitamin and mineral content, nutritive value per 100 grams, proper use and storage. The NHA must approve and register these foods prior to import.

Labeling regulations apply to products shipped in institutional-size containers for direct consumption in hotels, restaurants and institutions (HRI). However, if products are imported directly by the HRI end-user, Arabic labeling is not necessary.

Labeling requirements are waived for food products that are imported in bulk form for further processing.

Production and expiry (P/E) dates must be engraved, embossed, printed or stamped directly onto the original label or primary packaging at the time of production, using indelible ink. Neither stickers nor U.S. bar codes are permitted as substitutes. Multiple P/E dates on the label are not acceptable. Under the month/year format, the last day of the month will be considered the expiry date. The month may be printed in numbers or letters. For example, 4/2004 and April 2004 are both acceptable formats. P/E dates in English digits alone are acceptable, but it is preferable to have the dates in both languages for the Qatari market.

- Day/month/year for products with a shelf-life of 3 months or less
- Month/year for products with a shelf-life longer than 3 months

The expiration date may be printed in one of the following formats:

- Expiration date: (date)
- Use by: (date)
- Use before: (date)
- Sell by: (date)
- Fit for: (duration) from the date of production.

P/E dates are not required for certain products, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, and fresh bakery items.

Production dates alone are sufficient for products deemed to have extremely long shelf-life durations, such as salt, white sugar, spices and condiments, tea, rice and dried pulses.

Section III. Packaging and Container Regulations:

General requirements for packaged special foods are covered under GS 654/1998, GS 839/2001, and GS 1024/2001.

Section IV. Food Additives Regulations:

Most local regulations governing the use of food additives are based on Codex Alimentarius standards. Food coloring additives are regulated under QS 23/2000. This standard requires the common name and index number of all coloring additives contained in a product be noted on the product label. European "E" numbers are acceptable.

Qatar enforces a number of other standards governing the use of additives in a variety of food products. For example, QS

19/2001 regulates additives used in vegetable oils and fats while QS 356, 357, 381, 577, 578 and 1018 regulate other food additives. These regulations mimic Codex Alimentarius standards for food additives.

The General Organization for Standards and Metrology at MOEC, see Appendix I, can be contacted for copies of food additive or other standards. The standards are mostly in Arabic. Some standards are available in English, but not all.

Section V. Pesticides and Other Contaminants:

Local regulations governing pesticide and other contaminant residue levels are based on Codex Alimentarius standards. Specifically, QS 382/1996 and QS 383/1996 regulate pesticide and other contaminant residues in food products. The pesticide residues list, as is the food additives list, is a positive list, i.e. approved pesticides with tolerance levels are identified.

Pesticides must be registered with the Agricultural Development Department, Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Agriculture.

Section VI. Other Regulations and Requirements:

All new-to-market processed food products are subject to laboratory analysis. Subsequent shipments of a product that has passed the initial testing will be subject to further laboratory analysis again after six months. A product failing a previous inspection will be thoroughly examined on subsequent shipments for an undisclosed length of time.

All meat and poultry products must be accompanied by an Islamic (Halal) slaughter certificate issued by an approved Islamic center in the country of origin. Import of pork and products containing pork is strictly prohibited. Food products must identify the origin of any animal fat (e.g., beef tallow). Maximum alcohol content in barley beverage (non-alcoholic beer) is 0.05%.

Poultry and meat products are routinely tested for Salmonella. If Salmonella is detected in more than 20 percent of the tested samples, the shipment will be rejected. Import of alcoholic beverages and products containing alcohol is restricted to one organization. The government strictly controls the sale of alcoholic beverages. Advertising of such beverages is prohibited.

Food products do not require registration or an import permit. However, specialty foods, such as diet, health, and infant foods, require a special import/sales permit issued by a joint committee of representatives from the Food Control Division, PHD, and the Pharmacies and Medicines Control Department, NHA. The importer is responsible for obtaining this permit.

Importation of irradiated food products is permitted, but the product's label must clearly indicate that the product has undergone such treatment.

Qatar's municipality inspectors randomly check food products in wholesale and retail markets. In addition to the visual inspection of labels, samples are collected and analyzed to ensure product ingredients match those listed on the label. Local inspections are unscheduled. If a discrepancy is found, the product is removed from the market and destroyed at the importer's expense after notification.

Section VII. Other Specific Standards:

Imported food samples are not subject to special requirements. Samples destined for food shows and other types of promotional events are exempt from regulations covering labeling and shelf-life. Accompanying the samples must be a health certificate, and an invoice noting that the product is not for sale and is of no commercial value.

Section VIII. Copyright and/or Trademark Laws:

Commercial Agency Law Number 8/2002 regulates Agency matters. Only a Qatari citizen or Qatari company may register a commercial agency. An agency contract may be open-ended or time-limited. A brand can be registered to only one agent. A company producing several distinct brands may register each brand with a different agent.

Agency agreements are strictly enforced. Customs officials will automatically seize any brand imported by a company that is not registered as the official agent. With the registered agent's written consent, the consignment will be released. Often an agent will demand a fee, usually a percentage of the consignment's value, for such permission.

Law of Trademarks and Commercial Indications No. 9/2002 regulate Trademark matters. The Commercial Affairs Department, MOEC, is charged with enforcing trademark as well as agency regulations. A trademark can be registered directly with Commercial Affairs by a foreign company or through a local firm that specializes in such registrations. The latter is recommended.

Intellectual Property and Copyright Law No. 7/2002 regulates Intellectual Property matters. The Ministry of Economy and Commerce (MOEC) is charged with enforcing this law and other intellectual property matters.

Section IX. Import Procedures:

Most food products are imported via trucks from the United Arab Emirates. They enter the country at Abu Samra, which borders Saudi Arabia. Increasing quantities of products are imported through the seaport in the capital city, Doha. Small quantities of products, mainly fresh fruits and vegetables and chilled meat products, are imported via Doha International Airport. Fresh products are usually cleared within 24 hours of arrival and most other food products within two to three days. Laboratory analysis, however, may delay clearance of some products for up to ten days.

The following documents are required for imported foods:

- Commercial invoice
- Packing list
- Bill of Lading
- Health certificate from the country of origin
- Halal slaughter certificate (for poultry and meat products)
- Certificate of origin
- Radiation free certificate (for European products only)
- Spices must be accompanied by a certificate stating that it is free of pesticides and herbicides.

The invoice, Halal slaughter, health, and country of origin certificates must be notarized by the Qatari Embassy or consulate in the exporting country. In the absence of a Qatari diplomatic mission, any embassy or consulate of another GCC country can do the job. Rejected consignments for health/quality reasons must be returned to the country of origin or destroyed within maximum of two weeks. Rejected consignments for non-compliance may be re-exported (but not to another GCC country) or destroyed, normally within two weeks of arrival. This grace period can be extended if extenuating circumstances exist.

Health certificates are required for all food products. While agencies such as USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service regularly issues health certificates for meat products, obtaining certificates for processed food products such as grocery items can prove challenging for exporters. In most cases, exporters are able to obtain health certificates from State governments.

Products denied entry due to labeling infractions may later be cleared upon appeal to the Food Control Section of PHD/NHA, provided the infraction was minor. Labeling infractions deemed serious will result in rejection of a shipment with little chance of a successful appeal. Serious labeling infractions include label tampering, missing or incorrectly printed production/expiry dates and dates printed on stickers rather than the original label/packaging.

Appendix I. Government Regulatory Agency Contacts:

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Food safety issues