

## **APHIS Entry Requirements for Importation of Tomato and Pepper Seeds**

On August 8, 2019, USDA-APHIS issued a [Federal Order](#) (FO) that goes into force September 8, 2019, requiring all tomato and pepper seeds entering the U.S., from any country in the world, to be tested offshore for 6 different tospoviruses. The overall U.S. value of this seed sector is in the hundreds of millions of dollars which supports tomato and pepper production worth several billion dollars annually. Tomato and pepper seed have been imported unrestricted for tospoviruses for many years, and to date, there have been no observations nor reporting of any outbreaks of these tospoviruses that can be attributed to seed transmission.

ASTA and its members greatly appreciate APHIS' willingness to make itself available and to listen to the seed industry as USDA and the industry prepare for the FO's entry into force. However, as a result of the FO, seed imports into the U.S. have already been reduced and we expect seed shortages in the U.S. and elsewhere to begin shortly. A major concern we have is that long-term relocation of processing facilities and capacity outside the U.S. will be the only option for seed companies and will result in lost jobs in our farming communities.

The requirement to perform seed testing offshore is challenging and in the near term, probably impossible. The major issues we see are:

- 1) Currently, no internationally recognized testing method;
- 2) Most National Plant Protection Organizations (NPPOs) in countries of origin lack the capacity and know-how to conduct the molecular seed health testing required to comply with the FO; and
- 3) Significant backlogs in overseas testing laboratories are expected and NPPO's in those countries are not inclined to address these backlogs.

Because of the lack of capacity for offshore testing of the magnitude that will be needed, the industry critically needs an onshore (inside the U.S.) testing option as soon as possible. The industry requests APHIS to commit to develop and accept an onshore testing option and stand ready to help develop the process to do so.

The following steps are necessary to implement an onshore testing system:

- The seed health testing method developed needs to be certified by the National Seed Health System for testing to support both seed import as well as export certification. This needs to be completed no later than September 30, 2019.
- A protocol must be developed to implement onshore testing by the time the seed health test is certified at the end of September. A model compliance agreement template needs to be quickly developed (by APHIS with industry input) for importers. The National Seed Health Accreditation Pilot Program (NSHAPP) which has been developed for the importation of host seed of cucumber green mottle mosaic virus (CGMMV) could serve as a model.
- APHIS must develop a list of seed health testing labs in the National Seed Health System (NSHS) and the National Plant Diagnostic Network (NPDN) that will be authorized to conduct the onshore testing.

- APHIS must also communicate, as soon as possible, with the top 12-15 major NPPOs where seed is produced, the details of the onshore testing option and provide guidance as to how phytosanitary certificates should be issued using results from the onshore testing program.

The tomato and pepper seed industry is highly global in nature. Significant amounts of seed are produced in many countries such as China, Thailand, India, Peru, Guatemala, Kenya, and then imported into the U.S. where the seed is processed, conditioned, disinfected, analyzed, and packaged for domestic use and export to many other countries in the world, both in pre-commercial (breeder seed, stock seed, etc.) and commercial quantities. The U.S. serves as a major hub for many companies for processing, packaging, and re-export. It is imperative that the details be worked out to implement an onshore testing program as soon as possible, preferably as soon as the seed health testing method has been approved. ASTA recommends that a small team of operational experts from APHIS and the seed industry be appointed to meet together and develop the needed protocol(s) and procedures for the onshore testing option without delay.

In the longer term, a targeted domestic survey needs to be conducted for the 6 pospiviroids in question. Tomato and pepper seed have been imported unrestricted for pospiviroids for many years, and to date, there have been no observations nor reporting of any outbreaks of these pospiviroids that can be attributed to seed transmission. If these pospiviroids are already present in the U.S., the current approach of exclusion should be re-evaluated. Also, as the epidemiology relative to the role (if any) of seeds is not understood, research needs to be undertaken to evaluate this aspect, as well as determine if there is actually a risk of crossover from tomato and pepper to potato production. Such information is critically needed for APHIS to complete a pest risk assessment necessary for future decision making.