

## **An Overview of the Import Permit Application Process that Initiates at BAHA**

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The Belize Agricultural Health Authority (BAHA) has been designated as the competent authority for agricultural health and food safety. This means BAHA is in charge of all those aspects related to veterinary services, plant protection aspects, quarantine procedures, and regulating aspects of safe and wholesome foods. In essence, the role of the organization is to mitigate risks associated to these broad roles. All these services are arranged into two main categories of work: export compliance and import regulations. This article will focus on the latter aspects of our work.

With the creation of BAHA in 2000, the Government of Belize decided to streamline the process of importation of agricultural commodities. The importation process can be a very complicated one under certain conditions and scenarios, since in many cases more than one government agency may be involved in authorizing importations depending on their mandates. For example, certain commodities are quantitatively restricted and require import licenses by the Supplies Control Unit of the Ministry of Economic Development. (e.g., lumber, fruit juices, grains, etc.) Other commodities are also jointly controlled by the Ministry of Agriculture (such as vegetables, grains, meats, etc.) Other agencies, such as Forestry, also have restrictions for forestry seeds, and even the Police Department may need to be consulted in case of products that may have narcotic properties.

The Role of BAHA in this process is to manage risks associated to agricultural products that may end up affecting our agricultural industries, natural resources, and pose risks to human health. To ensure that imported agricultural commodities do not pose risks to agriculture and our environment, BAHA instituted a permit process that requires by law that all importations require a BAHA approved permit. This document is not a license. It is a means to have control of the importation of restricted commodities, to prevent the importation of prohibited commodities, and to ensure that importations comply with sanitary and phytosanitary requirements. These prescribed requirements have been determined to mitigate the risks associated to these importations.

Due to the complexities of the importation process, BAHA was designated as the one-stop shop, where the process initiates, and where the final authorization is granted, after having been cleared by all other relevant approving agencies. For a permit to be successful, all relevant agencies have to approve of the importation related to their own mandate.

The permit process initiates when an importer lodges an application at any of the BAHA offices across the country. Importers are required to supply all the necessary information in an application form. The base information required includes the name of the product, amount, intended use, origin, contact info, and point of entry. This information is sent to the relevant department in BAHA for vetting. Plant and plant products are sent to the Plant Health Department, animal and animal products are sent to the Animal Health Department and processed products are sent to the Food Safety Department. BAHA has already established conditions for many products from many sources. In these cases, if the products require a Supplies Control license or Agriculture Department license, the application is internally forwarded to these agencies. Signing officers in these departments then may modify amounts, sign as is, or refuse a license. In this case the process stops and BAHA does not proceed to process the BAHA import permit.

If the licenses are granted, BAHA processes a specific document that includes the commodity, amounts, source, date of validity, approved point of entry, and more importantly, the conditions of importation. Examples of these conditions generally include sanitary or phytosanitary certificates, specific treatments, or specification of freedom of certain plant pests, animal diseases, or food borne organisms. The permit document is used by the importer for clearing their consignments at the point of entry. Not having a permit constitutes a violation that may result in the product confiscated and destroyed and a fine levied. Every importation requires a permit which is valid for a single importation and within the amounts of products specified.

First time importation of certain commodities may require that these products go through a more rigorous process known as risk assessment. This is a process that determines what risks are associated to a commodity, which may be dependent on the products as well as the sources. It also determines the possibility of these risks following an importation and the conditions to mitigate these. A risk analysis process is very dependent on the availability of information from the source and collaboration by the exporting country. It may sometimes take several months for completion and may result in the determination that a product is not permissible for importation.

It is advisable for persons interested in importing commodities to Belize to call BAHA before initiating any process of applying for commodities so as to get indications if it even makes sense to initiate the process. Here we provide pointers on what processes to follow and critical advice on how to make a successful importation. We are not here as a barrier to the importation of wholesome agricultural products but rather to facilitate the process and at the same time safeguards our precious resources and our agricultural patrimony.

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