
Exportable.

The Pre-Shipment Checklist

The eleven answers that decide every document on your food shipment out of the United States — and the five checkpoints where each one has to be true.

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READ THIS FIRST

There is no universal document list

Anyone who hands you one is either guessing or selling you certificates you may not need.

The list is produced by a specific combination: the destination country, what the food actually is, where it was really made, what your plant is approved for, and how it will be sold. Change any one of those and the list changes with it.

So this checklist does not give you the documents. It gives you the **eleven answers that produce them**, and the five checkpoints where each one has to hold.

Answer all eleven before you quote. Not before you ship — before you quote.

The most expensive mistakes in this business happen at the quoting stage, when you commit to a price and a date without knowing what the document file costs, who pays for it, or how long it takes to assemble. An admissibility check belongs before the booking, not after it.

PART A

The eleven answers

01 ☐ Exact destination country, and the port or airport of entry.

Why it changes the list: requirements are set per country, and sometimes per point of entry. A rule applied at one border post does not automatically apply the same way at another, even inside a common market. Never extrapolate one country's list to its neighbour.

02 ☐ The product, with its U.S. tariff classification and its classification at destination.

Why: the export filing threshold, the preferential-origin question and most destination registrations all key off the classification. Something that is one product commercially can be two different things to two customs authorities.

03 ☐ **Real country of manufacture, and the origin of the relevant ingredients.**

Why: shipping *from* the United States is not the same as being *of* U.S. origin. Food manufactured abroad and warehoused in the U.S. can keep its foreign origin, and the destination's rules decide how you prove it. A U.S. invoice does not establish U.S. origin on its own.

04 ☐ **The manufacturer, the plant, the storage establishment — and what each is approved for.**

Why: several markets require the establishment itself to be listed or approved, not only the product. A certificate issued for a plant that is not eligible in that market does nothing for you.

05 ☐ **Ingredients, percentage of animal origin, additives and allergens.**

Why: this is what decides whether you fall into the composite-product regime. A biscuit containing milk, a candy containing gelatin and a plain vegetable preserve can each carry a different file — and information about your ingredient suppliers' plants can be required even when the finished product is shelf-stable.

06 ☐ **The process: raw, cooked, pasteurised, sterilised or fermented.**

Why: processing often determines whether a veterinary or sanitary certificate is required at all, and how the destination treats the product's stability.

07 ☐ **Presentation: bulk or retail; ambient, chilled or frozen.**

Why: labelling obligations and cold-chain documentation attach to the presentation, not to the product. The same food in a drum and in a jar are two different compliance problems.

08 ☐ **End use: consumption, further manufacturing, sample, or re-export.**

Why: several authorities run a separate, lighter route for ingredients and samples, and a much heavier one for retail product. Declaring the wrong one puts you in the wrong queue.

09 ☐ **Who is the importer, and who will hold the product registration at destination.**

Why: in most markets the registration belongs to a local entity, not to you. If your buyer is unwilling or unable to hold it, you do not have a route to that market with that buyer — and that is better to know before you quote than after.

10 ☐ **Value, volume, mode of transport, delivery term and planned date.**

Why: the export filing obligation, the insurance question and the allocation of who pays for which certificate all follow from these. They also decide whether you have time to obtain what the destination requires.

11 ☐ **Any claim you intend to make: organic, halal, kosher or other.**

Why: each has its own certifying body, its own scope and its own recognition problem. Verify that the issuing body is recognised for that country, that category and that plant. A certificate from a body the destination does not recognise is not a certificate.

The test of a finished list. With these eleven answered, every line of your document list should carry six fields: the responsible party, the accepted model, the lead time, the validity period, the issue date, and the official source.

Anything that cannot carry those six is not yet a requirement. It is a rumour, and you should not be paying for it.

PART B

The five checkpoints

Each answer above has to be true at a particular moment. These are the moments.

Before you quote

Is the product admissible in that country? Is the plant eligible? Is the importer able to hold the registration? Are the ingredients and the label acceptable as they stand?

Admissibility comes before booking, always.

Before you ship

Prior permits in hand, registrations current, pre-notification numbers issued, and the official certificates obtained in the model and with the content the destination accepts — not a generic version.

At shipment close

Product, lot, weights, dates, invoice, origin, package count, container and seal all agree with each other and with the transport document. Most border problems are inconsistencies, not missing paperwork.

At release

The destination declaration made and the control certificates issued. Confirm the product can actually be *sold*, not merely cleared — in several markets those are two separate authorisations.

Afterwards

Sale file, traceability and authorisations archived for the retention period that applies to you and to your buyer.

PART C

The four mistakes that cost the most

MISTAKE 01

Treating your FDA facility registration as an approval.

A U.S. facility can be subject to FDA registration and manufacturing rules. That registration is **not an approval of the food**, and it is **not an international health certificate**. No foreign authority accepts it as one.

MISTAKE 02

Copying the U.S. import playbook into an export file.

FSVP, Prior Notice and the U.S. agent are mechanisms for food entering the United States. They are **not documents of a U.S. export**, and listing them tells your buyer you have not done this before. The U.S. agent for a foreign facility's FDA registration is likewise not a universal figure for domestic exporters. If foreign food enters the U.S. first and is then re-exported, that entry phase needs its own separate review.

MISTAKE 03

Ordering the certificate before confirming admissibility.

Confirm that the product is admissible and the plant is eligible *first*. Then request the certificate. Done in the other order, you pay for a document that arrives in the wrong model, or for a market that was never open to you.

MISTAKE 04

Assuming a free-sale certificate or a COA replaces an official health certificate.

It does not, automatically or otherwise. And the name matters: a Certificate of Free Sale is available for the categories FDA designates — it is not the right name for every conventional food.

When you want the full file

Exportable is the complete document file for food leaving the United States — the reusable export file, the destination matrix for twenty-plus markets, which U.S. agency certifies what, and the control sheet. Every requirement cited to its official source and dated.

exportable.net/us

Sources. This checklist is built on official sources, including: U.S. Census Bureau and International Trade Administration on export filing and exemptions; ITA on common and special export documents; FDA Food Export Certificates; USDA FSIS Import & Export Library; USDA APHIS plant and animal product export certificates; USDA AMS dairy exports; NOAA seafood export services; and the competent authority of each destination market. Checked 2 October 2026.

This is practical guidance, not legal, customs or regulatory advice. It does not replace your customs broker, your freight forwarder, or the competent authority at destination. Requirements change and sanitary suspensions can be issued at any time — confirm the current position before you ship. ·
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