

Anton Turovsky, surveyor (Saint Petersburg)



For 6 years, as an individual entrepreneur, I have been controlling the quality of fresh vegetables and fruits in St. Petersburg, and sometimes in Moscow and Novorossiysk. I work with foreign exporters and their representatives in the Russian Federation, who ship fresh products directly to retail chains.

Imported fruits and vegetables arrive to St. Petersburg mainly by sea in refrigerated containers.

In this article, I will talk about my activities as an expert representing the interests of a supplier (a foreign exporter) in the territory of a buyer (a Russian importer).

In recent years, many Russian retail chains, including "Tander" ("Magnit"), "Lenta", "X5", "DIKSI" and others, have become, among other things, large importers of vegetables and fruits.

Retailers-importers are very fond of imposing stringent procurement conditions on their foreign suppliers, citing their own quality control systems.

If the imported goods were not of sufficient quality, the Russian chains could easily abandon the entire consignment.

There was a time when I worked not for an exporter, but for an importer as a receiver of goods for one large federal chain, and believe me, I know this business inside out.

Quality control of fresh fruits and vegetables is absolutely necessary, because these goods are very tender - these are perishable goods with a short shelf life.

For export, farmers usually grow the most stable varieties of fruits and vegetables, which bear transportation and subsequent storage well. However, errors made during harvesting, washing and packaging, as well as minor bruises, presses, cuts and cracks on the fruits during their transportation provoke processes of mold and rot, which leads to damage to the entire commodity lot.

Survey services are independent factual quality control of the product before, after and during its transportation or transshipment. Fresh fruits and vegetables as perishable goods require special attention and qualification from the surveyor.

Surveyor routine



Visual inspection of apples



The calibrator, along with the penetrometer, refractometer, thermometer, hygrometer, scales and camera, is one of the most important professional tools of the surveyor

The time spent in transit can last for over a month. It happens that ships are overloaded, arrested or forced to remain off the harbor in anticipation of improved weather conditions.

I'll give you a short example. Refrigerator containers with bananas are most likely to be at risk of arriving at their destination port very late. Several times, I personally faced that the transit time was 2-2.5 times above the norm. Bananas are shipped green, and they afterripen in refilling chambers in

Russian warehouses. I have repeatedly uncovered refrigerator containers that have exceeded regulatory transit times, and most often I have found a large number of already fully ripe bananas. Further afterripen of such bananas is impossible - the cargo is damaged.

Such risk factors are sometimes difficult to prevent or predict, so the quality of the received goods may differ markedly from the original one.

As a rule, the surveyor should inspect the cargo in detail, record all kinds of

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violations during opening of the container, check the ventilation panels, pay attention to the humidity inside the container, track the temperature change schedule using sensors, as well as analyze the time of the goods in transit.

Before starting work, it is important to understand the criteria by which quality assessment will be carried out. The UNECE FFV International Quality Standards should be used in handling imports.

However, each federal chain has its own criteria and adjustments for assessing the quality of fruits and vegetables, on which they are based when inspecting the cargo.

For example, upon arrival of the container at the distribution center (DC) of the retail chain, receivers randomly take samples of boxes from each tray and classify the fruits into four categories:

- *I category* — these are the best fruits;
- *II category* — these are fruits with defects that slightly impair their appearance, but do not affect their storability;
- *non-conforming* — the presence of defects that strongly affect the appearance of the fruits and/or their storability. These are gross mechanical damage, significant defects in color and shape, or any signs of fetal aging. Other defects are mold, dirt and traces of pesticides on the skin;
- *refuse* — fruits to be disposed of with phyto-pathological and other diseases, rot and spoilage.

However, sometimes knowledge of international standards and quality passports of the chains is not enough. Therefore, each surveyor should, in my opinion, have such professional qualities as «sharp-sighted»¹ and critical thinking.

Now imagine the New Year's vanity in the pre-Coronavirus era, when chain supermarkets order huge volumes of goods; customs are overloaded and passes



Control of oranges with a portable refractometer



Control weighing of bag with Egyptian potatoes

containers with a long delay. One of these containers came to me for inspection.

It contained drinking polished coconuts. The inspection was appointed on the territory of the retailer (importer).

When the container was opened, inside of it an excessive humidity was revealed. When sampling the boxes, we found traces of mold on the nut shell. Here it is worth adding that the traces of mold are completely different: in this particular case, we dealt with their light superficial embossments, which were easily cleaned and were barely noticeable.

In order to conduct a "destructive evaluation", we split several nuts. Inside, the coconuts were absolutely clean, fresh, without any internal damage. The expert from the buyer knew that any mold according to the standards of this chain is considered a refuse, but, after a constructive controversy, we came to a consensus that this defect does not affect the quality of the product. Only coconuts with hard-to-separate and noticeable mold foci were attributed to the refuse. We signed a joint inspection certificate in which the allowable percentage of waste was not exceeded, and the goods were accepted by the chain.



Sorting tangerines by category: (right to left) I category, non-conforming and refuse

However, the next day, when the goods were prepared for shipment to stores, the local warehouse quality service rechecked the container. Its results shocked me: 50% of it was considered a refuse! Any visible or suggested mold, dust, dirt - everything was classified as a *refuse* despite the fact that the external signs of mold absolutely did not affect the quality of coconut water. The chain employee with whom we conducted the inspection was reprimanded and almost lost his job for trying to objectively evaluate the quality of the product.

By the way, the chain accepted these coconuts with a 50% discount and, I have no doubt about it, the so-called refuse was also successfully sold in the future.

We regularly encounter situations where very minor defects become a reason to refuse goods or a huge fine for the supplier.

The main drawback is the System itself. Currently, it is too easy to abandon any container. If the receiver finds that the share of "refuse" or "non-conforming" exceeds certain permissible norms, then the chain may decide to

¹ The author means the visual experience of the expert in the process of long-term working with vegetables and fruits. (editor's note)

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refuse the arrived goods. For different retailers, the permissible standards for "refuse" are 3% or 5%, and for "non-conforming" - 10% or 15%.

If you literally follow these corporate rules, then potentially the buyer can abandon any container, because if you really want to, you may easily find 3% of the refuse in any container with high-quality fresh fruits.

Chains are always insured and reinsured. Yes, suppliers often took great risks by exporting goods of inadequate quality and hiring experts in the hope that they would help them minimize losses.

This strategy is obviously doomed to failure. If the expert, when inspecting the goods received, neglects such concepts as objectivity and common sense, then the only thing that awaits him is to be prohibited from entering the warehouse.

Quality control by the exporter's representative is certainly important and necessary for each delivery. By shipping the product to the buyer, you count on its honesty and an objective approach to work, which, alas, is not always found. After all, federal chains and other importers have their own plans and goals.

You should not forget the experts-supply receivers from retail, who do not always have proper experience and the ability to objectively evaluate the product.

In the high season, chains try to buy as many goods as possible. But by the end of the season, demand is declining and the price is falling. Therefore, the chain can give instructions to its quality control managers to be pickier about a product that is no longer in demand.

As an expert with many years of experience, I argue that almost any product can be returned, no matter what high quality it is. For the most part, exporters are forced to play according to the rules of the chain, since after conducting the main inspection on the customer's territory it is almost impossible to prove anything during a repeated joint inspection. Chain managers will always confirm their assigned interest.

Do not neglect the ability to stop the container and call, in addition to an expert, specialists from the insurance company and a representative of the carrier, if in case when opening the container, we observe any problems related to the temperature or humidity inside it.

There is another example from personal experience. A container with scorched walls arrived on the territory of the chain. Representatives of the retail, taking a photo of it, refused to unload and inspect the cargo, referring to the damage

to the container shell.

I was called to this inspection by a supplier who, for certain reasons, could not contact the insurance company and the carrier.

The task was to open the container, verify the integrity of the cargo inside and conduct a joint inspection with representatives of the chain quality control department. As a result of joint actions, we compiled a report that reflected the objective state of the cargo, namely: pallets are whole, on several boxes at the base of the container there is incrustation, and the product itself is of proper quality. In the evening of the same day, the cargo was received (with the exception of several damaged boxes). Thanks to the perseverance of the surveyor, the supplier managed to reduce downtime and avoid losses.

It is better and more correct to solve any issues with chains and other importers "from the get go". This will save nerves and money. When you agree on an initial joint examination, it is important to give clear instructions to your expert.

The most effective approach to joint inspections is not to be honest, to be as transparent and pleasant as possible in communication. Referring to international standards, discuss the overall picture of defects without trying to hide them. Our goal is to come to an understanding of how to classify these defects.

Every little thing is important here, even the way you talk to the host experts or quality managers. It is very important to get along well with all participants in the inspection if you want to turn the end result in your favor. When I find a common language with the inspectors, it changes the results of the inspection.

During the inspection itself, I always have a dialogue with the customer, especially if any problems with the product are identified. I send the supplier photos with defects online through instant messengers, trying to tell as quickly as possible about the quality of the product directly from the scene. Suppliers appreciate this attitude: it is convenient for them to immediately receive this information, evaluate it and plan what can be done with the product if it is returned with such defects. Suppliers themselves begin to work more quickly, and the surveyor instantly has feedback. By completing the inspection, we sign an act with the buyer's manager.

If the surveyor could not agree on how to classify certain defects, or does not agree with the manager on certain problems (regarding the value of interest, etc.), then he must have an act with

disagreements and a detailed explanation of their reasons and the essence of the matter.

Our customer is already aware of all interest and problems with the goods, if any, when preparing the report on the inspection. We are also required to report all the problems we have discovered and to describe our recommendations in order to find out exactly what happened to the product and why, as well as how this can be prevented in the future.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the quality control of vegetables and fruits in Russia is still quite young and it is only gaining momentum. Many suppliers, hoping to save money, do not see the services of the surveyor as practical benefits and sometimes neglect them, when they shouldn't! **RF**