# Food Specifications: Frequently Asked Questions

**What is USDA food specification?**

A specification is a written description of a USDA food, and it includes the specific requirements that the vendor must follow to meet the Department of Agriculture's (USDA) contract for producing and delivering our USDA food. The USDA food specifications are developed by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and Farm Service Agency (FSA), and are used by the AMS and FSA Contracting Officers when they purchase foods which are distributed through our USDA food assistance programs.

**What information is contained in a specification?**

A specification contains standards relating to the quality, appearance and delivery of the product: conditions under which it is to be grown or produced, packed, stored and transported; explicit descriptions regarding its size, weight, color and nutrient content; details of the inspection process; and specific packing and labeling requirements. All requirements for purchase of USDA food products are included in the specification.

**How is a specification developed?**

Quite frequently AMS and FSA begin to develop a specification for a USDA food by using the Commercial Item Description (CID), if one is available. A CID is a simplified product description that concisely describes salient product characteristics of a commercial product. Several agencies develop CIDs, including the Department of Defense. Food and Consumer Service (FCS) provides FSA and AMS with any special requirements for the item to be purchased. AMS and FSA will incorporate these requirements into the specification. Special requirements are based on the needs and preferences of the recipients, such as nutritional requirements. Hence, USDA's specifications may be more stringent than what is required in a CID. In some cases, AMS or FSA use the CID without any changes.

**Is a specification the same as an announcement?**

No. An announcement is a document containing producers' requirements for bidding on USDA food, such as billing requirements, shipping and delivery guidelines, contract information, and certifications, requirements and warranties. AMS and FSA contracting officers make the announcement available to prospective bidders. Vendors use the information in announcements to determine their bid prices. The specification and announcement for commodities purchased by AMS are separate documents. The specification and announcement for commodities purchased by FSA are combined into one document.

**Who uses specifications?**

Specifications are distributed to prospective bidders by the AMS and FSA Contracting Offices. They are included in the announcements for the invitations for bids on the commodities purchased for our food distribution programs. FCS makes the specifications available to its Regional Offices, which distribute them to State agencies. Regional Offices and State agencies use the specification as a reference document to answer questions and clarify details about the USDA food, such as packaging requirements.

**When might a specification be changed or amended?**

Specific requirements are included in USDA's specifications to ensure that the producer will provide a quality and nutritious product that will be well accepted by recipients and meet their needs. However, in a few instances FCS may receive a complaint on a product that highlights the need modify the specification to include future problems with the product. When this is done, regions and State agencies are notified through an amendment to the specification.

**How can I obtain a copy of a specification for a USDA food?**

The Program Support Team (PST) in the Food Distribution Division, FCS Headquarters is responsible for handling specifications and any related issues on USDA foods. You may contact your Regional Office or the PST staff for a copy of a specification or if you have questions on a specification.

*For questions about this information, contact*[*Antonio Ante*](https://dpi.wi.gov/user/221/contact)*(608) 267-4599*

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