

Conformity checks of fruit and vegetables sold online in Sweden

Elin Keblanz, Swedish Board of Agriculture

The Plant Inspection unit at the Swedish Board of Agriculture are responsible for conformity checks regarding marketing standards for fruit and vegetables. Since 2022 compliance inspections of fruit and vegetables sold online are part of the unit's annual inspection plan. How did we get here?

The marketing standards for fruit and vegetables (EU 543/2011) applies to distance selling with no exceptions from what applies to a physical retailer or wholesaler, hence conformity checks for online sales are expected.

In 2020 the unit began preparations for starting a project developing several aspects of the conformity checks of fruit and vegetables. One of the major goals was to develop a model for inspections of fruit and vegetables sold online.

The project decided to face the challenges of finding a suitable way to do inspections of fruit and vegetable sold online with a pilot trial of three different inspection models. The inspections conducted in the pilot trial were considered as tests and did not need to meet all formal standards. The aim was to gather information and knowledge rather than to formally and legally make an impact in the industry. To connect with industry and collect further information a network with representatives from various businesses was initiated.

To make the pilot trial possible several aspects had to be taken under consideration to limit the trial to a reasonable size. For example, the trial was limited to the business segment of online sales similar to physical retail. The inspection population was limited to the 7 largest operators on the market, who combined hold a vast majority of the market shares.

Pilot model 1 – Inspection of information displayed on website. All products on each website was inspected. Criteria checked; country of origin, class (when applicable) and variety (when applicable). All discrepancies were documented, screenshots were used for documentation.

Pilot model 2 – Inspection of information displayed on website combined with comparison with ordered products. A total of 15 products inspected per website, screenshots were taken of every product and saved for comparison. Criteria checked; country of origin, class (when applicable) and variety (when applicable). After inspection on website the products were ordered for pick up or delivery and later a physical inspection was conducted to compare information on website with information following the physical product.

Pilot model 3 – Inspection of information displayed on website combined with comparison with stock in physical store. A total of 25 products inspected per website, screenshots were taken of every product and saved for comparison. Criteria checked; country of origin, class (when applicable) and variety (when applicable). Later the same day as the inspection on the website the physical retail store or warehouse was inspected and the information from the website was compared to the physical stock.

Experiences and future - The deviation level for all three pilot models were 40-50 %, which is higher than deviation levels in regular conformity checks in retail and wholesale. Representatives from the industry showed great interest and commitment and our relationships were strengthened. Since the field of online sales of fruit and vegetables is complexed, the relationships are very valuable. It's possible to do inspections in this field and the workload is reasonable. In 2022 inspections of fruit and vegetables sold online were included in our annual inspection plan. Methods used for inspections are similar to pilot model 1 and 2, but constantly evolving regarding details as we learn more and as the industry adjusts to the requirements now being enforced.