*Indicates Hard 7, which represent the primary items of focus for the National Produce Program due in part to their relative high durability, availability, and nutritional value
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i. Intro

The Feeding America network has seen produce as a category (from all sources) grow impressively, from about 600 MM lbs. in FY10 to over 900MM lbs. in FY13. Produce has many attractive benefits, such as being highly nutritious. However, it also presents unique handling requirements that can differ from traditional food bank staple items like canned goods.

As they move increasing amounts of produce, members have articulated a need for more materials to guide them on how to handle produce. This toolkit aims to address that need by providing a set of guidelines and best practices on produce handling for food banks, from receiving to outbound.

Food banks see a wide range of produce crops and quality, everything from excess product that is retail quality to produce that has gone beyond a salvageable state. This toolkit is intended to address the unique produce handling needs of food banks in a way that standard produce industry guides cannot. It incorporates produce industry standards for handling, best practices from members, and Feeding America policies.

Every food bank is different. Not every practice described in this toolkit will fit the needs of every food bank. This document is meant to be a guide, not a rulebook.

Finally, this toolkit is a living document. We welcome feedback on its contents as well as suggestions for additions. Feedback will be incorporated as it is provided. Please contact Melody Chan, Produce Engagement Coordinator, at mchan@feedingamerica.org for comments or questions. This document is available on the Produce Resource Center of Hungernet at https://www.hungernet.org/PRC/ops/Documents/Produce%20Handling%20Toolkit.docx.
Framework

The following framework of the produce handling process organizes the contents of this toolkit. It begins when the product is received at the food bank and ends when it is outbound to agencies (or, in some cases, directly to clients).

There is a section in the toolkit with best practices for each of the five steps below. Additionally, for some of the most common crops that the network handles, there is a series of product one-pagers with handling information.
Produce handling guide: From pick-up to outbound

I. Receiving

When produce is received at the food bank, it is usually the first opportunity for food banks to physically examine the product. Unlike other food types like cans or other shelf-stable packaged food, produce requires unique and specific handling. Produce can generally withstand a range of storage/transport temperatures, but going too extreme on either end could cause damage. Therefore, going through a thorough inspection process during receiving is crucial to ensuring product quality.

Executing the receiving process well is also an essential part of inventory management. Recording dates, quantities, conditions, etc. is important for any type of food, but is especially important with food types that can go bad in days. Collecting and labeling the appropriate information during the receiving process will help the food bank coordinate inventory well.

The “Receiving” section begins with best practices for pick-up at the donor site and then details a recommended receiving process, including instructions for inspection. There is a recommended inspection form for receiving that is included in the appendix.

Pick-up

Some food banks choose to pick up produce directly from the donor. For these food banks, it is a good idea for drivers to go through the inspection process detailed below at the pick-up site, before loading it onto the truck. That way, the driver can decide whether or not the load is usable before putting in the time and resources to transport it. For instance, farms often may not have cooler facilities at the pick-up site, and produce that has sat out in the sun may be too hot to cool down to the proper transport temperature when loaded, even if the refrigerated truck itself is at the recommended temperature before the truck is loaded.

It is particularly important for the drivers to take photos at pick-up, since there are no other food bank personnel there to help assess on-site. In the event that a load is rejected, photos are necessary evidence of the reasons for rejection.
Receiving process

Executing produce receiving well is important because it helps ensure product quality and good inventory management. The receiving inspection is typically the first opportunity to examine the condition of the produce, while the information documented during receiving is a key input into the overall inventory management system.

The “Inbound Produce Inspection Form” in the appendix is recommended to document the process detailed here.

Inspecting should happen at multiple times throughout the life of the product—not just at receiving, but also while it is stored and before it gets loaded. However, inspection when the produce is first received should be the most thorough.

We recommend the following steps for receiving produce:

1. **Check the seal (if applicable)**
   
   For loads ordered from the Feeding America Choice system, there will be a seal on the truck door. If the seal is broken on one of these trucks before arriving at the food bank, contact Feeding America. Also, it is important to verify the actual seal number with the seal number on the Bill of Lading (BOL) to make sure that it is the original seal.  
   
   3rd party trucks may not have a seal to start with due to various reasons (i.e., distributing to multiple food banks). Working with partners that seal their loads is best practice.

2. **Assess produce appearance (take photos)**
   
   The inspector should do a visual scan to check for signs of damage, decay, pests, etc. when first opening the door. Then, pull the pallets off and examine quality from pallets located in back, middle, and front of the truck. If possible, taking photographs of the produce from multiple areas of the shipment will provide documentation. Visual evidence is especially helpful if there is a reason to reject the load.

3. **Record truck temperature (if possible)**
   
   Refrigerated trucks usually have a temperature recorder that shows the truck temperature during its journey. If it is too high, the produce may have begun to decay; if too low, the produce may be frozen or damaged by chill.  
   
   National Produce Program (NPP) trucks are required to have a temperature recorder. Pull the paper strip from the temperature recorder, review, and attach to BOL for future reference.  
   
   For trucks that are not from the NPP and do not have temperature recorders, it is advisable for food banks to require growers/shippers to use temperature recorders.
4. **Check product samples (temperature, condition) from multiple areas of the shipment**

   Temperatures need to be taken from inside the product using a pulp thermometer (acceptable temperatures in "Produce Storage/Transport Guidelines"). A pulp thermometer (see picture) is a probe type device that is inserted into the center or core of the product.

   Samples should be taken from different pallets in the front, middle, and back of the shipment to be comprehensive. Conditions can vary between different areas of the truck.

   In addition to taking the temperature, inspectors should assess the qualitative condition of the samples for signs of decay and damage. If necessary, inspectors should cut into the product samples to examine for rot, discoloration, etc. Keep in mind that donated produce is often a USDA #2 grade with surface blemishes that do not affect its overall quality.

5. **Set an expiration date based on the temperature and condition assessment**

   Inspectors should set a date by which the produce needs to be moved out of the warehouse. This date should be based on temperature and condition at receiving, as well as the typical life span of the product. Identifying an expiration date will help manage inventory efficiently.

   Because there are so many factors affecting produce life span, this task is best done by people experienced in produce handling. For some guidance on how to estimate life span, see “Product lifespan estimation” in the appendix.

6. **Unload and label produce**

   Pallets should be labeled with product type, amount, date of arrival, and date of expiration.

   In appendix, see “Produce labeling forms” for a suggested template on reusable produce labels. It is meant to be printed and then laminated so that the yellow side is on front (label before volunteer sort) and green on back (label after volunteer sort). Then dry erase markers can be used to fill in the information.

7. **If necessary, follow protocol to reject the load of produce**

   In general, make sure to check and photograph any issues with the trailer and/or produce, note damage on bills, and keep the truck on site until the situation is resolved. For Choice loads, see “Choice Bad Load Resolution Process.”
II. Storage

Once produce has been received and inspected, the food bank needs to hold it until it can go out again for distribution. Keeping produce in the recommended storage conditions gives it the best chance of getting to the client’s hands in good condition. After all, agencies may not be able to distribute produce immediately, and clients may store it after receiving as well. Most produce requires conditioned storage space to maintain its quality. Also, some crops have special storage considerations to take into account (i.e., apples and bananas should not be stored together because the ethylene gas that the apples emit will cause the bananas to ripen too quickly).

This section begins with best practices for storage, followed by handouts that can be printed and used separately for education or reference purposes (e.g., temperature guidelines).

Temperature

Maintaining proper temperatures is key to ensuring quality. Produce should spend as little time as possible outside of its recommended temperature settings. Use the “Produce storage/transport guidelines” table to determine at what temperature to store each crop, as well as additional info (on ethylene and odors).

Storage food safety measures

For coolers, adequate air circulation should be provided. Product must be stored at least four inches from walls. Each cooler unit needs an accurate, easily visible and readable thermometer. Cold storage facilities and in particular refrigeration coils, refrigerator drip pans, forced air cooling fans, drain tiles, walls and floors should be cleaned and sanitized on a frequent and regular basis. Avoid placing warm products in coolers with insufficient capacity; the temperature will rise, and as the room cools condensation may drip and contaminate produce.

Products in dry storage must be maintained off the floor by using pallets, shelving or other means, and must be kept 18 inches away from walls. Any surface it comes in contact with should be cleaned and sanitized on a regular basis.

Organizing produce storage

Certain crops should not be kept in close proximity to other products. Ethylene gas and odor are typical culprits. Some crops (like apples) emit ethylene gas, which causes ethylene-sensitive crops (like bananas) to ripen too quickly if exposed. Likewise, some crops (like lemons) have strong odors that affect some sensitive crops (like pineapples). Refer to “Produce storage/transport groupings” for crops by ethylene sensitivity/production and odor sensitivity/production. Produce should never be kept near chemicals, raw poultry, meat, or seafood.
Given that food banks often do not have the luxury of using numerous coolers with different temperature control settings, “Produce storage/transport temperature grouping” categorizes crops into various temperature groupings. These groupings are not the recommended storage temperature for each crop, but rather general guidelines on the temperature range that each crop falls within to aid in produce area organization.

**Storage inspections**

While in storage, **produce should be checked daily (if not more often) to ensure that there are no new signs of damage, decay, or pest infestation and that it is being held in the proper temperature.** One way to integrate this with other warehouse activities is to check for produce quality while doing inventory level checks. Documenting and coordinating checks will help make operations more efficient.
**Produce storage/transport guidelines**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCT</th>
<th>STORAGE TEMP (°F)</th>
<th>ETHYLENE SENSITIVE</th>
<th>ETHYLENE PRODUCER</th>
<th>ODOR SENSITIVE</th>
<th>ODOR PRODUCER</th>
<th>SUSCEPTIBLE TO FREEZING</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APPLES</td>
<td>32-34</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BANANAS</td>
<td>56-58; to ripen 60-65</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEANS, SNAP/GREEN</td>
<td>40-45</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEANS, LIMA</td>
<td>37-41</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BERRIES, BLACKBERRIES</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
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<td>BERRIES, BLUEBERRIES</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>BERRIES, STRAWBERRIES</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
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<td>BROCCOLI</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANTALOUPE</td>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARROTS</td>
<td>33-35</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>CORN</td>
<td>34-38</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>CUCUMBERS</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
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<tr>
<td>MIXED FRUIT, FRESH CUT</td>
<td>33-41</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAPES</td>
<td>30-32</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAPEFRUIT</td>
<td>CA and AZ: 50-55; FL and TX: 50-60</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HONEYDEW</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEMONS</td>
<td>45-48</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETTUCE WHOLE</td>
<td>34-36</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETTUCE LEAF</td>
<td>34-36</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECTARINES</td>
<td>31-32; to ripen 51-77</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OKRA</td>
<td>43-45</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONIONS, BULB</td>
<td>40-60</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONIONS, GREEN</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONIONS, SWEET</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ORANGES</td>
<td>FL: 32-34; CA: 45-48; AZ &amp; TX: 32-48</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEACHES</td>
<td>In-transit: 32-34; Receiving 57-77</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEARs</td>
<td>32; To ripen 60-70</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPPERS, BELL</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PINEAPPLES</td>
<td>Green: 50-55; Ripe: 45</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLUMS</td>
<td>In-transit: 32-34; Receiving 51-77</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POTATOES</td>
<td>45-50</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SALAD MIXES, FRESH CUT</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>SQUASH</td>
<td>Soft: 41-50; Hard: 50-55</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWEET POTATOES</td>
<td>55-60</td>
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<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOMATOES</td>
<td>62-68; Ripe 55-60</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WATERMELONS</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ethylene sensitive products should NOT be stored or transported with ethylene-producers. Similarly, odor sensitive products should NOT be stored or transported with odor producers.

Data from *The Guide: Produce Availability & Merchandising Guide*
Produce storage/transport groupings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethylene* sensitive</th>
<th>Ethylene* producers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BANANAS</td>
<td>APPLES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEANS, SNAP/GREEN</td>
<td>CANTALOUPE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROCCOLI</td>
<td>PEACHES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CABBAGE</td>
<td>Pears</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARROTS</td>
<td>PLUMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAULIFLOWER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CUCUMBERS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HONEYDEW MELONS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETTUCE WHOLE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETTUCE LEAF</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OKRA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONIONS, BULB</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPPERS, BELL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQUASH</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWEET POTATOES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WATERMELONS</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Odor** sensitive</th>
<th>Odor** producers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>APPLES</td>
<td>GRAPES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CABBAGE</td>
<td>LEMONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARROTS</td>
<td>ONIONS, BULB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELERY</td>
<td>ONIONS, GREEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORN</td>
<td>ONIONS, SWEET</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GRAPES</td>
<td>ORANGES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONIONS, BULB</td>
<td>Pears</td>
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<tr>
<td>ONIONS, SWEET</td>
<td>PEPPERS, BELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEARS</td>
<td>POTATOES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PINEAPPLES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>POTATOES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ethylene is a gas that causes many fruits and vegetables to ripen. Certain crops are particularly sensitive to it, while others produce large quantities of it. Ethylene sensitive crops should never be stored or transported with ethylene producers.

**Some crops will readily absorb odors from certain other crops with strong odors if kept in the same area. Crops labeled as odor sensitive should never be stored or transported with odor producers.
**Produce storage/transport temperature groupings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Very cold group:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cold group:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Cool group:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>32-38°F</strong></td>
<td><strong>45-50°F</strong></td>
<td><strong>55-65°F</strong></td>
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<td>APPLES</td>
<td>BEANS, SNAP/GREEN</td>
<td>BANANAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEANS, LIMA</td>
<td>CUCUMBERS</td>
<td>ONIONS, BULB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BERRIES, BLACKBERRIES</td>
<td>GRAPEFRUIT</td>
<td>SWEET POTATOES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BERRIES, BLUEBERRIES</td>
<td>HONEYDEW MELONS</td>
<td>TOMATOES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BERRIES, STRAWBERRIES</td>
<td>LEMONS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BROCCOLI</td>
<td>ONIONS, SWEET</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CABBAGE</td>
<td>ORANGES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANTALOupe</td>
<td>OKRA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARROTS</td>
<td>PEPPERS, BELL</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAULIFLOWER</td>
<td>PINEAPPLES</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CELERY</td>
<td>POTATOES</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORN</td>
<td>SQUASH</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>GRAPES</td>
<td>WATERMELONS</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>LETTUCE LEAF</td>
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<tr>
<td>LETTUCE WHOLE</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIXED FRUIT, FRESH CUT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NECTARINES</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ONIONS, GREEN</td>
<td></td>
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<td>PEACHES</td>
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<td>Pears</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLUMS</td>
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<tr>
<td>SALAD MIXES, FRESH CUT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These cooler space groupings are meant to help organize storage for coolers at food banks, not to be taken as an exact indication of recommended storage temperature for each product. For precise temperatures by product, check “Produce storage/transport guidelines.”
III. Volunteer Sort

Once the produce has been taken into the food bank, it is often sorted by volunteers. This sorting generally serves one (or both) of these purposes:

1. **Culling**
   Volunteers will sort produce by hand to ensure that moldy or otherwise unusable produce is disposed of. The need for culling depends on how fast the food bank typically distributes produce as well as what percentage of the produce usable is usable when it comes in. For food banks that have extremely fast turnover (same day or next day from receiving), culling is not as important as for food banks that may have to store produce for longer.

2. **Repack**
   The need for repack depends largely on program and agency capacity. Many programs and agencies do not have the capabilities to handle full pallets of produce.
   
   Programs that distribute to seniors and children, for example, may need their produce to be placed into small packs (i.e., 3 lb. bags). Programs that distribute to families often can handle slightly larger packs. Regardless, programs that involve handing small quantities of produce to individuals or families will generally require repack.
   
   Small agencies often do not distribute large enough volumes to handle full pallets of produce. For instance, if agencies cannot distribute an entire pallet of cantaloupes at once, it will likely spoil and go to waste before it reaches clients. To deal with this agency capacity issue, volunteers can sort produce into mixed pallets that agencies can use more easily.

The volunteer sort process will differ from food bank to food bank, given different facilities, resources, and product mix. The following handout is a list of tips for volunteer sort that should be widely applicable to most food banks.
Practical tips for volunteer sorting

Sanitary practices
- Make sure anyone sorting is in good health (not sick with a cold or flu-like symptoms)
- Wash hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds before sorting and when returning from breaks; preferably, dry hands with paper towels
- Put on a hair restraint (hairnet, bandana, or hat) before sorting
- Use disposable food-service grade gloves
- For very dusty crops like potatoes or sweet potatoes, you can use masks and disposable aprons to avoid breathing in dust and dirtying clothes
- After finishing the sort, wash and sanitize all surfaces that were used, especially tabletops
  - Sweep floors and inspect for spills; clean floors with sanitizing solution as necessary
  - Thoroughly wash and sanitize sinks
  - Wash, rinse and sanitize all equipment used

Physical safety tips
- Use safe lifting techniques when carrying heavy objects (i.e., lift with legs and not back)
- Avoid heavy work if you have health issues that will become aggravated
- Stay hydrated and take breaks as needed
- Stay out of the way of potentially dangerous warehouse equipment like forklifts

Sorting equipment suggestions
- Softer products that have with more delicate skin (i.e., peaches) are better in boxes for repack, while harder products (i.e., apples) can withstand repack in bags
- Of all of the materials to use in the sort process, plastic bins are ideal from a food safety perspective because it can be properly sanitized, while cardboard and wood cannot be
- The ideal packaging for outbound produce includes vents (i.e., perforation in bags or sides of boxes) to encourage ventilation
- Try not to reuse cardboard boxes if possible to avoid cross-contamination

General recommendations
- If you find a moldy item, do not sniff it because of potential respiratory issues; remove and place in scrap receptacle
- Always minimize the time produce spends outside of ideal storage conditions
- Show volunteers acceptable vs. not acceptable blemishes to help understand what produce should be thrown away (see Product one-pagers for some examples to use)
- Using the Produce labeling forms included in the appendix makes it easy to identify what produce has been sorted or not (yellow is unsorted, green is sorted)
- For distribution to small agencies, it may be a good idea for volunteers to sort mixed pallets
- Do not overfill repack containers or bags
- Composting rejected produce is an alternative to discarding it
IV. Stage

Staging is when the food bank is preparing produce for outbound distribution. While the physical act of staging is usually straightforward, deciding which produce goes out when can be trickier. Different crops in different conditions at receiving have different lifespans. Managing produce inventory involves balancing different needs—while certain products may need to be distributed quickly, agencies may not necessarily have the capacity to handle large amounts of it in a short period of time.

While the best practices below focus on produce in the food bank, we want to acknowledge the role of agencies. From an inventory management perspective, a “push” model where the food bank works out a produce distribution schedule with the agencies is better for the food bank than a “pull” model where agencies order specific quantities/types of produce. However, a “push” model will require more planning upfront to forecast produce demand and supply.

**FEFO or FIFO**

**FEFO stands for First Expiry, First Out.** It is an inventory management practice for perishable goods that will minimize spoilage. Using FEFO means that the produce that will expire the soonest needs to leave the warehouse the soonest. For instance, there could be shipments of potatoes and strawberries received on Monday. However, during the receiving inspection, the strawberries are assigned an expiration date of that Wednesday, while the potatoes are assigned an expiration date of the following Monday. Despite the fact that the potatoes and strawberries came in at the same time, the strawberries should leave earlier because of their shorter life span.

To use FEFO, make sure to assign, label, and document an expiration date for produce when it is first received. The expiration date assessment should be based on the product’s typical life span as well as its condition upon receiving.

**FIFO stands for First In, First Out.** Using this practice, whatever comes in to the warehouse first should leave soonest. FEFO is highly preferable to FIFO for produce, due to examples like the one just mentioned above. However, FEFO may also be harder to implement because estimating product life span can be a difficult task. At the very least, produce should be managed using FIFO based on arrival times.

**Staging best practices**

As with any step in produce handling, keep a continuous cold chain. Staging should be done in the cooler to maintain proper storage conditions. In the event that staging cannot be done in the cooler because of space restrictions, make sure to minimize time out of proper storage conditions.
V. Outbound

Having put so much effort into handling produce through its lifetime at the food bank, it is important to make sure it gets to the agency (or other final destination) in good condition. On its way out the door, the basics of handling produce are the same as they have been throughout the whole handling process. However, there are some tips in this section specific to loading onto transport that will help ensure that the produce stays fresh.

Also, many food banks have expanded produce distribution into a new channel: Mobile Pantry. Although Mobile Pantry comes in many forms, the model that will be discussed here is the one where food banks operate their own truck and distribute directly to clients. This channel helps food banks distribute produce in excess of agency capacity or in areas where there is very little agency activity. Mobile pantry is typically used to target clients that do not have access to nutritious food regularly, “food deserts.” There are some tips for operating Mobile Pantry included in this section as well.
Practical tips for loading

Loading pointers specific to produce:

- Pre-cool the unit to recommended storage/transport temperature before loading begins
  - Road and weather conditions may affect the temperature of the truck—keep them in mind when setting a transport temperature
- Before loading produce, make sure to inspect its condition one last time
  - Catching a quality issue before the produce reaches the agency will save time and fuel
- Load as quickly as possible to minimize time out of optimal storage conditions
- For transport to many small agencies, make sure to organize the load by what will go out to each agency (i.e., don’t put all of one type of produce in the front of the trailer when it should be distributed to every agency)

Trucking best practices, as for any type of load:

- Make sure the weight is distributed evenly across the trailer
- Turn unit off while loading to minimize heat and humidity entering the trailer
- to minimize movement during transport
- Make use of strapping, shrink wrap, brace bars, and other stabilizing tools as necessary to minimize shifting and damage during transport
- Allow at least one foot of airspace above the load to ensure proper circulation
- Check that refrigerated unit is operating normally and at the correct temperature before leaving
Mobile Pantry tips

Mobile Pantry vehicle
- For direct distribution to clients, beverage trucks with side panel doors work well
- Having at least some cooled compartments within truck allows the truck to carry a variety of food types, including produce

Produce planning for Mobile Pantry runs
- Forecasting and planning ahead is especially important for ensuring consistent produce supply on frequent Mobile Pantry runs (i.e., twice a week)
- Sourcing a variety of produce is ideal for relatively small distributions like these—a truck full of onions is probably not appealing to clients
- Mobile Pantry can ensure that produce with a short lifespan gets to clients before it goes bad
- Packing produce in small enough packs for families/individuals facilitates quick distribution

Operating the Mobile Pantry program
- Make sure to market the event well beforehand, especially if the Mobile Pantry does not make consistent visits to the site
- Although volunteers usually help with distribution, using a driver that can drive and oversee program operations can be an efficient use of resources
- If running water is not available at the site, have hand sanitizer available for staff and volunteers
- In adverse weather conditions (especially in areas with harsh winters), Mobile Pantry may need to coordinate with agencies to use an actual facility
VI. Product one-pagers

These one-pagers on common produce crops are designed for produce handling training or ongoing reference. They may be helpful for training volunteers on sorting or for labeling shipments of certain products as they come in. All of the one-pagers include temperature guidelines, inspecting tips, and photographs to help identify what product is acceptable and what is not.

Crops covered in the one-pagers:

1. Apples*
2. Bananas
3. Cabbage*
4. Cantaloupe
5. Carrots*
6. Lettuce
7. Onions (bulb)*
8. Oranges*
9. Potatoes*
10. Sweet potatoes*
11. Tomatoes
12. Watermelon

*Indicates Hard 7, which represent the primary items of focus for the National Produce Program due in part to their relative high durability, availability, and nutritional value.

Main sources: The Packer, PMA
Apples

**Receiving and inspecting**
Apples should be firm and have smooth skin.

**Storing and handling**
Apples should be stored at 32-34°F, at 85-95% relative humidity. Susceptible to freezing; do not store below 29°F.

- Sensitive to ethylene: No
- Odor-sensitive: Yes
- Produces ethylene: Yes
- Odor-producing: No

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acceptable</th>
<th>Not acceptable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Figure 2" /> <strong>Bruises</strong></td>
<td>![image2.png] <strong>Superficial spot</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![image3.png] <strong>Blue mold</strong></td>
<td>![image4.png] <strong>Gray mold</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>![image5.png] <strong>Alternaria rot</strong></td>
<td>![image6.png] <strong>Bull's eye rot</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bananas

Receiving and inspecting
Avoid fruit with damaged skins.

Storing and handling
Bananas should be stored at 56-58°F, at 85-95% relative humidity. To ripen green bananas, store at 60-65°F. Bananas bruise easily; handle with care.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensitive to ethylene: Yes</th>
<th>Odor-sensitive: No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Produces ethylene: No</td>
<td>Odor-producing: No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Acceptable

A few bruises

Slight speckling

Not acceptable

Chill damage

Overripe

Also overripe
Cabbage

Receiving and inspecting
Cabbages should be fairly even colored and heavy for its size.

Storing and handling
Watermelons should be stored at 32-36°F, at 90-98% relative humidity.
Sensitive to ethylene: Yes    Odor-sensitive: Yes
Produces ethylene: No        Odor-producing: No

Acceptable

Small spots on outer leaves

Not acceptable

Black rot

White rot

Downy mildew
Cantaloupe

**Receiving and inspecting**
Cantaloupes should be round with good netting or webbing over creamy-colored rind. They have a distinctive aroma and the blossom end will yield to gentle pressure when ripe.

**Storing and handling**
Cantaloupes should be stored at 36-41°F, at 90-98% relative humidity. Susceptible to freezing; to prevent chill injury, do not store below 30°F.

- **Sensitive to ethylene:** No
- **Odor-sensitive:** No
- **Produces ethylene:** Yes
- **Odor-producing:** No

Acceptable

Slight discoloration

Not acceptable

Mold

Decay

Anthracnose
Carrots

Receiving and inspecting
Carrots should have firm, smooth exteriors (i.e., should snap when bent far enough). Color should be vibrant orange to orange-red.

Storing and handling
Carrots should be stored at 33-35°F, at 90-98% relative humidity. Do not store below 30°F.

Sensitive to ethylene: Yes
Produces ethylene: No

Odor-sensitive: Yes
Odor-producing: No

Acceptable
Spots on outer surface
Odd shapes

Not acceptable
Rot
Mold

More rot
Lettuce

Receiving and inspecting
In general, avoid wilted and discolored leaves. For iceberg lettuce, some browning of the core end is natural and occurs from oxidation after lettuce has been harvested and trimmed.

Storing and handling
Lettuce should be stored at 34-36°F, at 90-98% relative humidity. Keep lettuce away from drafts to avoid dehydration.

Sensitive to ethylene: Yes
Produce ethylene: No

Odor-sensitive: No
Odor-producing: No

Acceptable

Brown core

Tear/slight bruising

Not acceptable

Wilted leaves

Translucent leaves (freeze damage)

White mold
Onions (bulb)

**Receiving and inspecting**
Good quality onions should be firm and hard with short, tight necks and dry papery skin. Slightly loose outer skin is common and should not affect quality.

**Storing and handling**
Onions should be stored at 40-60°F, at 85-95% relative humidity. For extended storage (longer than 7 days), hold at 32-36°F. Keep out of direct sunlight.

Sensitive to ethylene: **Yes**  Odor-sensitive: **Yes**
Produce ethylene: **No**  Odor-producing: **Yes**

---

**Acceptable**

- Small sprouts
- Unusual shape

---

**Not acceptable**

- Bulb rot
- Bacterial soft rot
- Neck rot
- Sour skin
Oranges

**Receiving and inspecting**
Oranges should be firm, heavy for size, and have fine-textured skin. Skin color of a ripe orange ranges from orange to greenish-orange. Many oranges go through a regreening process on the tree in which the skin color begins to turn from orange back to green again. Regreening is a natural occurrence and does not affect the flavor quality of the orange.

**Storing and handling**
Optimal storage temperature varies by type. FL: 32-34°F; CA: 45-48°F; AZ & TX: 32-48°F, at 85-95% relative humidity.

- Sensitive to ethylene: No
- Produces ethylene: No
- Odor-sensitive: No
- Odor-producing: Yes

---

**Acceptable**

- Slightly green oranges
- Small spots

---

**Not acceptable**

- Mold
- Mold in navel
- Stem end decay
- More mold (green)
Potatoes

Receiving and inspecting
All potato varieties should be fairly clean, firm, and smooth. Avoid potatoes with wrinkled skins, soft dark spots, or green appearance.

Storing and handling
Potatoes should be stored at 45-50°F, at 85-95% relative humidity. Susceptible to freezing; to prevent chill injury, do not store below 42°F.

Sensitive to ethylene: No
Produces ethylene: No

Odor-sensitive: Yes
Odor-producing: Yes

Acceptable

Small peepers (sprouts)
Odd lumps

Not acceptable

Moldy cut
Green potato (solanine)
Common scab
Late blight
**Sweet potatoes**

**Receiving and inspecting**
Good quality sweet potatoes should be firm with smooth skins.

**Storing and handling**
Sweet potatoes should be stored at 55-60°F, at 85-95% relative humidity. Store in well-ventilated area.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensitive to ethylene</th>
<th>Odor-sensitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Produces ethylene</th>
<th>Odor-producing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Acceptable**

![Odd shapes](image1)

![Small sprouts](image2)

**Not acceptable**

![Mold](image3)

![Chill damage (soft spots)](image4)
Tomatoes

**Receiving and inspecting**
Good quality tomatoes should have bright, shiny skin and firm flesh.

**Storing and handling**
Ripe (nearly full red) tomatoes should be stored at 55-60°F; less ripe tomatoes should be stored at 62-68°F. 85-95% relative humidity is ideal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sensitive to ethylene: No</th>
<th>Odor-sensitive: No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Produces ethylene: No</td>
<td>Odor-producing: No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Acceptable**

- Slight dent
- Greenish tint

---

**Not acceptable**

- Moldy bruise
- Black rot
- Late blight
- Mold and bruising
Watermelon

**Receiving and inspecting**
Watermelons should be firm. Watermelons do not ripen after harvesting; a ripe watermelon will produce a distinct hollow sound when thumped.

**Storing and handling**
Watermelons should be stored at 50-60°F, at 85-95% relative humidity. Susceptible to freezing; to prevent chill injury, do not store below 41°F.

- Sensitive to ethylene: **Yes**
- Odor-sensitive: No
- Produces ethylene: No
- Odor-producing: No

**Acceptable**

![White/yellow patch](image1)

![Small spots](image2)

**Not acceptable**

![Decay](image3)

![Anthracnose](image4)

![Fruit blotch](image5)
## Appendix

### Inspection form

**Inbound Produce Inspection**

Complete this form for any produce load arriving at the food bank. Inspect truck and product *before* unloading from truck. If product is damaged, infested or out of temp range, or truck is unacceptable, *stop unloading truck* and reject load.

Inspected by: ______________________________________ Date: __________________

Donor: ___________________________________________ Time: _________________

Carrier: ___________________________________________

Receipt Ref Number: __________________________________

**Product type and quantity:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vehicle/Trailer Condition</th>
<th>Yes/No/NA</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Product Condition</th>
<th>Yes/No/NA</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Free of damage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Free of unacceptable spoilage, odors, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clean (free of mold, etc)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Free of apparent pest activity (insects, rodents)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill of Lading (BOL) present</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Free of damage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seal unbroken</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Product count(s) match BOL and quantity ordered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Temperature</th>
<th>Acceptable?</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truck monitor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperature recorder</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product sample 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product sample 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product sample 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If product needs to be rejected:

1. Describe the reason for rejection on the back of this form.
2. Do not return any paperwork to the driver or let the truck leave.
3. If this is a Feeding America Choice System produce load, refer to their instructions for handling rejected produce loads.
4. The appropriate operations supervisor should contact the donor for handling instructions and note the resolution steps on the back of this form (including name, phone number of contact person and date/time of conversation).

If load is accepted:

1. Keep this completed form and copy of signed BOL with any other receiving documents.
2. Give this completed form, signed BOL, any other receiving documents and copy of the receipt to the appropriate operations supervisor.

Inspector signature: 

Complete these sections if rejecting the load.

Reason(s) for rejecting the load:

Details of donor conversation and resolution steps to be taken

Contact name and phone number:

Date/Time of conversation:

Details:
Choice Bad Load Resolution Process

Scenario: A bad produce load arrives at your dock.

Solution: Truck must remain at your dock.

YOU MUST NOTIFY FEEDING AMERICA IMMEDIATELY TO ENSURE THESE LOADS ARE HANDLED PER FEDERAL PACA REGULATIONS AND TO ENSURE PROPER CREDIT. NO EXCEPTIONS.

Step 1: Call the Feeding America Logistics Department immediately in the following order if one is not available: Emily Maris at 312.641.6550 (or by email at emaris@feedingamerica.org); Debbie Micienko at 312.641.6748 (dmicienko@feedingamerica.org); Peg Collins Sarinyamas at 312.641.6516 (psarinyamas@feedingamerica.org); or Dan LaBonte at 312.641.6515 (dlabonte@feedingamerica.org).

Step 2: Check to see if the refrigerated unit on the truck is running. Examine the condition of the trailer and make note of any holes in the trailer on either the side, bottom, back, or the roof area. A damaged trailer can lead to improper refrigeration and temperature controls.

Step 3: You will need to off-load a few of the pallets of product and do the following: (1) Pulp (take temperature readings) the product from different location points inside the trailer. (2) Photograph the product on the trailer, off the trailer, standing alone and cut open. Check if the product is infested with bugs. If so, take pictures of that too. Send photos via email to Feeding America immediately.

Step 4: Reload truck and close up trailer.

Step 5: Before returning bills or load manifest to the driver, you must note damage on the bills. Use terminology similar to this: LOAD REJECTED DUE TO DAMAGE. WAITING FOR DISPOSITION FROM THE BUYING OFFICE.

Step 6: Wait for Feeding America to call back and DO NOT SEND TRUCK AWAY. Additionally, if it is determined that the load is going to be dumped, we will need your assistance to find a local landfill that accepts bad produce to direct the driver to--this is key because not all landfills accept bad produce. If you have contact information for the local landfill readily available, that will speed up the process.

Step 7: Feeding America will advise and work with you to resolve this problem, but again, DO NOT SEND TRUCK AWAY until we have a joint resolution and a next-step action plan.

Things to remember:

In many cases these loads are U.S. Number 2 grade produce (grade 1 is available at the grocery store). Please keep in mind that there could be some discoloration, deformation, and exterior/surface blemishes that are common reasons for the grading difference. For example, an apple may have what is referred to
in the produce industry as “limb or branch rub” meaning that the apple was rubbed by blowing branches during a certain point in their development leaving a bark-like section due to the fruit’s continued growth and healing process—essentially creating a “scab.” The interior fruit quality is not poor, but this surface blemish causes the fruit to be effectively “unmarketable” to the commercial fresh market. Even though it may lack the cosmetically pristine look on the outside, it does not mean that it is not good quality in the inside. In addition, grade 2 produce might have 1 to 2 percent decay (this is common industry standard approval guidelines).

Any further questions or comments about this procedure should be referred to Mark Thomas, Produce Program Operations Manager, by email at mthomas@feedingamerica.org or by phone at 312.641.6606. Your cooperation with these rare cases of bad produce arrival is greatly appreciated.
Produce labeling form instructions

The following templates can be used to label produce while it is at the food bank, after receiving and before it is loaded for distribution. It is meant to help capture relevant handling information (like type, quantity, expiration date) and make it easy to identify at a glance if it has been sorted or not. Using this labeling system, volunteers and staff immediately know what needs to be sorted and in what priority (yellow tags by date), and staff know what is available to send out to agencies (green by date).

Using the yellow side indicates that the produce has not yet been sorted, while the green side indicates that it has been sorted already.

Instructions for use:

1. Print the following two templates on one sheet of paper, yellow on one side and green on the other.
2. Laminate the sheet.
3. After produce is received, use dry erase marker to fill out the yellow side with relevant information. Date is especially important (expiration date for a FEFO inventory management system, arrival date for a FIFO system).
4. Use a binder clip to fasten the filled-out sheet to an item on the pallet with the yellow side facing out.
5. After the produce is sorted, flip the tag around and copy the info to the green side. Clip to pallet.
6. Remove before the produce is loaded and reuse as needed.
Produce labeling form (FRONT, before volunteer sort)

Expiration date:________________________

Arrival date:________________________

Product:______________________________

Quantity:____________________________
Produce labeling form (BACK, after volunteer sort)

Expiration date:______________________________

Sort date:______________________________

Product:______________________________

Quantity:______________________________
Produce lifespan estimation method (from Frank Bonner, formerly at St. Mary’s Food Bank in Phoenix, AZ)

**Product lifespan estimation:**

The inspection process is conducted by assessing Condition and Temperature. You will need to determine the percentage of decay or damage on each carton sampled *(using best judgment practice)* and record that percentage along with general description of findings. Each percentage will be totaled and an overall percentage will be determined.

The same basic process will be used to determine percentages on temperatures. Each overall percentage is equal to one point. Example: 20% = 20 points. Add the two numbers together to obtain your overall score.

**Example of Inspection #1:** 10 pallets of cantaloupes come into the food bank; during your inspection you notice the following. All cartons are straight and show no damage externally, but about 20% of the cantaloupes you inspected have minimal or some sunken places and appear sound. There is no sign of mold or decay visible on the melons. When you cut (generally 1 to 3 melons per pallet if suspect) a few of the melons showed some slight translucent discoloration in the flesh near or under the
external sunken places. The pulp temperatures (taken from the sample melons) are reading 40 degrees consistently.

Condition is good no visible decay, sunken area’s 20%.......... score = 20
Temperature is only 4 degrees above standards.................. score = 4

Total score = 24

Result: Product recommended to be distributed within 4 days for maximum usage

Example of Inspection #2: 10 pallets of cantaloupes come into the food bank; during your inspection you notice the following. Most cartons are broken and show damage externally; about 60% of the cantaloupes you inspected have multiple sunken places and some mold is present sporadically through the carton. There are also consistent signs of decay visible on the vine end (belly button). When you cut (generally 1 to 3 melons per pallet if suspect) a sample of the melons, there is discoloration in the flesh near or under the external sunken places. The pulp temperatures (taken from the sample melons) are reading 73 degrees consistently.

Condition is poor, visible decay, sunken area’s 60%............ score = 60
Temperature is 35 degrees above standards..................... score = 35

Total score = 95

Result: Product should be disposed of, and not distributed.
Banana ripening guide

Suggested Guide for Banana Ripening

Notes:
- Temperatures are °F
- Temperatures are PULP not AIR
- Use the Super-Ripening Center and Ethylene Generator for ripening if green bananas and ethylene are required
- Maintain 100% to 150% of ethylene
- Protect temperature, humidity, and air circulation, maintain fruit color breaks
- For delayed shipment hold at 58°F
- After 24 hour ripening irrigation period vent room for 15-30 minutes with fan on

Day | 5 Day Schedule | 6 Day Schedule | 7 Day Schedule | 8 Day Schedule
---|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------
1 | 58°F | 60°F | 64°F | 64°F
2 | 58°F | 60°F | 62°F | 62°F
3 | 58°F | 60°F | 62°F | 62°F
4 | 58°F | 60°F | 62°F | 62°F
5 | 58°F | 60°F | 62°F | 62°F
6 | 58°F | 60°F | 62°F | 62°F
7 | 58°F | 60°F | 62°F | 62°F
8 | 58°F | 60°F | 62°F | 62°F