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Compliance & Regulations

IMPORT REGULATIONS
FOR FOOD

IN THE UAE

FLANDERS INVESTMENT & TRADE MARKET STUDY



IMPORT REGULATIONS FOR FOOD

IN THE UAE

Dubai / 12.10.2022



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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to provide detailed information to Flemish exporters of food items about UAE import regulations, documents and labelling requirements. Few see more of food items exported from Belgium to Dubai do not comply with the current regulations, resulting in loss of valuable time and resources for the exporter as well as for the importer and the local authorities. In some cases, the contravention results in the loss of the entire food shipment.

A better understanding of UAE import regulations should reduce the number of contraventions in food shipments coming from Belgium, which will be beneficial for the Flemish exporter and all UAE parties involved.

2. GENERAL GOVERNING FOOD AUTHORITIES

2.1.1 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

Like the European Union (EU), GCC or the Gulf Cooperation Council is the umbrella organization which represents the political and economic union of the Arab states bordering the Gulf. The member countries of GGC are UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. GCC's primary focus remains on security and economic coordination.

2.1.2 Gulf Standardization Organization (GSO)

In an attempt to create harmonization within the GCC, the Gulf Standardization Organization (GSO) was established. The aim of [GSO](#) lies in unifying the various standardization activities and following up implementation and compliance within the member states.

GSO focused on the development of the production and service sectors, fostering the intra-GCC trade, protecting the consumer, environment and the public health and thereby, enhancing the GCC economy and its competitiveness.

GSO also focused on meeting the requirements of Gulf Custom Union and Gulf Common Market¹.

Therefore, GSO's prime focus remains in the development of food and non-food regulations and standards. GCC countries are members of the World Trade Organization (WTO), and hence each member country is required to notify WTO of any proposed standards or regulations.

¹ [The Gulf Standardization Organization](#)

The following are the key GSO members that take an active role in the decision-making process for harmonized GCC standard:

- **United Arab Emirates** –[Ministry of Industry & Advanced Technology \(MoIAT\)](#)
- **The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia** - [Saudi Standards, Metrology and Quality Organization \(SASO\)](#)
- **Bahrain** - [Bahrain Standards & Metrology Directorate \(BSMD\)](#)
- **The Sultanate of Oman** - [Directorate General for Specifications and Measurements \(DGSM\)](#)
- **Qatar** - [Qatar General Organization for Standardization \(Q.S.\)](#)
- **Kuwait** - [Standards and Industrial Services Affairs – KOWSMD](#)

A ministerial decree is issued by each country's official government gazette (above) when regulations are formally implemented. This is marked by a grace period for enforcement post-publication of the new decree.

The GSO typically tries to incorporate and align the technical regulations and standards in line with the following organizations; however, exceptions always exist:

- CODEX Alimentarius²
- International Organization for Standardization (ISO)³
- The European Food Safety Agency (EFSA)⁴
- The U.S Food and Drug Administration (FDA)⁵

For more information on GSO, please refer to the following [website](#).

2.1.3 GCC Unified Custom Law and Single Custom Tariff

The "Common Custom Law" was adopted to unify the customs procedures and regulations in all customs administration of the GCC Member States. The GCC Unified Customs Law and Single Customs Tariff (UCL) came into effect as from 2003. According to information provided in the Federal Custom Authorities, the following are the principles and concept of the customs union⁶:

- Customs Union is the territory wherein customs duties "taxes" as well as regulations and procedures restricting trade among the member states are abolished, and wherein unified customs duties "taxes" and trade and customs regulations for trade with the non-member States are implemented.

² [Codex Alimentarius](#)

³ [International Organization for Standardization](#)

⁴ [European Food Safety Agency \(EFSA\)](#)

⁵ [U.S. Food and Drug Administration \(FDA\)](#)

⁶ <https://www.fca.gov.ae/en/homerightmenu/pages/uniongccstates.aspx?SelectedTab=9>

- The GCC customs union is based on the following principles:
 - A Common External Customs Tariff for products imported from outside of the GCC Customs Union
 - A Common Customs Law
 - Unified customs regulations and rules are applicable in all Member States in related fields.
 - Unification of the internal customs, financial and administrative regulations and procedures relating to importation, exportation and re-exportation in the GCC States.
 - Single entry point where unified customs duties are collected
 - Free movement of goods among the GCC States without customs or non-customs restrictions, while taking into consideration the implementation of the veterinary and agricultural quarantine regulations and the prohibited and restricted goods
 - Treatment of the goods produced in any of the GCC States as national products.

For more information of Unified Custom Procedures, please refer to the following website [FCA - Customs Guide - UNIFIED GUIDE FOR CUSTOMS PROCEDURES](#) and [Procedures and steps for implementation of the Customs Union of the GCC States](#)

Single Custom Tariff:

- The common customs tariff of the GCC Customs Union shall be 5 % on all foreign goods imported from outside of the Customs Union with effect from 1/1/2003 A.C⁷.
- Customs duties "taxes" imposed on tobacco and products thereof in the member states of the Customs Union shall be 100 %
- Customs duties "taxes" imposed on alcohol and products thereof in the member states of the Customs Union shall be 50 %
- For more information on the customs tariff for other products, please refer to the following website [The Unified Customs Tariff for GCC States 2017](#)

2.1.4 Guide for Food Import Procedures for GCC Countries

The [GCC Guide For Control On Imported Foods](#) was developed aimed at unified procedures for clearing food consignment and harmonizing import certificate for food across the GCC. While regulatory requirement and procedures are not fully harmonized between the GCC countries, this [GCC Guide For Control On Imported Foods](#) will give you an insight into the terminologies, principles, regulatory requirements, documentation and health certificates etc.

⁷ [GCC Common Custom Tariff](#)

3. UNITED ARAB EMIRATES REGULATORY AUTHORITIES STRUCTURE

The following are the key governing bodies in the food and agriculture segment:

3.1.1 Federal Level:

- **Ministry of Climate Change and Environment (MOCCAЕ)**
 - MOCCAЕ is responsible for the following:
 - Establish and implement food safety regulations and laws
 - Align with recommendations from GSO
 - Align with recommendations from UAE National Food Safety Committee (NFSC) for food-related topics
 - Align with recommendations from the Veterinary Committee (V.C) on meat and poultry
 - Is the regulatory authority for the following: Import regulations of live animals, plants, seed, raw agricultural commodities and fisheries
 - All Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) certification requirements and issues are managed by MOCCAЕ
 - MOCCAЕ acts as a country liaison to the SPS Agreement and complies with the WTO SPS Measures
- **Ministry of Industry & Advanced Technology (MoIAT) which has absorbed the Emirates Authority for Standardization & Metrology (ESMA)**
 - MoIAT (former ESMA) is the sole Standardization Body in the UAE and provides standards, metrology, conformity assessment and accreditation services in line with international standards and practices.
 - MoIAT (former ESMA) acts as a country liaison to the WTO for all technical trade barriers related topics
 - MoIAT (former ESMA) acts as the country liaison to the GSO in their attempt to harmonize standards and technical regulations

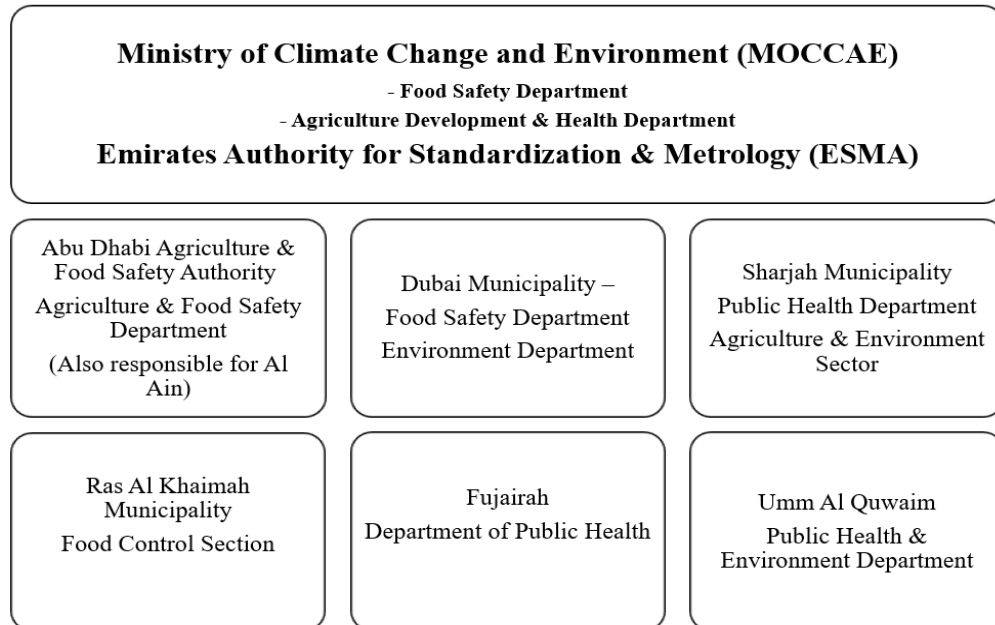
3.1.2 Local Level:

The state municipalities technically manage, act as facilitators and executors of the regulations and standards as set by MOCCAЕ and MoIAT. The municipalities activities include port inspection, label approval, shipment releases, testing and clearances etc. The municipalities are well versed

with the standards and regulations and the practicality of the implementation process, and hence they have the right to appeal to the federal authorities concerning regulations when not in agreement.

Please refer to the municipality website and also avail information for any online services such as registration of food products and product label requirements below:

- [Abu Dhabi Agriculture and Food Safety Authority \(ADAFSA\)](#) - Abu Dhabi and Al Ain
- [Dubai Municipality](#)
- [Sharjah Municipality](#)
- [Ras Al Khaimah Municipality](#)
- [Fujairah Municipality](#)
- [Umm Al Quwaim Municipality](#)



4. ROLE OF FOOD IMPORTERS OR DISTRIBUTORS OR TRADING COMPANIES

The Food trading companies or the local importers/distributors of food products are registered either in Freezone or in the mainland. A Freezone company can trade only with other Freezone companies. In the case of Freezone company trading with the mainland, a customs duty of 5% or the applicable rate as per product will need to be paid. The company will need to hold an import/export license to trade with mainland companies.

The registration process for food items irrespective of your company is mainland, freezone remains the same for both.

Before bringing in your food products, these local distributors will need to register each food item in ZAD. Before the arrival of the shipment via Jebel Ali Port, the company will need to register with the particular unit of Dubai municipality called FIRS (Food Item Registration and Label Assessment) system. We will discuss both these two registration processes below in details.

5. FOOD REGISTRATION PROCESS

The UAE has developed stringent procedures for products business.

The Dubai Municipality is responsible for overseeing the food registration and implementation process. It is mandatory to register all food products for import and re-export. The Federal Scheme for Food Accreditation and Registration was implemented in 2018. They established the Federal portal called ZAD, a subsidiary of Dubai Municipality – the electronic platform for food registration to enlist all food items to ensure compliance with the UAE's food law prior releasing it in the market.

The food registration process involves the ingredients of food items verified by lab tests.

According to the information available on the official [website](#), ZAD features the following services:

- Food business operators to register their companies,
- Register the food item products
- Search option on registered food items
- To obtain No Objection Certificates for transfer of any food consignment between emirates
- Information on approved Islamic entities and slaughterhouses worldwide as approved by MOCCAE

Please refer to the [ZAD Portal Public User Manual](#) for your reference and additional information.

Documents Required For Food Product Registration

- Artwork of the product
- Ingredient list
- Additives, if any
- Barcode details
- Label image
- Free sale certificate (attested from the chamber of commerce from the country of origin and also UAE embassy attestation)
- Halal Certificate issued by an Islamic organization which is approved by UAE authorities

- Declaration of conformity
- Micro-biological report (if applicable)
- Additionally, if your product label mentions GMO-free, claims as organic and has an organic logo, the supplier must provide with a GMO-free certificate or Certificate from an accredited body supporting the claim must be provided. This is applicable for other certifications such as Avian Flu-free certificates, Dioxin-free certificates, etc.

Please check with your local distributors if there are any additional documents required.

6. FOOD IMPORT AND RE-EXPORT SYSTEM – FIRS

If a shipment arrives at any port in Dubai, then it is mandatory that the food item AND its label needs to be registered in the Food Import and Re-export System (FIRS) of Dubai Municipality.

Food item and label registration can only be done online by the UAE importing company.

The entire procedure can be done online BEFORE the shipment arrives. It is highly advisable to complete the registration prior to the arrival of the shipment, as this provides some time for rectifying any problems. In case there are no problems with labels or documents, the shipment will be released from the port of entry within a matter of hours.

Different packaging of the same food item (for example, one 100 gr package and one 200 gr package) are considered different food items and should be registered in FIRS separately. Please also note that FIRS will reject any item that is already registered with another name or account. FIRS is only for food products and not items such as cigarettes and food supplements.

7. FOOD LABELING

The following information is MANDATORY on the food label:

- Language: Labels must be in Arabic only or Arabic/English
- Brand name
- Product name: a summarized description of the food product.

- Food ingredients: arranged in a descending order according to the weight or volume. All ingredients should be listed.
- Production & expiration dates of all products, except those which are exempted from displaying the validity or expiration dates, such as fresh produce.
- The only accepted format of dates is: dd/mm/yyyy, for products with a shelf life longer than 3 months mm/yyyy is accepted.
- For more information on expiration period for food products, please check the D.M. Food Control Import Requirements Guide. A distinction is made between:
 - foodstuff with mandatory specified shelf life,
 - foodstuff with voluntary shelf life,
 - exempted products.
- Name of the food manufacturer, packer, distributor or importer
- Net weight or volume
- Country of origin should be declared clearly and should be specific. E.U. is not a country of origin!
- Product's barcode
- Lot number
- The language of the label should be Arabic.
- Approved stickers could be used to translate (part of) the food labels in the Arabic language. The minimum requirement for the Arabic information on the label or sticker are:
 - product name,
 - food ingredients,
 - country of origin,
 - storage conditions (if applicable),
 - instructions for use (if applicable),
 - nutritional information (if applicable).
- Any stickers used should not be easily removable!
- Storage conditions (if the validity of the product depends on such conditions)
- Mentioning the ingredients which may cause hypersensitivity
- Instructions for using the product (if needed)
- Nutritional labelling as per the UAES 2233:2017 requires mandatory disclosure of nutritional information. The following declaration for prepacked food for direct consumption or after heating must entail:
 - To mention nutritional value such as carbohydrates, protein, fat dietary fibres, energy

- If any ingredient such as vitamins, mineral salts or any other dietary elements are part of the prepacked food, the value of the dietary elements has to be mentioned on the label
- All nutritional information and/or net content shall be set forth as a percentage by weight if it is less than 100 grams or 100 ml or by food serving specified by the manufacturer
- International units such as gram, mg, ug, I.U. shall be used and kilocalories for energy values
- All health claims must be supported by certificates to confirm the claims
- Nutritional Labeling UAE.S 5034:2018: traffic light (T.L.) supplemental nutritional information labelling system to be displayed on the package of processed food for sale in the UAE. This applies to food business operates at all stages of the food chain where their activities concern the provision of food information to consumers. As per amendments in December 2021, the standard on T.L will stay as voluntary.
- Emirates Conformity Assessment System (ECAS)
 - Cabinet Decree No. (29) for 2018 on Milk and Dairy products and Cabinet Decree No. (30) for 2018 on juices & beverages require companies to obtain a UAE Certificate of Conformity for their products in accordance with the Emirates Conformity Assessment System (ECAS) before introducing them into the market
 - However, it is not yet mandatory for all dairy and juice products. Therefore, it is imperative to consult with your importers of these commodities to determine if ECAS is applicable to their products.
 - Currently, Emirates Conformity Assessment System (ECAS) and Emirates Quality Mark (EQM) logo is mandatory for water.
- Exception in labelling:
 - Products for intended for institutional use – does not require Arabic translation on the product label and are not allowed for sale in retail stores
 - Alcoholic beverages and products containing alcohol do not require any special labelling (to follow home country labelling requirements only). Sale and importation of alcohol is permitted through UAE authorized establishments only
 - Pet Food label require both Arabic and English either as a sticker or printed on the package, and the label must contain the statement "NOT FIT FOR HUMAN CONSUMPTION" and must have both production and expiry dates on the label. UAE also prohibits the sale of pet food containing pork.

For additional information on General Food Labelling Requirements by Abu Dhabi Agriculture and Food Safety Authority, please click on the link [here](#).

8. INGREDIENTS AND LABORATORY TESTING

All ingredients, colourings and flavourings should be mentioned on the label.

The information should be product specific. E.g. 'vinegar', 'oil', 'coloring', 'flavoring' are unacceptable descriptions. 'Rice vinegar', 'canola oil', 'E 127 or erythrosine', 'E1505 or triethyl citrate' are accepted.

Food items that are newly registered and imported into Dubai will undergo laboratory testing at Dubai Municipality. In case any ingredient or additive not mentioned on the label is identified through lab testing, the food item will not be accepted for import.

As per UAE standard - UAE.S192:2019 , additives permitted to use in Food stuffs follow the following standards:

- CODEX Approved standards

If the additives are not listed in the Codex system, you are allowed to refer to EU standards with below link https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/foods_system/main/?sector=FAD&auth=SANCAS

For example, If your ingredient/additive benzoate is an approved ingredient either by CODEX or by E.U Food standards, then there should be no issues in this region. Both these mentioned standards are recognized by MoIAT, formerly called ESMA (Emirates Authority for Standardization & Metrology).

If the additives are not listed in the Codex system, you are allowed to refer to EU standards with below link.

https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/foods_system/main/?event=substances.sear

8.1 **BANNED ADDITIVES AND INGREDIENTS**

The following additives and ingredients are completely banned in the UAE:

Food additives:

- E104 Quinoline yellow (yellow no.1)
- E105 fast yellow A B
- E107 Yellow G 2 (Food Yellow 5)

- E123 Amaranth (C.I. 16185 FD and C Red 2)
- E124 Ponceau 4 R (Red 2) (Cl.16255)
- E127 Erythrosine (FD & C Red 3) (C.I.45430)
- E131 Patent Blue V (C.I.42051)
- E142 Green S (Acid Brilliant Green, Food Green S, Lissamine Green, C.44090)
- E924 Potassium Bromate (Bread products)
- E952 Cyclamate
- E1510 Ethanol (alcohol)

Note: adding alcohol is not allowed in any food product. However, if alcohol occurs naturally in some products such as juices, it is subjected to the limits as indicated in the respective UAE standards.

Ingredients:

- Poppy seeds
- Qat leafs
- Betel leaf or nuts,
- Niswar (=tobacco snuff),
- Gutkha (=a preparation of crushed areca nut, tobacco, catechu, paraffin wax, slaked lime and sweet or savory flavorings).

If any product contains pork or pork products, it should be clearly declared on the label (NOT only in ingredients).

9. REQUIRED DOCUMENTS

Documents needed for clearance by D.M - Food Control at the port of entry:

- Bill of entry/ airway bill
- Delivery order in case of containers only
- An ORIGINAL health certificate approved by the government health authority at the country of origin. A copy of the health certificate will not be accepted and shall result in detaining of the consignment at the port of entry.
- The only authority in Belgium authorized to issue health certificates is the 'Federaal Agentschap voor de Voedselveiligheid (AFSCA-FAVV), www.favv.be

- Consignment packing list
- An ORIGINAL halal certificate issued by an Islamic Organization which is approved by UAE authorities (for meat and poultry and products thereof). Failure to deliver an original Halal Certificate shall result in detaining or re-exporting of the consignment.
- The only authorities in Belgium authorized by Dubai Municipality to issue halal certificates are [Halal Food Council Europe](#) and [Halal Quality Control](#).
- Any other certificates which might be required in case of any international epidemics or any certificates required based on local decisions.
- Additionally, if your product label mentions GMO-free, claims as organic and has an organic logo, the supplier must provide with a GMO-free certificate or Certificate from an accredited body supporting the claim must be provided. This is applicable for other certifications such as Avian Flu-free certificates, Dioxin-free certificates, etc.

10. MAIN REASONS FOR REJECTION OF ENTRY

- Banned ingredients such as poppy seeds and alcohol,
- Difficult to read the information on the label,
- Health certificate is not original,
- Easily removable sticker,
- Duplicated barcodes in the FIRS,
- Food supplements, medication, vitamins do not fall under this regulation but need approval by additional/other authorities.
- Not all ingredients have been declared,
- Ingredients are mentioned in a foreign language,
- Non-conformity with 'shape law': there are religious signs or inappropriate pictures (this also includes any mention of alcoholic drinks, e.g. marketing a food item as a good accompaniment to a glass of beer or wine).

11. MORE INFORMATION

More information on regulations, procedures & actions taken in case of contraventions can also be found on the websites and links below:

Dubai:

[Dubai Municipality Food Safety Department](#)

http://www.foodsafe.ae/pic/requirements/Food_Import_and_Re-export_Requirements_Eng.pdf

Abu Dhabi

Abu Dhabi Agriculture & Food Safety Authority

<http://www.adafsa.gov.ae/English/AboutADFCA/Pages/default.aspx>

<https://www.adafsa.gov.ae/English/PolicyAndLegislations/AdvisoryGuidlines/Documents/Food%20import%20-Eng.pdf>

<https://www.adafsa.gov.ae/English/PolicyAndLegislations/AdvisoryGuidlines/Documents/FDIMPO-en-2021.pdf>

Sharjah

<https://www.sharjahcustoms.gov.ae/en/import-procedures>

Ministry of Industry & Advanced Technology (MoIAT), formerly called ESMA

<https://moiat.gov.ae/en/>

For regulated products by MoIAT in the F&B sector, please review

<https://moiat.gov.ae/en/services/issue-conformity-certificates-for-regulated-products/>

Regulated products in F&B sector are for example: Organic products, tobacco products, cigarettes products, energy drinks, bottled drinking water, milk and dairy products

For unregulated products, one can apply for the issuance of a conformity certificate through MoIAT through this [link](#).

In case you have any further questions the office of Flanders Investment & Trade in Dubai will be happy to assist you

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