

THE PRODUCE NEWS

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USDA expands hours to accommodate floral importers in Miami

by John S. Niblock | May 24, 2013

On May 25, the U.S. Department of Agriculture expanded its import inspections on a non-overtime basis at Miami International Airport for the first time in 66 years. Christine Boldt, executive vice president of the Association of Floral Importers of Florida, said the agency added an entomologist at its Miami Inspection Station on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Previously, the station had done inspections on Saturdays only when importers paid for overtime

“Having the insect identifier at the diagnostic laboratory on Saturdays means incoming flower shipments probably do not have to pay overtime charges or be held from Friday night to Monday morning, but can be cleared more quickly for delivery,” Boldt said in an interview.



The inspection process begins at Miami International Airport when a cargo plane arrives with boxes of fresh-cut flowers. Also, starting June 17, the Miami USDA Inspection Station will expand its hours of non-overtime operations for all services — for flowers, primarily insect identification and overseeing fumigation for pest insects—Mondays through Fridays to 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., she added. Previously, non-overtime hours were from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., which often meant shipments that could not be processed the same day had to be held over until the next business day.

Beginning in January 2014, the Miami station will be open for all services on a non-overtime basis on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Boldt said. Inspections had been available only if importers paid for overtime work on Saturdays until the entomologist was added May 25.

Overtime identifications can be performed when needed outside regular operating hours, but importers have to pay fees to cover the overtime costs, Boldt explained. About half of the insects found in initial inspections, are determined to be unharmed and the flowers are then cleared for release. If the insect is harmful and the load has to be fumigated, the flower farms pay the costs.

“In fall 2010, when USDA opened a large new facility at the Miami airport, AFIF requested expanded operating hours at the inspection station to meet the specific needs of the flower industry,” Boldt recounted. “We got turned down by USDA in September 2010, so we turned to 12 members of Congress and asked them to help support AFIF importers by urging USDA to expedite inspection of our products.”

After almost three years, the pleas were answered. A May 6 letter from USDA South Florida Area Director Pedro Millan announced that the expansion of inspection operations at Miami airport would be expanded in three phases over the next seven months.

“AFIF would like to thank the members of Congress who helped with this important effort to improve the delivery of fresh-cut flowers that we import and provide to consumers throughout the United States,” Boldt said. “They have continued to work closely with AFIF over the past few years to make our hopes for improved USDA services come true.”

The floral import business at Miami airport is the largest in the nation. More than 90 percent of the flowers imported into the United States are imported through Miami.