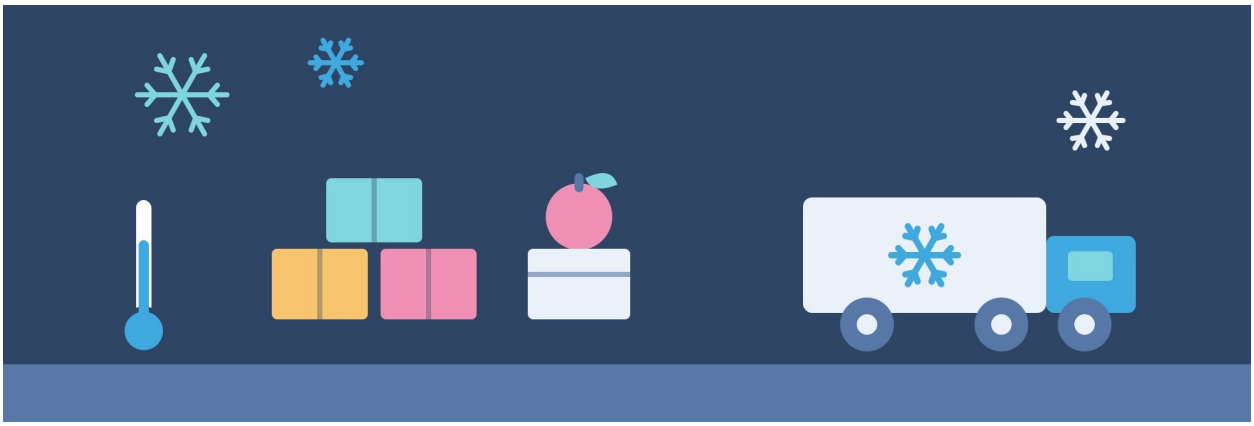


GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAIN LOGISTICS INC.

CORE GUIDE SERIES

Temperature-Controlled & Food-Grade Shipping to Canada

Regulations, Compliance & Best Practices · 2026 Edition

What food and spice importers must know about CFIA licensing under the Safe Food for Canadians Regulations, and keeping the cold chain intact.

Mississauga, Ontario · globalscl.ca · 2026 Edition

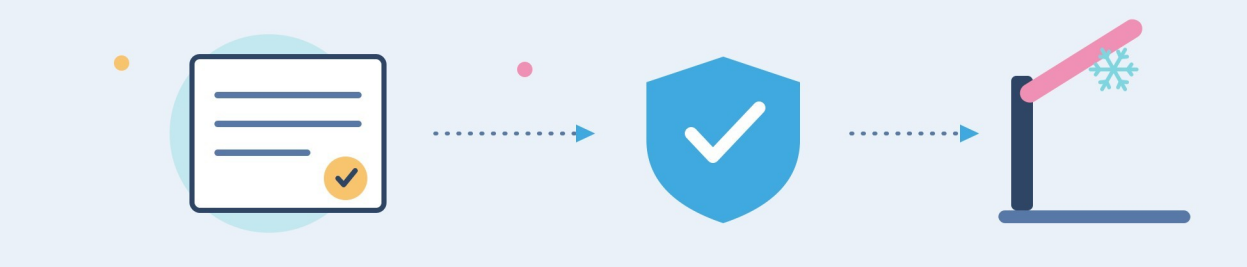
Executive summary

This guide is for businesses importing food into Canada, including dried spices, packaged goods, produce, and perishables. It explains the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) rules that apply before your shipment moves, and the cold chain practices that protect your product while it does.

Four things to take away before you read further:

> Most commercial food imports require a Safe Food for Canadians (SFC) licence issued for the activity “Importing Food” and for your specific commodities. You cannot obtain one at the border.
>
> The CFIA verifies your licence automatically on the import declaration. An invalid or mistyped licence number means automatic rejection, and your shipment is denied entry until corrected.
>
> A preventive control plan and traceability records are conditions of holding the licence. They must exist before you apply, not after your first shipment.
>
> A cold chain is only as strong as its weakest handoff. Plan every transfer point, and every customs step, before goods leave origin.

Part 1: The rules that apply before you ship



Who needs an SFC licence

The Safe Food for Canadians Regulations (SFCR) came into force on January 15, 2019. Since then, commercial importers of meat and poultry products, dairy, eggs, fish and seafood, fresh and processed fruits and vegetables, and honey and maple products have been required to hold an SFC licence. On July 15, 2020, the licensing requirement extended to the manufactured foods sector, which covers products such as snack foods, beverages, grain-based foods, and dried herbs and spices.

If you are unsure whether your product requires a licence, the CFIA publishes a Licensing interactive tool that answers the question by commodity and activity. For most commercial food imports, the answer is yes.

How to get one

Applications go through the My CFIA online portal. You create an account and a party profile, then apply for the licence under the activity “Importing Food”, listing the commodities you intend to import. Two rules matter here.

First, if you are required to prepare a preventive control plan, it must be written and implemented before you request the licence. Second, the CFIA does not issue licences at the border. A business that arrives at the border without a valid licence will not clear, and there is no same-day fix.

Automatic verification at the border

The CFIA uses the Integrated Import Declaration to automatically verify that food importers hold a valid SFC licence. Verification has applied to the original licensed commodities since March 2021 and was extended to manufactured foods on February 12, 2024.

A valid licence to import is one that is active, issued for the activity “Importing Food”, and issued for the commodities being imported. The licence number must be declared exactly as the CFIA issued it. If any of this is wrong, the transaction is rejected and the shipment is denied entry until the error is corrected and the declaration resubmitted. For a refrigerated shipment, that delay is not an inconvenience. It is a direct threat to the product.

One planning advantage: you can submit your electronic import declaration up to 90 days before your shipment arrives. Early submission surfaces licence and data errors while your goods are still at origin.

The preventive control plan

A preventive control plan (PCP) documents the hazards in your product and the controls you use to manage them. For importers, it typically covers supplier approval, food safety controls, traceability, complaint handling, corrective actions, and recall procedures. The CFIA does not approve PCPs. It verifies that you have documented evidence your controls work.

The plan must reflect your actual product. The CFIA's own guidance for spice importers, for example, identifies pathogens such as Salmonella, along with moulds and mycotoxins such as aflatoxin, as hazards to address regardless of the foreign supplier's procedures. A generic template copied from another business rarely survives inspection.

Sourcing from a supplier in a country whose food safety system the CFIA recognizes simplifies the documentation. In that case, your plan should show the food was sourced from such a supplier and that the supplier is in good standing with its own authority.

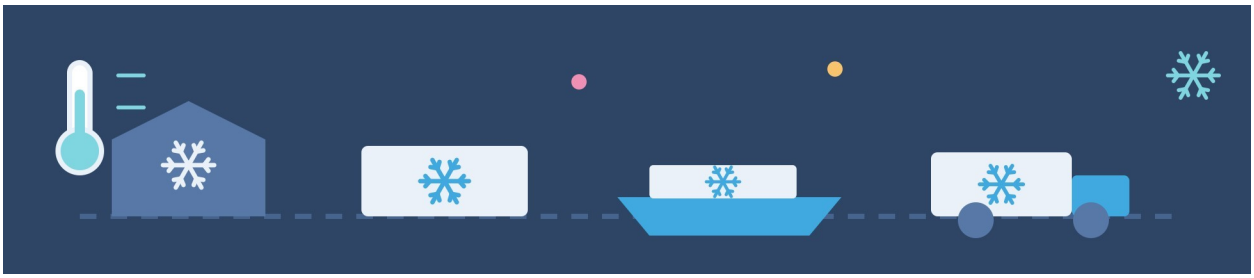
Traceability and recall

The SFCR requires traceability one step back and one step forward: you must be able to show where each food came from and to whom you provided it. Records must be retrievable, because their purpose is speed during a recall or a food safety investigation. Your business must also maintain a complaint and recall system. If an investigation finds a risk to human health, the CFIA must be notified.

Non-resident importers

International sellers can act as importer of record without a physical presence in Canada, subject to conditions. A non-resident importer must comply with the same licensing, preventive control, and traceability requirements, must have a fixed place of business in a country whose food safety system Canada recognizes, and must apply for the licence under “Importing Food”, not “Exporting Food”. The CFIA uses “export” to mean sending food out of Canada.

Part 2: The cold chain in practice



What the cold chain is

Cold chain logistics keeps temperature-sensitive goods within a defined range across the entire journey: origin storage, the refrigerated (reefer) container or air freight unit, the ocean or air leg, the truck, and the destination warehouse. The chain is judged at its handoffs. A product held perfectly at sea and left on a dock for four hours in summer has not been kept in the cold chain.

Choosing the mode

Reefer ocean containers carry most temperature-controlled trade. They hold a setpoint reliably for weeks and cost far less per unit than air. Air freight is the choice when shelf life is short or value is high. The deciding inputs are the product's remaining shelf life on arrival and the tolerance band it can survive, weighed against what the market will pay. Dried spices and shelf-stable packaged foods often need protection from heat and humidity rather than refrigeration, which changes the equipment and the cost.

Where cold chains break

- **Transfer points.** Dwell time at port, on the tarmac, or at a cross-dock is the most common failure. Every handoff needs a maximum-exposure plan.
- **Customs holds.** A rejected declaration or a missing permit stops the clock on clearance but not on temperature. Compliance work in Part 1 is cold chain work.
- **Wrong setpoint or mode.** Chilled and frozen are different instructions. Confirm the setpoint, the ventilation setting, and the humidity requirement in writing on every booking.
- **Packaging.** Insulation, airflow spacing inside the container, and pre-cooling the product before loading all decide how much abuse a shipment can absorb.

Practical controls that work

Pre-cool the product and, where the carrier permits, the container. Load with airflow in mind rather than to maximum density. Place data loggers in the shipment so disputes are settled by records rather than memory. Agree in advance who acts, and how fast, if a unit alarms mid-route. Finally, file the import declaration early. The 90-day window exists so that paperwork problems are found while the product is still in a warehouse at origin.

Part 3: Labelling, documentation, and border flow



Labelling basics

Food sold in Canada must be labelled in accordance with the Food and Drugs Act and the SFCR. Core elements include a common name, the net quantity, an ingredient list, nutrition labelling where required, the responsible business's name and place of business, and bilingual presentation in English and French. Labelling defects are a compliance matter and a commercial one: relabelling imported stock in a warehouse is slow and expensive. Confirm the Canadian label before production, not after arrival.

Check your exact requirements in AIRS

The CFIA's Automated Import Reference System (AIRS) returns the import requirements for your specific situation by commodity classification, origin, destination, and end use. Requirements differ by product and by country, so a general answer is not enough. Run your own combination before committing to a shipment.

How this connects to CARM

The CFIA licence sits alongside the customs obligations covered in our importing guide. You still need a CRA business number, an import-export (RM) account, and your own CARM Client Portal account, and since January 1, 2026 a broker's business number can no longer clear goods on your behalf. For a food importer this means two registrations must both be in order before the first shipment: the CARM account with CBSA and the SFC licence with the CFIA. A gap in either one holds the goods.

Documents to have ready

A typical food shipment involves the commercial invoice, packing list, bill of lading or air waybill, the import declaration carrying your SFC licence number, and any certificate AIRS requires for your product and origin. Your forwarder should confirm the exact set for each shipment and check the data before filing, because under automatic verification a typo has the same effect as a missing licence.

How GSCL supports food importers

GSCL is a freight forwarding and 3PL/4PL company based in Mississauga, Ontario, serving the Greater Toronto Area. For food and temperature-sensitive cargo, our role covers:

- **Temperature-controlled movement and storage.** Reefer ocean and air options matched to the product, with cold and dry storage across the GTA.
- **Compliance coordination.** We work within your CARM account and alongside your SFC licence, checking declarations and AIRS requirements before filing so shipments are not stopped by data errors.
- **Transfer-point planning.** Routings built around minimum dwell time at handoffs, with monitoring and contingency steps agreed before departure.
- **One point of accountability.** From origin to your door, one partner answers for the shipment and its temperature record.

Your legal obligations stay with you. The SFC licence, the preventive control plan, and importer-of-record responsibility are yours to hold. We make the execution around them clean and on time.

Your next step

Food importing rewards preparation more than any other cargo category, because a compliance delay and a spoiled product are the same event. If you are planning a food or temperature-controlled shipment into Canada, talk to us before you book. We will confirm the licence, AIRS, and CARM steps for your product, then design the routing around the cold chain it needs.

Global Supply Chain Logistics Inc. · globalscl.ca · Mississauga, Ontario

Sources

All factual claims in this guide draw on government and official sources. Links are provided so every claim can be checked against the original. Sources accessed September 2026.

1. Canadian Food Inspection Agency, “Importing food with a valid Safe Food for Canadians licence” (automatic licence verification, valid-licence criteria, 90-day advance declaration). https://inspection.canada.ca/en/food-licences/importing-food
2. Canadian Food Inspection Agency, “Importing food to Canada: a step-by-step guide.” https://inspection.canada.ca/en/importing-food-plants-animals/food-imports/step-step-guide
3. Canadian Food Inspection Agency, “Guide for food importers: prepare your preventive control plan” (includes the spice hazard example: Salmonella, moulds, mycotoxins such as aflatoxin). https://inspection.canada.ca/en/food-safety-industry/preventive-control-plans/importers
4. Canadian Food Inspection Agency, “Toolkit for food businesses new to the Safe Food for Canadians Regulations” (licensing, preventive controls, traceability one step back and one step forward). https://inspection.canada.ca/en/food-safety-industry/toolkit-food-businesses
5. Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Automated Import Reference System (AIRS). https://inspection.canada.ca/en/importing-food-plants-animals/airs
6. Canada Border Services Agency, Customs Notice 24-03, “Safe Food for Canadians (SFC) licence to import food to Canada” (SFCR in force January 15, 2019; manufactured foods licensing July 15, 2020; automatic verification for manufactured foods February 12, 2024; no licences issued at the border). https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/publications/cn-ad/cn24-03-eng.html
7. Canada Border Services Agency, “Get started with CARM.” https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/services/carm-gcra/start-passer-eng.html
8. Canada Border Services Agency, Customs Notice 25-32, “End of CARM Transition Measures and Coming Into Force of Importer of Record Changes to the Customs Act.” https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/publications/cn-ad/cn25-32-eng.html

This guide is general information, not legal, customs, or food-safety advice. Requirements vary by product and origin and change over time. Confirm your situation with the CFIA, CBSA, or your logistics partner before shipping.