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Addressing Agricultural Smuggling in the United States

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Outline

- Introduction to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) Plant Protection and Quarantine (PPQ) Smuggling Interdiction and Trade Compliance (SITC) Program and the SITC Internet Team (SIT)
- Challenges of Addressing Agricultural Smuggling
- The Role of Social Media in Illicit Movement
- Collaboration with Third-Party and Social Media Platforms





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Introduction to USDA APHIS PPQ SITC and SIT

SITC is an anti-smuggling and trade compliance program operating under USDA APHIS PPQ.

The mission of the program is to stop the entry and distribution of prohibited or restricted foreign agricultural goods to prevent the entry of invasive pests and diseases.

The SITC Internet Team (SIT) is comprised of 3 operational analysts led by the SITC National Operations Manager (NOM), playing a dual role in national support and monitoring illegal agricultural movement via e-commerce.





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Challenges of Addressing Agricultural Smuggling

- SITC was established in 2001 to address agriculture smuggling by traditional methods.
- The internet created new pathways for the entry of agricultural goods. Consequently, in 2010 the SIT was formed to monitor such movement carried out on e-commerce platforms.
- SIT Focus: building relationships with platforms to gain access to information (e.g. sales history, seller contact information, etc). The information is used to close e-commerce pathways by removing sellers and item offerings, which proved successful until the rise of social media.





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Challenges of Addressing Agricultural Smuggling

- Technology: Mobile applications and access to websites overseas
- Privacy and Anonymity: Most platforms require users to register using legitimate information but allow the use of anonymous usernames and profiles.
- Border limitations: Vendors outside of national boundaries create challenges to gaining compliance.





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The Role of Social Media in Illicit Movement

- 2017: The SIT observed an increase in movement of agricultural material through social media, specifically public and private groups and through Direct Messaging (DM) or Private Messaging (PM).
- Seed trains: An individual volunteers to ship individually packed varieties of seeds to another person in the train. The receiver removes their desired seeds, adds their own, and posts to the next person in line, and so on.
- The increase in use of mobile applications has exacerbated the problem, since it allows users to avoid public and private forums.





Collaboration With Third-party Platforms

- 2020: The United States experienced a phenomenon called brushing, where large quantities of unsolicited items such as seeds and other materials were shipped to residences, often marketed as “free gift.”
- APHIS was successful in working with some of the larger e-commerce platforms (Amazon, eBay and Etsy) and they agreed to build internal filters so that US buyers do not have access to foreign origin agricultural materials.
- SIT continues to monitor these platforms for materials that are not detected by the filter.
- Building partnerships with new e-commerce platforms: Third party, social media, mobile applications.





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Thank you

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