



Getting Documentation Right the First Time

Getting your documentation right as an importer or exporter is a must.

Commercial shipments require documentation to satisfy operational, regulatory and financial requirements—and the correct paperwork is essential to avoid delivery delays and additional costs. Import documentation is one of the most common reasons import shipments are delayed at Customs.

In order to clear goods without delay, the border agency must be able to easily and clearly identify:

- Who is importing this cargo?
- What is it?
- Where was it made?
- What is it made of?
- What tariff treatment is it entitled to?

The purpose of import documentation is to clearly answer these and other questions for the border agency.

The border agency, in turn, must determine:

- if the goods are prohibited,
- are subject to regulations from other government departments,
- If the goods/importer has complied with Customs legislation with respect to value and marking of the goods,
- if the goods are classified correctly under the Harmonized System.

Proper documentation, including certificates of origin, is also necessary for claiming preferential treatment under free trade agreements.

So, how do you get documentation right the first time?

Step 1: Do your research. Understand your legal obligations.

You as the importer are ultimately responsible for particulars of your import shipments. You want to know what licenses or permits are required for your product before the shipment arrives at the border.

- Know your product, including the end use of that product. Take the time to find out the correct tariff classification for your product and apply to an advance or binding ruling. (See below for tariff classification resources.)
- Find out the import/export requirements before importing or purchasing the products.
- Consider your packaging materials and whether they, too, may have specific requirements. For example, wooden crates need to comply with regulations and requirements for wood products in both the U.S. and Canada. (See below for more information on wood products.)
- Learn the requirements and required documentation for any free or preferential trade agreements.

Step 2: Have the right documents in the right place at the right time

- Get familiar with Customs requirements and the requirements of the specific government agencies regulating your product(s), such as Health Canada (HC) or USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture)
- Learn which documents are required prior to shipping, along with any other requirements that may affect your supply chain. For example, vehicles exported from

- the U.S. must file with AES (Automated Export System) at least 72 hours prior to clearing customs. <https://www.coleintl.com/importing-vehicles-into-canada.php>
- See below regarding Canada's Single Window Initiative, as submission requirements have recently changed.
 -

Step 3: Partner with the experts. Enlist the support of a competent Customs broker.

Strong supplier relationships with supply chain partners elevate the visibility of shipments in transit.

- Call your logistics partner and ask about rules, regulations, and requirements before you purchase products. An experienced customs broker will have the most current information—and your initial research will put you in a good position to ask specific questions.
- Give your logistics partner as much lead time as possible and send them your documentation as soon as you can to ensure a smooth clearance process and avoid unnecessary delays.

Step 4: Ensure that your team and suppliers are on board.

- Initiate training for employees responsible for liaising with suppliers regarding import requirements. By developing a sustainable training program, you will ensure knowledge of compliance requirements.
- Ensure foreign suppliers comply with their obligations. They need to provide adequate shipment documentation including commercial invoices, certifications, packing slips, certificates of origin, and other applicable compliance documents.

Step 5: Make sure all documents are legible and complete.

- If you are unable to read a handwritten document or struggle to read a photocopied document, then chances are Customs will not be able to read it either.
- Identify the country of origin of the goods. If this information is missing or hard to find, it raises suspicion with Customs. Incomplete documentation can result in fees that can cost your company \$150 or more.

Step 6: Determine the correct 10-digit tariff classification number for the imported goods.

An incorrect classification number may delay your imports and incur penalties from border agencies.

- Watch our short and informative video to get all the background information you need <https://youtu.be/x-SDVKIzJdl>
- Brush up on tariff classification basics here <https://blog.coleintl.com/blog/logistics-101-tariff-classification>

Step 7: Pay any amounts owing related to duties and taxes.

It is your responsibility as the importer to know what duties and taxes apply and to pay them promptly.

Case Study: Importing wood products into the U.S. and Canada

Import requirements vary depending on the type of product, its dimensions, the quantity you're bringing in and where it comes from – among other factors. Because there's so much variability in products and the requirements for each, it's best to check with the relevant regulatory body to make sure you follow all the rules. It can also be a good idea to consult a customs broker who's well-versed in the import requirements for all manner of goods.

Canadian regulatory bodies

The import of wooden and wood-containing products into Canada is regulated by the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). In specific circumstances, they may also be subject to provisions under CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, of which Canada is a signatory).

The first step for importers should be to acquire the pertinent permits and certificates. Most wood articles will require one or more of the following:

- Plant Protection Import Permit (from the CFIA)
- Phytosanitary Certificate (from the exporting country)
- Phytosanitary Certificate for Re-export (for U.S.-origin goods, from the USDA)

- A couple other distinctions of note:
- Processed wood materials (plywood, fibreboard and so on) are exempt from most import requirements.
- Wooden packing materials (pallets, crates, shavings, etc.) have their own requirements, too. Check the CFIA's requirements for wood packing materials for more information.

U.S. regulatory bodies

In the U.S., the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHISTM), part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, regulates the movement of wood, plants and related materials across the border to ensure pests or diseases do not enter the country.

- APHIS requires importers of most wood products to obtain a Timber and Timber Products Import Permit, available online on the APHIS ePermit website.
- An in-person APHIS inspection of the shipment is also usually required, and is done at one of 12 inspection stations located throughout the U.S.

Other information wood importers need to be aware of:

- Bark-containing wood products from China are usually not allowed into the U.S.
- If importing wood from endangered species, check for applicable regulations under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).
- There may be extra fees associated with importing wood from certain countries.
- Wood furniture may be subject to extra fees, depending on the country of origin. Most wood furniture imported from China requires payment of anti-dumping duties.
- Wood packing material, for example, pallets, crates and shavings, are subject to their own requirements. These items must have been treated prior to entering the U.S., per the International Standards of Phytosanitary Measures. For more detailed information, see the U.S. customs website and the APHIS website.

For importers of wood products, the following information in the customs documentation is required:

- Country of origin (and country of export, if different)
- Thickness/dimensions

- Bark (presence/absence)
- Treatment status (detail any heat or chemical treatment it has had)
- Tree species (not always required, but indicate if known)
- Finish (is the item painted, lacquered or unfinished?)

Because import requirements can change over time, it's always best to check with the border agency and your customs broker before you purchase and import wooden articles.

Important information regarding Canada's Single Window Initiative (SWI)

The Single Window Initiative (SWI) is a federal government process for gathering information on imports into Canada.

This Initiative has changed the process of submitting import documentation such that instead of submitting different information to different government agencies, as in the past, any information on imported goods can be provided through a single submission to CBSA.

Submitting an Integrated Import Declaration (IID) through that "single window" is now mandatory.

Although SWI simplifies the import process, in some cases it means more advance information is required than before.

If you are importing goods regulated by any of the Participating Government Agencies (PGAs) below, you will need to ensure all data elements required by all PGAs is provided in your import declaration (IID):

- Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) <https://www.inspection.gc.ca/eng/1297964599443/1297965645317>
- Canadian Nuclear Safety Commission (CNSC) <https://nuclearsafety.gc.ca/eng/>
- Environment and Climate Change Canada (ECCC) <https://www.canada.ca/en/environment-climate-change.html>
- Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) <https://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/index-eng.htm>
- Global Affairs Canada (GAC) <https://www.international.gc.ca/gac-amc/index.aspx?lang=eng>
- Health Canada (HC) <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada.html>
- Natural Resources Canada (NRCAN) <https://www.nrcan.gc.ca/home>
- Public Health Agency Canada (PHAC) <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health.html>
- Transport Canada (TC) <https://www.tc.gc.ca/en/transport-canada.html>

This CBSA site provides information on which data is required for each type of product regulated by each of the PGAs: <https://www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/prog/sw-gu/ogd-amg-eng.html>

Conveniently, the IID can be sent to CBSA for processing up to 90 days prior to the arrival of the goods, so importers can receive recommended border decisions before shipments reach the border.

Additionally, we provide in depth information on each PGA and their requirements under SWI on our blog.

<https://www.coleintl.com/search.php?searchword=survival%20guide&searchphrase=all>

Customs compliance

Compliance goes hand in hand with correct documentation. Here are a couple of articles to brush up your compliance practice:

- 10 key practices to ensure customs compliance <https://blog.coleintl.com/blog/10-key-practices-to-ensure-customs-compliance>
- Company compliance programs: an essential part of your business <https://blog.coleintl.com/blog/company-compliance-programs-an-essential-part-of-your-business>

After clearing Customs: A guide to record-keeping

Once your shipment is cleared, maintaining a paper trail of your records as an importer or exporter is also a must. If you are audited, clear and complete records need to be at your fingertips.

In a broad sense, you need to keep documentation of all activities related to the import and/or export process.

This includes documentation related to:

- The quantities of goods received, price paid, the country of origin, vendor, product, and all other related product information;
- Any importation, declaration or entry;
- The transportation or storage of merchandise carried;
- The filing of refund duty and/or import taxes of any kind;
- The completion and signature of a Free Trade Proof of Origin documentation;
- The collection and payment of fees and taxes to the border agency/ies; and
- any other activity subject to laws or regulations administered by border agencies.

Who is required to keep the records?

In general, records must be kept and maintained if you are:

- an owner, importer, exporter, consignee, importer of record, entry filer, or another person who:
- imports/exports merchandise, files a refund claim for import duties and/or taxes, transports or stores merchandise carried or held under bond.
- Border agencies may also allow an agent to maintain and keep your records on your behalf, such as a customs broker or consultant, provided the proper requests have been made to CBP and CBSA.

How long should I keep my records?

The United States' border agency (CBP) requires documentation to be kept for five years from the date of entry.

The Canadian agency (CBSA) requires records to be kept for six years, plus the current year from the date of importation (customs release).

Getting documentation right

Having the right paperwork in place for a smooth import process is complex, but doable. If you need support with your documentation, Cole is here to help.

We have a network of offices in the United States and Canada ready to support you. With more than 60 years of Customs experience, we can answer your questions and help get your imports where they need to be quickly and efficiently. Contact us today!

- Cole International - Customs & Freight Department

Thank-you for reading!

We hope this guide has provided you with valuable insights and practical strategies to optimize your logistics and trade operations. At Cole International, we're dedicated to helping businesses like yours navigate the complexities of customs, transportation, and compliance with ease.

But don't stop here—put the knowledge you've gained into action! Whether you need professional advice, tailored logistics solutions, or help with customs clearance, our experienced team is here to support you every step of the way.

Ready to take the next step?

Contact us today to discuss how we can partner together to streamline your supply chain, reduce costs, and keep your business moving forward.

Let's **Get in touch** to get started!

Get in touch:

- [Let's Connect](#)
- [Schedule a Free Consultation](#)
- [Visit our website](#)
- [Subscribe](#) to our Trade News
- Follow us on [Social](#)

We look forward to partnering with you to drive your business forward.

