

# Working with PDA

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture (PDA) Bureau of Food Safety and Laboratory Services is responsible for enforcing food regulations and inspecting food establishments. It may be tempting to think of a government agency as a hindrance to your dreams of becoming a food entrepreneur, but PDA food inspectors, also known as sanitarians, are trained in food safety and sanitation and are knowledgeable about the food regulations with which you will have to comply. Working closely with a PDA sanitarian as early as possible in your business development can save you time and money.



Your relationship begins with a telephone call to your nearest regional PDA office. Ask to speak to a sanitarian who can answer questions on food business startups. Be prepared to describe what is in your product, where you plan to make it, and how you intend to preserve and package it. The sanitarian will tell you which regulations apply to your product, offer advice on how to bring your facility up to standards, and perhaps stop by for a preliminary assessment of your operation.

Here are some topics that are likely to come up the first time you discuss your food business with a PDA sanitarian.

### Wholesale versus retail sales

If you are strictly wholesaling your product (e.g., to a grocery store, distributor, a restaurant owned by someone else), you only need to have your facility inspected and registered with the PDA. If you also plan to sell your product directly to consumers (e.g., at your store or farm stand, by direct door or phone sales, or over the Internet), you will need to fill out a "Retail Plan Review Packet." Do this as early as possible to ensure no delay in opening your business.

### Local zoning approval

You will need to obtain written verification that your local government (town, borough, city, or township) has approved the operation of food businesses at your location. Call your city or town hall and ask to speak to someone in the zoning office. If you get approval, ask for written verification. If your location is not zoned for food businesses, you'll have to find another place to make your product or apply for a variance—a process

that will delay your start and involve additional costs.

### Safe water supply

Pennsylvania regulations require food processors to verify that their water comes from a safe source. If you plan to use municipal water, an annual water bill is adequate proof of safety. If you are going to obtain water from a private well or cistern, you will need to have your water tested for coliform bacteria at a state-approved water-testing laboratory. In some instances, additional testing may be required. You are required to retest your water every year that your business is in operation. Remember to keep a copy of your water bill or test results. You will need to show it to the sanitarian during inspections.

### Product testing

Once you explain what your product is, how you will preserve it, and where you intend to make it, the sanitarian can tell you if any laboratory testing is necessary. If your product is a potentially hazardous food (PHF), it must be tested for pH and water activity. Jams and jellies will need to be tested for soluble solids in order to meet truth-in-labeling requirements.

### Compliance with sanitation regulations

PDA enforces all federal food safety and sanitation regulations that pertain to the manufacturing of food products. This means you will have to make sure the place where you will be processing is in compliance with sanitary standards for the layout and condition of buildings and grounds, design and use of food

equipment, availability and maintenance of restroom and handwashing facilities, and food-handler hygienic practices. Read the regulations carefully and conduct your own self-inspection before your first PDA inspection.

Finally, when all the tasks above are completed and you feel your facility is in compliance with sanitation regulations, make an appointment with the regional PDA office for your first official inspection.

### **The Inspection Process**

The inspection process begins when the sanitarian arrives at your facility. After reviewing verification of permission to operate at your location and proof that your water is safe, the sanitarian will walk through your facility for a visual examination. Here is a list of suggestions that will help you get the most out of the experience.

### **Cooperate fully with the inspector.**

You both have the same goal: to protect the public from harm. A visit from a sanitarian provides an

excellent opportunity to learn new sanitation techniques that can result in higher-quality, safer foods.

### **Take an active role in the inspection process.**

Walk along with the inspector. This gives you the chance to immediately correct simple problems as well as learn how to improve your own self-inspections. Take plenty of notes on any comments or violations so you can remember what problems were pointed out and more easily make corrections.

### **Keep the relationship strictly professional.**

Do not offer food or other items to the inspector since this could be misconstrued as an attempt to influence the inspector's findings. Do not lie, deceive, or attempt to hide anything. This can get you in serious legal trouble and cost your company a lot of money.

### **Follow up on the inspector's report.**

Immediately after the inspection is over, ask the sanitarian to explain

his/her findings to you and offer suggestions on areas that need improvement. If you don't understand a violation, ask for an explanation. The sanitarian will want to make sure you fully understand why you are being asked to make corrections to prevent repeat violations in the future. Make sure you address problem areas in your next self-inspection so they won't come up again during the next PDA inspection.

At the conclusion of your inspection, if satisfactory, the sanitarian will give you a signed copy of the inspection report and collect a small registration fee. If serious violations were found and you did not pass, don't panic. Make the necessary corrections immediately and arrange for another inspection so you can get your business up and running as soon as possible.

**For more information,** contact your regional PDA office or the cooperative extension office in your county or visit [www.PaFoodVentures.psu.edu](http://www.PaFoodVentures.psu.edu).

*"Our PDA inspector has offered valuable support ever since we started the business."  
—Pa. food business owner*

## Collaboration of Penn State Cooperative Extension, PENNTap, and Penn State Department of Food Science.

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