

Customs and Border Protection of the United States
29 January 2021

Creation of the CCRT (Covid-19 Cargo Resolution Team)

In March 2020, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) received an influx of inquiries from first time importers regarding incoming shipments of personal protective equipment (PPE). Many offices throughout CBP were receiving inquiries and in some cases, multiple offices were receiving the same requests. After discussion among several CBP offices, in order to handle the flood of PPE and to prepare CBP for the importation of the COVID-19 vaccine, CBP decided to create a cargo focused team under the leadership of the Pharmaceutical, Health and Chemical Center of Excellence and Expertise (PHC Center). The PHC Center assembled a multidisciplinary team of subject matter experts from all of CBP to triage incoming inquiries, coordinate with affected Ports and Centers, and respond directly as appropriate.

To streamline this process, CBP created the COVID 19 Relief Imports Web Portal located on the CBP website. <https://imports.cbp.gov>. The web portal made it easy to find answers to COVID-19 FAQs on admissibility, cargo hold and facilitation, PPE and vaccine import guidance, classification, and duties. Through the web portal, the CCRT coordinates responses, prioritizes release, and provides timely guidance from all government agencies regarding the import of critical vaccines, vaccine supplies and PPE.

Coordinated border management has also been critical for the CCRT. The CCRT worked closely with Health and Human Services (HHS), Department of Defense (DOD), Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and offices across CBP to ensure the swift review and release of shipments as part of national initiatives. These include FEMA's Project Airbridgeⁱ and Operation Warp Speedⁱⁱ with HHS and DOD.

Through the PHC Center's Partnership Division, the team developed strong relationships with industry partners involved in the development of the vaccines, possible remedies, and the detection of counterfeits. The CCRT has been proactive in reaching out to vaccine developers and have ensured the prioritization of the release of these shipments to their final destination. Working with other government agencies, such as the FDA, the CCRT is able to resolve entry issues before the goods arrive.

Internal Guidance

In March 2020, through the Integrated Trade Targeting Network (ITTN), CBP disseminated COVID-19 guidance related to the imports of PPE, unapproved test kits and other related products. In January 2021, through the ITTN, CBP disseminated updated COVID-19 related guidance to include critical information on imports of vaccines as well as the goods and devices used for the vaccines. Both guidance documents were a collaboration between CBP and the FDA to provide critical information to the field to facilitate the movement of lawful products, while ensuring the safety and securing of the American people.

ⁱ FEMA, 'FEMA Phasing Out Project Airbridge' <https://www.fema.gov/news-release/20200726/fema-phasing-out-project-airbridge>, 2020, "Project Airbridge was created to shorten the amount of time it takes for U.S. medical supply

distributors to bring personal protective equipment (PPE) and other critical medical supplies into the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic response.”

ⁱⁱ HHS, ‘Fact Sheet: Explaining Operation Warp Speed’, <https://www.hhs.gov/coronavirus/explaining-operation-warp-speed/index.html>, 2020, “Operation Warp Speed’s goal is to produce and deliver 300 million doses of safe and effective vaccines with the initial doses available by January 2021, as part of a broader strategy to accelerate the development, manufacturing, and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics, and diagnostics”

In order to avoid delays with these critical shipments, communication is key. The CCRT has relayed to the manufactures that all documentation related to these shipments must be forwarded prior to arrival and the CCRT must be aware of any shipments inbound to the United States. This enables the team to ensure all documentation is reviewed and the local port of entry is notified of its arrival. The CCRT has assembled a comprehensive list of personnel at all major ports of entry to ensure shipments are immediately released without delay.