BEST IF USED BY GUIDANCE
WAREHOUSE INVENTORY CONTROL

Q: How can I effectively manage my inventory to ensure quality products are being served?

A: The most basic rule of inventory management is first-in-first-out (FIFO)...foods delivered to the warehouse first (first in) should be the first items distributed to recipient agencies (first out). You can achieve an acceptable level of accuracy by **marking the pallets, or cases if you receive mixed pallets, with the date you receive them and practicing FIFO**. This will significantly reduce the risk of product going out of condition. Also, consider the amount of product already in inventory. Excessive inventory increases the risk of product going out of condition.

Storage conditions have a significant impact on the quality of food products. The same product will last for different periods of time depending on the temperature of the warehouse, the humidity level, and air circulation. In general, cool temperatures and low humidity provide the best storage conditions. Store food off the floor and away from contact with walls and ceilings.

Q: How can I tell when a product has gone out of condition? Is there a single date I can refer to?

A: Experts disagree how long a product can be kept in storage before it goes out of condition. There is no single date before which most products must be used, and after which they must not be used. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. The exception is infant formula. Infant formula and some baby foods are unique in that they must not be used after the "use-by" date that appears on the case and unit.

Some commercial products may display recommended quality dates. A **"best-if-used-by"** date means that the manufacturer recommends using the product by this date for the best flavor or quality. At some point after that date, the product will change *very gradually* in taste, color, texture, or nutrient content. But, the product may be wholesome, nutritious, and safe long after that date. You may also see a **"sell-by"** date on a food product. This means the manufacturer recommends that a store sell the product by that date. It is assumed that the product may then be stored for some period of time before it is used. Therefore, a "sell-by" date would be reached earlier in the life of a product than a "best-if-used-by" date.

A **"pack date"** indicates when the product was packaged and processed. It is important to understand that a "pack date" several months old does not mean the product is old. For example, peas - which are generally harvested and processed during June and July - may reflect one of those months plus the year of pack. Therefore, if a shipment arrives in March, the "pack date" will be from the previous year. Recipients may think they are getting an old product because of the 9-month-old date, but the product is wholesome and of good quality. In fact, it is the same domestic product that would be found on the grocer's shelf at that time. This is true for most domestic fruit and vegetable products because they are harvested during the spring and summer months.

These various dating systems do not represent expiration dates, and they do not indicate when product safety becomes an issue. However, these dates can affect your customer's willingness to accept the product. Your inventory should be managed to prevent products that have reached their "best-if-used-by" or "sell-by" dates from being offered to your customers.