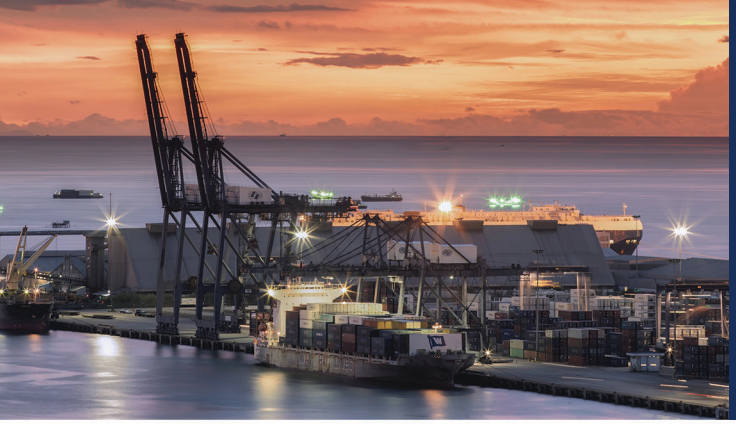

JTS Johanson Transportation Service

Freight Industry Guidebook

Topical insights from JTS Thought Leaders

Import with Confidence: The U.S. Importer's 18-Question Checklist

By Danielle Negueloua, International Director

Importing into the U.S. is a complex process. Every shipment passes through a web of regulations enforced by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and dozens of Partner Government Agencies (PGAs), and the legal responsibility for getting it right rests with the importer of record (IOR). A single misclassified product, missing document or late filing can lead to delays, storage charges, penalties, or seized goods. With tariffs and trade rules changing faster than ever, assumptions that were true last year may now be costly mistakes.

The good news is that most import problems can be prevented by asking the right questions before goods ship. You don't have to answer them alone. Your customs broker can confirm classification, duty rates and filing requirements. Your freight forwarder or 3PL can coordinate timing, documentation and carrier handoffs. Your supplier holds key information on product makeup, origin and value. For complex or high-risk situations, a trade compliance attorney can provide formal guidance. This guide outlines the essential questions every importer should ask, and who is best positioned to answer each one.

Responsibility

1. Who is the importer of record (IOR), and do they understand they are legally liable for the entry?
2. Do we need a customs broker, and what will they manage versus what we handle?
3. Do we have a customs bond (single-entry or continuous)?

Product

4. What is the correct HTS code (Harmonized Tariff Schedule) for each item, and who confirmed it?
5. What is the country of origin, and is it marked correctly on the goods?
6. Does the product need approval from another agency, such as FDA, USDA, EPA, CPSC or FCC?
7. Are there any restrictions, quotas or licenses for the product or origin?

Cost

8. What is the total cost: duty rate, special tariffs, fees, freight, insurance, and brokerage?
9. Are there extra tariffs on this product or country right now, such as Section 301 or Section 232?
10. Does a free trade agreement such as USMCA apply, and do we have the paperwork to claim it?
11. Under our sales terms (Incoterms), who pays duties, freight, and insurance, and where does risk transfer?

Paperwork and timing

12. Do we have a complete commercial invoice, packing list and bill of lading, with accurate values and descriptions?
13. For ocean freight, who files the ISF (the "10+2" Importer Security Filing), and is it on time? It's due 24 hours before loading at the foreign port.
14. How long will clearance take, and what could cause an exam or hold?

Supplier and supply chain risk

15. Have we vetted the supplier, including forced-labor rules (the UFLPA, Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act) and any restricted-party screening?
16. Is the declared value accurate and supported? Undervaluation brings penalties.

After the shipment

17. How long must we keep records? Typically, five years from the date of entry.
18. How do we catch and correct errors after entry, and could we be due for a refund or drawback?

Summary

Importing successfully comes down to preparation, accuracy, and the right partners. The questions in this guide are a strong start, but knowing which answers apply to your products, suppliers and lanes takes experience, and the rules keep changing.

You do not have to carry the burden alone. An experienced 3PL with import expertise can coordinate brokers, carriers and documentation, flag risks before they become delays, and help you land goods at the lowest total cost. Rather than navigating the import process on your own, let a partner who manages imports every day guide you through it.

Contact JTS International at (800) 742-2053 to talk with an importing specialist about your next shipment.

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