

What is WTO's Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures?

The Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary measures (SPS) under WTO, provides guidelines for member countries to adopt measures related to food safety and animal and plant health from various biosafety risks arising from trade. These risks are usually related to pests and diseases and may come from risks arising from additives, toxins and contaminants in food and feed.

Here, while importing items, members can adopt restrictive measures under APS if such risks are there.

Thus, the SPS provides biosecurity measures which are applied to protect human, animal or plant life or health. Under APS, the WTO gives detailed guidelines for the enforcement of sanitary (human or animal life or health) and phytosanitary (plant life or health) measures which may affect trade.

At the same time, the SPS gives restrictions for its applications so that arbitrary use of it should not curtail international trade.

The SPS allows countries to set their own standards. But the SPS regulations must be based on science. They should be applied only to the extent necessary to protect human, animal or plant life or health. Measures under SPS should not arbitrarily or unjustifiably discriminate between countries in matters regarding trade.

During the Covid times, several countries imposed SPS on the import of agricultural goods and other items fearing disease spread. To enhance transparency the members should notify the measures they have taken on trade front (import restrictions mainly) to the WTO. As per the WTO data, out of the 175 notifications related to COVID-19, the majority (40%) were submitted under the WTO's Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) while 25% were notified under the SPS Agreement.
