

Dishing the Dirt on Aircraft Trash

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16 September, 2025



We've had a few reports from OPSGROUP members lately about issues with how international aircraft trash is handled when arriving in the US.

In one case at **KMIA/Miami**, a handler said that **CBP asked them to track the tail numbers** of any aircraft that disposed of trash after leaving the customs ramp. If this happens, CBP may issue fines—and if handlers don't report it, *they could be held responsible instead.*

While there's no sign of any new rules, it's a good reminder of how strict the existing requirements are and how expensive it can get if you don't comply.

So, what exactly counts as regulated garbage, and how should it be handled?

What Counts as "Regulated Garbage"

Certain waste can carry animal diseases or pests into the US. The **USDA** and **APHIS** require this type of trash to be handled under strict rules (CFR Title 7 330.400 – 402, and CFR Title 9 94.5.).

Regulated garbage includes:

- Any food waste, fruits, vegetables, meats, or other plant/animal products.
- Anything that has touched those items—like packaging, napkins, or utensils.

Time limits matter:

- From *any foreign country* in the past **2 years**.
- From *Hawaii or US territories* in the past **12 months**.

You'll need to pass this trash to a USDA-approved service so they can dispose of it.

What Isn't Regulated

- Trash from **Canada-only** flights.
- **Clean items** like magazines or unused paper towels.
- **Sealed, unopened US-origin food** that hasn't been contaminated.
- Empty cans or bottles for recycling **only if they've never touched food waste.**

Important: If clean trash gets mixed with food waste, it becomes regulated. So bag international food waste separately and don't let it mix with clean trash!

Common Questions

Q: I'm arriving from Hawaii or a US territory. Does this apply?

Yes. USDA/APHIS rules apply to trash arriving from outside the Continental US - be careful if arriving from Hawaii or other US territories abroad (Guam, Virgin Islands etc). You may have taken off from American soil, but the rules still apply.

Q: What about Alaska?

Alaska is considered part of the continental US for this purpose, and so trash from Alaska flights isn't regulated.

Q: My catering came from a pre-clearance airport like EINN/Shannon. Am I exempt?

No. Pre-clearance doesn't simply let you bypass the disposal rules. Some exceptions do exist but these require certificates/inspector actions and strict conditions. In practice, pre-clearance alone will not free you from regulated garbage rules. Apparently diseases and pests care not for our paperwork!

Enforcement: Why Miami Came Up

While USDA and APHIS make the rules, **CBP enforces them** at ports of entry.

Enforcement can vary by location, and some airports take a "treat all trash as regulated" approach to keep things simple.

If you want to keep unregulated trash separate, you'll need:

- Clear, documented segregation.
- Advance notification to the customs inspector.
- Records of who you coordinated with (including badge numbers).

Otherwise, CBP can assume non-compliance and issue fines.

Safest bet: Treat all international trash as regulated and dispose of it at the customs ramp.

More Questions?

Get in touch with us on blog@ops.group. For USDA/APHIS garbage and quarantine inquiries, email ppq.fsis.mail@usda.gov or AskUSDA@usda.gov. You can also find contact details for CBP at your intended arrival airport here.