

Mobile Food Operations

Questions and Answers



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This booklet is intended to be a brief outline of some of the requirements needed for a mobile food operation. It does not contain all of the requirements necessary to operate a mobile food operation. The Logan County Health District, Chapter 3717 of the Ohio Revised Code and Chapter 3701-21 and 3717-1 of the Ohio Administrative Code should be consulted to assure that all applicable criteria have been addressed prior to applying for licensing.

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Mobile Food Operations

What is a mobile food operation?

A mobile food operation is either a mobile food service operation or a mobile retail food establishment.

A mobile food service operation is a food service operation that serves food in individual portions in a form that is edible without further washing, cooking or additional preparation. It also includes operations that serve only frozen desserts, beverages, nuts, popcorn, candy or similar confections, bakery products or any combination of those items.

A mobile retail food establishment sells food that is not in individual portions.

Each are operated from a movable vehicle, portable structure or watercraft that routinely changes location and does not remain at any one location for more than forty consecutive days. If all of the conditions above are not met, then the operation cannot be licensed as a mobile food operation. This definition was developed to address food service operations that are truly mobile in nature that “routinely,” meaning “regularly” or “as a matter of custom,” change

locations. Moving a mobile a few feet or pulling the operation around the block and returning to the same location does not comply with the intent of the law.

How is a mobile food operation license obtained?

The operator of a mobile food operation shall make application for a license to the Board of Health of the health district in which the operator's business headquarters are located. The application must be submitted prior to beginning operation and is valid through March 1, which is the end of the food licensing year.

If a mobile food operation's business address is located outside of Ohio, the health district in which the mobile unit first operates is to issue the mobile food operator's license.

If, however, the unlicensed mobile operation's business headquarters are located in Ohio but outside the local health district in which the operator wishes to begin conducting business, the mobile operator will be instructed to contact the local health district having jurisdiction over their business address to arrange for an inspection to become licensed. A temporary food license may be issued if the local health district is willing although temporaries are only valid for up to five days. Under no circumstances can the health district

without jurisdiction over the business address of the operator issue a mobile food operation license.

If such an operation under the conditions described earlier is issued a temporary food license, the local health district having jurisdiction over the operator's business address must be notified so that the operator can be assessed a late penalty fee at the time they obtain their mobile license.

Are plans required to be reviewed prior to issuing a license?

Yes, a menu is necessary along with a diagram that is drawn relatively to scale to show the layout of the type of equipment being proposed. The health district can then make a determination whether the operation's equipment are appropriate for the proposed menu. The approved floorplan and menu will then be printed onto the back of the license.

What else is required to be placed on the back of a mobile food operation license?

Besides the menu and layout that shows the location and type of food equipment, any exemptions, restrictions or conditions limiting the types of food that may be prepared or served by the licensee based on the type of available equipment must be stated.

What are the license fees for mobile food operations?

The fees are determined by a cost methodology and since each health district conducts its own analysis, the fees may be different for each jurisdiction.

What information is required to be posted outside of the mobile?

The name of the operation, the city of origin and a telephone number which includes the area code must be conspicuously displayed on the exterior of the unit or placed on a portable sign.

The operation's name and city of origin shall be made of letters that each measure at least three inches high and one inch wide.

When are inspections required and what items are subject to inspection?

One standard inspection must be completed at least once during the licensing period (which runs from March 1 to March 1). The inspection should occur before the license is issued and before the unit begins operation which can be after March 1.

Inspections may be conducted as necessary and at reasonable times by any health district having jurisdiction where a mobile is operating.

All equipment used as part of the mobile food operation must be inspected to determine that it is in compliance with all applicable laws and rules. This includes support vehicles such as supply trucks and trailers that contain additional equipment such as refrigerators, freezers and ice machines.

When an inspection is conducted by a health district other than the licensing health district, a copy of any inspection report created must be sent to the health district that issued the mobile's license.

Can mobile licenses be suspended or revoked?

Yes, if a violation exists that presents an immediate danger to the public health, the license may be suspended without giving written notice or the opportunity to make corrections. Both the licensor that issued the license and the licensor for the health district in which the operation is being operated may suspend the license.

When a license is suspended, the licensor that suspended the license will hold the license until the suspension is lifted. Written notice of the next location at which the licensee (mobile operator) proposes to operate the mobile food operation must be forwarded to the suspending licensor.

Revoking a mobile food operation license can only be accomplished by the health district that issued the license.

Any appeal on a suspension or a revocation must be made to the licensor that suspended or revoked the license.

What types of foods may be served?

Only those food items that are consistent with the information on the back of the license may be served.

All food to be used in and sold from a mobile unit must be commercially prepackaged or prepared inside the licensed mobile food operation. The only exemptions include;

- 1) certain food items prepared in a private home that have been classified as a “cottage food” or,
- 2) food items that have been prepared in a licensed Home Bakery.

No home-canned foods are permitted. All foods shall be obtained from sources that comply with all laws relating to food and food products. Only government-inspected meat shall be used. Only clean, whole eggs (with intact shells and no cracks), pasteurized liquid, frozen or dry eggs or egg

products and hard-boiled, peeled eggs that are commercially prepared and packaged may be used.

Bulk containers of food not in their original packaging and not easily identifiable must be properly labeled with the product's common name.

How are foods required to be protected by temperature control?

All "time and temperature controlled for safety" (TCS) foods are to be maintained at an internal temperature of 41°F or below or 135°F or above during storage, display and transportation.

All TCS foods requiring cooking must be cooked to at least 145°F or above for at least fifteen seconds, except that:

- 1) Exotic raw meats and raw poultry products, stuffed fish or meats, stuffing containing raw meat, poultry or fish must be cooked to an interior temperature of at least 165°F for at least 15 seconds;
- 2) Comminuted (chopped) fish and meats, injected meats and unpasteurized eggs must be cooked to at least 155°F for at least 15 seconds;
- 3) Roasts of beef and corned beef shall be cooked in an oven that is preheated to

the required temperature and held for the required time as specified in the table located in Section 3717-1-03.3 (A)(4)(a) and (b) of the Ohio Administrative Code.

Raw, rare or undercooked TCS foods may only be served if ordered that way by the consumer.

TCS foods cooked in a microwave must be rotated or stirred midway through the cooking process, covered to retain moisture, cooked to an internal temperature of at least 165°F and allowed to stand covered for two minutes after cooking.

What are the requirements for reheating in a mobile food operation?

Foods that are to be reheated must be heated within two hours to an internal temperature of at least 165°F for least 15 seconds. Steam tables, warmers and crock pots are not permitted to be used for reheating.

TCS foods that are to be reheated in a microwave for hot holding must be covered, rotated or stirred and allowed to stand covered for two minutes after reheating.

All “ready-to-eat” (RTE) food for hot holding from a commercially processed, hermetically sealed

container or from an intact package shall be heated to an internal temperature of at least 135°F.

What equipment is necessary to maintain product temperature?

This will vary because some TCS food operations may need both hot and cold holding facilities. Mechanical equipment is required to properly transport hot, cold and frozen food. These food storage facilities must be sufficient to prevent cross-contamination. Effectively insulated containers may be used for serving.

The number and size of hot holding units are determined by the menu and sales volume of the operation. Each hot holding facility must be provided with a numerically scaled thermometer placed in the coolest part and located so that it is easily readable.

Each refrigerated storage unit must also be provided with an easily readable, numerically scaled thermometer marked every two degrees and located in the warmest part of the unit.

A metal stem-type, numerically scaled food thermometer marked every two degrees must be used to assure that proper cooking, hot holding and cold holding temperatures are being attained and maintained.

What is the proper way to thaw foods in a mobile?

There are only four acceptable ways to thaw TCS foods. They are:

- 1) in a refrigerator at a temperature at or below 41°F;
- 2) under cold, potable running water with sufficient velocity to float off loose particles;
- 3) in a microwave if then cooked immediately after thawing; or,
- 4) as part of the conventional cooking process.

What foods can be re-served by a mobile food operation?

Only prepackaged, non-TCS foods may be re-served if the packages have not been opened and the food is in sound condition.

How should foods be protected in a mobile food operation?

All foods must be kept protected at all times, including while being stored, prepared, cooked, displayed and transported from potential contamination sources including dust, insects, rodents, unclean equipment and utensils,

unnecessary handling, coughs and sneezes, hair, overhead leakage and drips from condensation.

Both raw and prepared foods when removed from their original containers must be stored in approved clean and covered containers.

Raw animal foods must be stored and handled away from or below ready-to-eat foods to prevent cross-contamination.

Foods must be stored so that foods that require a higher cooking temperature are below those foods that require lower cooking temperatures.

All equipment, surfaces and utensils must be kept clean and sanitized.

Only ice scoops may be stored in ice intended for human consumption if the handles always remain out of the ice.

Ice used to cool beverage lines may not be used for human consumption.

Packaged food shall not be stored in contact with water or undrained ice.

Raw fruits and vegetables shall be thoroughly washed with potable water before being cooked or served.

How must food be handled in mobile operations?

Food shall be prepared with the least possible manual contact using appropriate and durable utensils.

An ice scoop or other suitable utensil must be used when dispensing ice.

How are dispensing utensils to be stored?

Dispensing utensils must be stored either:

- 1) clean and dry;
- 2) in cold food, hot food or hot water kept at the proper temperature with the handles up out of the food; or,
- 3) in cold, running, potable water with sufficient velocity to agitate and float off loose particles into an overflow.

Malt collars and dispensing utensils used in preparing frozen desserts may only be stored in a dipper well supplied with running potable water or clean and dry.

Ice scoops may not be stored inside ice machines unless the unit is equipped with an ice scoop holder.

What is required of all employees when working in a mobile?

All employees must be healthy, have clean clothing, properly restrain hair, practice safe food

handling procedures and wash their hands when required.

What equipment and utensils can be used in a mobile?

All equipment must be approved prior to licensing and installation. In the event that a previously approved piece of equipment should break during the licensing year, it may be replaced with the same make and model number. All equipment and utensils must be in good condition at all times so that they are smooth and easily cleanable.

What kinds of sinks are required on mobiles?

All mobiles where there are exposed foods are required to have hand washing facilities that include a dedicated hand wash sink provided with warm water under pressure, soap and disposable paper towels.

For mobiles that must wash utensils and dishware, a three-compartment sink is required. Besides dish detergent, an approved sanitizer must be available with matching test strips to monitor the sanitizer strength while it is in use.

How are sanitizers to be used?

If chlorine or quaternary ammonia (“quats”) is used as a sanitizer in a three-compartment sink, the first basin is used for soap and water, the middle basin

is used for a clear water rinse and the third or last basin is for the sanitizer.

The required sanitizer level is as follows:

Chlorine – 50 to 200 ppm

“Quats” – 200 ppm, 200 to 400 ppm or 150 to 400 ppm (as stated on the product label)

If other types of sanitizers are used, the manufacturer’s directions must be followed including the requirement that no final potable water rinse is required.

Wiping cloths must be stored in a solution of sanitizer at the concentration recommended by the manufacturer between uses and changed when the solution becomes soiled.

How often is the equipment in a mobile operation required to be cleaned?

The food contact surfaces of equipment and utensils used to prepare TCS foods should be washed, rinsed and sanitized at intervals throughout the day based on when they become heavily soiled and may not exceed four (4) hours of continuous use.

Except for hot oil cooking equipment and hot oil filtering systems, the food contact surfaces of grills, griddles and similar cooking devices, can opener

blades, the interior and door seals of microwaves shall be cleaned thoroughly and sanitized at least once a day.

The cleaning, maintenance and record keeping of heat treatment (ice cream) dispensing freezers must follow the requirements as specified in section 3717-1-08.1 of the Ohio Administrative Code.

Nonfood contact surfaces of equipment shall be cleaned as often as necessary to keep them free of an accumulation of dust, dirt, food particles and other debris.

How are cleaned and sanitized equipment to be stored?

All cleaned and sanitized utensils and equipment shall be handled to prevent contamination. Knives, spoons and forks must be contacted by their handles only. Cups, bowls, plates and similar items shall be handled without contacting their food contact surfaces and any surfaces that may contact the user's mouth.

Washed equipment must be stored at least six (6) inches above the floor to allow for proper air drying while in a self-draining position.

How are single-service utensils to be stored and dispensed?

Unless prewrapped, all knives, forks and spoons must be dispensed with their handles presented toward the employee or consumer.

All items such as cups, bowls, plates and pizza circles must be stored in a manner that will prevent them from being contaminated such as being kept covered or upside down on a clean surface during storage and dispensing.

The reuse of single-service articles (paper plates, Styrofoam cups, crimped foil pans, etc...) is prohibited.

What are the water requirements for a mobile?

All water used in a mobile must be adequate and of a safe, sanitary quality. If a freshwater holding tank is used, it must be filled with potable water from an approved source (a public water supply such as used by a city or from a private well that has had a safe water test within the past year).

Hot and cold (or warm) running water under pressure must be provided to all fixtures while the mobile is in operation. Bottled water may be used but must be obtained from sources that comply with all applicable laws and must be handled and stored so that it will not become contaminated. Bottled water must be dispensed from the original container.

All mobiles equipped for constant pressure connection to a potable water supply must have an ASSE 1024 backflow preventer to prevent possible contamination of the water supply. If a water hose is used, it must be food-grade rated and not a standard garden hose. To prevent the possibility of mistakenly using the wastewater hose for the freshwater supply, use obvious hose labeling that corresponds with signage on the mobile or different sized hoses and connections.

If a freshwater holding tank is used it must be separate from the holding tank for wastewater and sloped to a one inch or larger drain that has a shut off valve.

How is the wastewater disposed of from mobiles?

An on-board, built-in, wastewater holding tank or a portable, pull-type enclosed wastewater container (such as a “blue belly” used for a recreational vehicle) must be available if a direct connection to the sanitary sewer is not provided. The portable wastewater container must be properly emptied into an acceptable wastewater treatment facility. If a hose is connected to a sewer riser, it must be connected so that there is not spillage of wastewater onto the surface of the ground.

What are the plumbing requirements for mobiles?

Plumbing requirements are specifically addressed in the food code. Ice bin drains may not be directly connected to the wastewater drain lines in order to prevent possible contamination of the ice from sewage backups or bacterial growth.

All sinks must have drains that are connected directly to a wastewater holding tank or portable container. A mop sink is not required in a mobile unit. An onboard wastewater holding tank must at least 15 percent larger in capacity than the mobile's onboard potable water supply.

A hand wash sink is required. If the mobile returns to a commissary daily for cleaning or no utensils are used to dispense food, a three-compartment sink may not be required. A sufficient supply of clean utensils would have to be available during all hours of operation in case a utensil becomes soiled or is dropped. This information must be noted as a limitation on the back of the mobile license.

What facilities are required on mobiles for the disposal of garbage and trash?

Trash containers that are leak proof, durable, cleanable, insect and rodent proof and have tight-fitting lids are required in all mobiles.

Trash cans are to be covered at all times and emptied when full into approved waste holding containers to prevent insect and rodent attraction.

Overnight storage of garbage in mobiles is prohibited.

What are the requirements for floors, walls and ceilings in mobiles?

All floors, walls and ceilings are to be constructed of materials that are smooth and easily cleanable and must be maintained clean and in good repair at all times.

If floor mats are used, they must be non-absorbent, grease resistant and kept clean. Cardboard and carpeting may not be used.

What are the lighting requirements in a mobile?

Artificial light sources that are permanently installed shall provide at least 50 foot candles of light intensity at all food preparation surfaces and at equipment and utensil washing sinks. The lights must be properly shielded or have shatter-resistant bulbs to protect against broken glass falling onto exposed food.

Infrared or other heat lamps shall be protected against breakage by a shield surrounding and extending beyond each bulb, leaving only the face of the bulb exposed.

How are chemicals and personal belongings stored in a mobile?

All chemicals needed to operate the mobile must be stored in their original container and separately or below all food products. Only those chemicals needed for the operation of the mobile are permitted.

Medications, purses, clothing, cell phones and other personal items are to be stored to prevent contamination of food and food contact surfaces.

Can a mobile be used as sleeping or living quarters?

Under no circumstances may a mobile be used for sleeping or living quarters.

Mobile Food Service Operations:

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Bureau of Local Environmental Health Services
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Mobile Retail Food Establishments:

Ohio Department of Agriculture
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8995 East Main Street
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General Mobile Food Operation Questions:

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