

By Ken Melban
President

Fair Trade, Not Free Trade at Any Cost

California's nearly 3,000 avocado growers deserve a fair opportunity to compete. That's the principle driving the California Avocado Commission's efforts to secure a tariff-rate quota (TRQ) on Mexican avocados. There is no sugarcoating, it's an uphill battle, but one worth fighting.

As many of you are aware, the review of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) is now underway. I attended the second round of negotiations in Washington, D.C., in April, and as this issue of *From the Grove* is printed, I'll be preparing to attend the third round of negotiations in Mexico City at the end of July. I am participating as a cleared advisor on the U.S. Trade Representative and USDA Agricultural Technical Advisory Committee (ATAC) for Fruits and Vegetables, providing input on behalf of our industry throughout this process.

The Commission is pursuing every possible avenue to make our case. We recently produced a seven-minute video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VuWRM3bQj_E) explaining why a TRQ is necessary and how it would create a fairer competitive environment for California growers. We are meeting with policymakers, engaging stakeholders and telling your story.

We are not trying to stop trade. We are asking for fair trade.

Imports play an important role in supplying consumers year-round. A tariff-rate quota is not about closing our borders. It is about ensuring California growers have a fair opportunity to compete during our harvest season while providing consumers with year-round access to avocados.

The opposition to changing the status quo under USMCA is well financed and well organized. They argue that imports support American jobs and that our nation's food security depends on imports from Mexico and Canada. I disagree! Food security begins at home. The opposition's arguments overlook the livelihoods of California farm families and the thousands of jobs supported by domestic agriculture. Relying on another country for an increasing share of our food supply is not what I consider true food security.

There is another issue that deserves attention: the growing influence of organized crime in Mexico's avocado-producing regions. Mexico's avocado shipments are produced in Michoacán and Jalisco where, as widely reported, the cartel extorts growers, controls portions of the supply chain, and uses violence and intimidation to maintain control and exploit Mexico's multi-billion-dollar avocado industry. That reality has implications for Mexico's growers and the integrity of the supply chain serving the U.S. market.

President Trump designated the cartels as Foreign Terrorist Organizations on his first day in office. At the same time, the U.S. Department of State maintained a Level 4 "Do Not Travel" advisory for all of Michoacán. United States Department of Agriculture inspectors are expected to inspect avocado groves there, yet travel restrictions prevent them from safely accessing many of those areas. It is fair to ask whether the inspection program can function as intended when U.S. personnel cannot safely enter the areas they are responsible for inspecting.

The economic realities facing our growers are equally compelling. During the first quarter of 2026, Mexico shipped



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approximately 300 million pounds of avocados into the U.S. market above their projection. To put that into perspective, California's entire 2026 crop is expected to total about 330 million pounds. That tremendous oversupply pushed prices to unsustainable levels, forcing many California growers to accept returns nearly 50% below last year's levels. When California growers are paying approximately \$20 per hour in wages while competing against unfairly low labor costs in Mexico, it is nearly impossible to overcome the effects of an oversupplied market.

A TRQ would not stop trade. It would help bring greater stability to the marketplace during California's harvest season while preserving year-round access to imported fruit. Most importantly, it would provide California growers with a fair opportunity to compete.

I know this won't be easy, and I know success is far from guaranteed. But I also know that no one will fight harder for California avocado growers than your Commission. We owe it to every grower and every family whose livelihood depends on this industry to do everything we can to create a level playing field and a fair opportunity to compete.

California avocado growers have spent generations building the California Avocado brand and your Commission is dedicated to protecting what we have collectively created. 🥑