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U.S.-Mexico deal on avocados and potatoes delayed

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Amid fanfare and banners, a load of avocados grown and packed in the Mexican state of Jalisco was headed for Texas the week of Jan. 16-21, marking the first time avocados from that region would have access to the U.S. market.

While that truck was moving north on the Mexican highway, Potatoes USA and the U.S. National Potato Council issued a joint press release noting that “interim steps” had been taken by the United States and Mexico, creating “additional fresh potato access to Mexico” for U.S. producers.

About a day later, the avocado truck was rerouted, a planned celebration in Laredo, TX, was delayed and leaders of the two potato organizations noted that “any actions to open the Mexican market to U.S. fresh potatoes [beyond the 26 kilometer zone along the border which currently has access] are postponed indefinitely.”

It's unclear exactly what happened and U.S.-Mexico negotiators have not issued any clarifying statement. In fact, it's highly unlikely that anyone from either government officially will link the efforts to open the U.S. market to Jalisco avocados with the plan to further expand the Mexican market for U.S. potatoes. Off the record, however, several different members of the U.S. fresh produce industry say the twin negotiations have been ongoing for quite some time.

Last summer, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that all states in Mexico will have the opportunity to ship avocados to the United States providing they follow certain protocols, which had yet to be established. Producers and packers in the Mexican state of Michoacán who follow a prescribed process have had access to the U.S. market on a gradually expanding basis for more than two decades. Producers in other states have been lobbying for that same access. For more than a

decade, U.S. potato producers have been trying to increase their access to the Mexican market.

It appeared that those outcomes had been met this week — and they still may be imminent — but they have been delayed.

Four separate members of the U.S. avocado industry confirmed to The Produce News that the Jalisco avocados were packed and shipped over the weekend, with one person claiming to have seen photos of the event. Another industry representative received an email from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on Tuesday, Jan. 17, announcing that the Laredo celebratory event had been “postponed indefinitely.”

On the potato front, the update on Monday, Jan. 16, from the two U.S.-based organizations said that Mexico’s agriculture department (SAGARPA) had published a new pest risk assessment for U.S. potatoes and a requirement sheet for the import of those potatoes. The release said that while U.S. and Mexican agricultural officials still have to “define the process by which imports will be allowed,” it characterized this action as “a very positive step in a 15-year process to gain access to all areas of Mexico.”

The release also indicated that immediate access was possible, though it noted that the filing of lawsuits could stop implementation of the effort — a scenario that has happened in the past.

A day later, the same executives for the same two organizations, responding to an email from The Produce News, said it was their understanding that access to Mexico was postponed indefinitely until Mexican regulations are in place.

As a practical matter, Jalisco’s winter production is all but over and the area will not have avocado supplies to ship to the United States again for several months. U.S. potatoes, on the other hand, have year-round availability and could begin shipments as soon as allowed. However, one potato industry member said he has been watching this play out for more than a decade and is not hopeful that a resolution is imminent.

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