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Port Laredo developing a thriving produce following

By

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Port Laredo has long been an important crossing point for goods from Mexico. In recent years, fresh produce has been a larger part of the equation as the port is making investments in the infrastructure to better serve the perishables industry.

One of the unique aspects of Port Laredo is that it is the only port on the U.S.-Mexico border that shares two international bridges with two states in Mexico: Tamaulipas and Nuevo Leon. This gives it a competitive advantage due to the strategic geographical location.

“We are proud to say that we are the only port that has refrigerated inspection facilities at both World Trade Bridge and Colombia Solidarity Bridge, as well as an off-site six minutes away from Colombia Solidarity Bridge with 20 docks available that never break the cold chain,” said Alma Saldana Cruz, marketing manager for Port Laredo. “Furthermore, Port Laredo has 1.5 million square feet in over 17 cold storage facilities within minutes of both bridges.”

Produce shippers are taking notice. Last year alone, of the 341,000-plus truckloads of produce that crossed from Mexico to Texas, 22 percent came through Laredo totaling just over 3 billion pounds of fresh produce.

“Every year our goal is quality service, and we seek to attract new port users and keep our existing relationships happy,” said Saldana Cruz. “We want to make sure that we are providing the best technology and infrastructure to ensure the longest possible shelf life for their products.”

Chief among recent developments for infrastructure investments has been the move for expanded bridges across the Rio Grande River in Brownsville, Laredo and Eagle Pass. U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) and U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-TX) led bipartisan legislation to streamline the permitting process to expedite construction of the bridges. In early January, the two legislators held a press conference to tout their victory.

“Every year, Texas and Mexico have roughly \$800 billion in trade and commerce that comes

across the border,” Sen. Cruz said at the press conference. “That’s jobs in Texas. That’s jobs in Mexico. That’s the lifeblood of South Texas.”

Sen. Cruz said the effort was beset by bureaucratic roadblocks the last three years, and it wasn’t until June 2023 that forward progress was achieved when he led the entire South Texas congressional delegation, both Democrats and Republicans, in sending a letter to Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to urge the Biden administration to resolve delays in providing permits for four international Texas bridge projects.

Sen. Cruz sent another letter in October, this time to President Biden, to express frustration over the delays and urged him to approve the four critical Texas-Mexico bridge projects, citing the creation of jobs, improved supply chain resiliency and to promote economic growth. Sen. Cruz was joined by Cuellar and U.S. Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) and U.S. Reps. Vicente Gonzalez (D-TX) and Monica De La Cruz (R-TX) in signing the letter.

In December, the annual defense authorization bill was passed with a provision to streamline the presidential permitting process for new and expanded bridges across the Rio Grande in Brownsville, Laredo and Eagle Pass, a significant victory for cross-border trade between the U.S. and Mexico.

The new and expanded bridges will eventually mean more business for Port Laredo, and officials say they are up to the challenge.

“With four major corridors (35, Future 27, 69W and Future 2), Port Laredo was ranked the No. 1 port in North America in 2023, handling over \$300 billion in trade with 17,000 trucks daily,” said Miriam Castillo, director of economic development department for the city of Laredo. “Transportation is the backbone of Laredo’s economy and a vast impact to the Texas economy with Laredo port of entry handling more than 57.6 percent of land port trade that enters through the Texas-Mexico border.”

She added that there are 50 million square feet of industrial space available, meaning that Port Laredo’s growth can move quickly with shovel-ready developments and more than 10 million square feet of future construction expected to be available in the next two years.

“Some of the most recent infrastructure projects by the Texas Department of Transportation include more than \$900 million on various projects that have been completed and/or are currently under construction,” Castillo said.

Port Laredo will be exhibiting at the upcoming Viva Fresh Expo, which will be held April 11-14 in Houston.

The expo provides an opportunity for Port Laredo to shine a spotlight on its importance to the Lone Star State and the potential for increased business with the produce trade.

“Port Laredo has participated with Viva Fresh since 2017 and the show provides the stage and

opportunity to incentivize and attract the development of new business and to offer the services and technology of our bridges and airport cargo to the perishables industry,” said Saldana Cruz. “As our No. 1 trade partner, Mexico is and continues to be a strategic ally in the produce trade. In 2023, we had a 73 percent increase in imports of produce and a 67 percent increase in fresh-cut flowers. Furthermore, Port Laredo became the No. 1 port in North America, and we welcome continued growth.”

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John Groh graduated from the University of San Diego in 1989 with a bachelors of arts degree in English. Following a brief stint as a sportswriter covering the New York Giants football team, he joined The Produce News in 1995 as an assistant editor and worked his way up the ranks, becoming publisher in 2006. He and his wife, Mary Anne, live in northern New Jersey in the suburbs of New York City.

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