

Avocados, Agriculture and Trade in the 21st Century

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We all know that just about every part of our lives is being transformed as we hurtle toward the so-called "New World." Sweeping economic, political, social and technological changes not only challenge all of us to innovate and look ahead, they also put us at risk from the institutions making decisions that impact our lives and businesses. Take the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and its shifting trade policy as an example.

Current agricultural trade policy is guided by four assumptions: 1) demand for US products will grow in Asia and Latin America; 2) new alliances provide trade stability; 3) the US must initiate trade liberalizing activities; and 4) the use of health-related requirements as disguised barriers to trade will increase.

Furthering the goals of free and fair trade is a noble undertaking. But there is nothing admirable about selling one industry or economic sector out for the sake of another. By all appearances, this is exactly what the US government is prepared to do.

The USDA seems exceptionally eager to do its part to increase trade. Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman has stated that agricultural exports to the world were a record \$45.7 billion in 1994, and that his goal was to reach \$50 billion by the year 2000. Impressive numbers, to be sure.

I wonder if Secretary Glickman would find it surprising to learn that agriculture in Southern California pumps \$45 billion annually back into the US economy. The unique climate and growing conditions in this part of California support specialty crops which cannot be cultivated as successfully anywhere else in the US. In a part of the country most Americans envision as being blanketed with freeways and housing developments, agriculture flourishes, figuratively and literally, allowing 40,000 people to breathe a little easier because they have a stable income and cleaner air.

It would be unfortunate indeed if the USDA contracted tunnel vision as a result of its own ambitions trade objectives. How ironic it would be if, in its attempt to discourage new plant health requirements which parade a disguised trade barrier, USDA disassembled its own plant protection system. This is not leadership and it makes no sense. Yet USDA seems poised to trade away the California avocado industry and a \$45 billion sector of the fragile Southern California economy.

Has USDA forgotten that NAFTA explicitly recognizes that countries have a legitimate need for regulations to protect plant health? If the US is to be a true leader in the liberalization of trade in agricultural commodities, then it should carry the torch of scientific principle and risk assessment down the path of darkness, holding it high to

light the way for others. The pending decision on the importation of fresh Mexican avocados provides USDA with just such an opportunity.

The scientific evidence in the avocado case clearly points to one disturbing conclusion: that USDA lacks a well-founded risk assessment process for making phytosanitary decisions. So how will the USDA respond to the risk assessment experts who blasted the Department's methods, models and procedures for the elicitation of expert judgment, and the serious charges that it failed to take human error into account when it did its risk analysis? Will the US set the right example? Or will we compromise our scientific principles and send a signal around the world that poorly conducted science is acceptable if it ensures the two-way movement of agricultural commodities, thereby edging us to the \$50 billion mark? Those whose livelihood depends on Southern California agriculture are anxiously awaiting the answer.

USDA would do well to remember that in order for there to be agricultural trade in the 21st century, there must be agriculture. If US growers accept a gross miscalculation of pest risk as the new standard for plant protection, then it will only be a matter of time before our domestic crops are threatened, our agricultural diversity wanes and our dependency on imported food increases. The California avocado industry wants no part of that kind of world leadership.