

## ***Mexican Avocados Seized in US***

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According to industry sources, an illegal shipment of Mexican avocados was seized by the USDA in May at a distribution point in Chicago. Twelve pallets, containing 1100 cartons of Mexican Hass avocados, were confiscated. The Mexican fruit was packed into domestic cartons covered over with paper labels claiming the fruit was from Chile.

The seizure of Mexican fruit in a market far from the US-Mexico border comes as proof to some in the industry that the borders are porous to illegal fruit shipments. "Here, by all appearances, was a well established pipeline of (Mexican) fruit through the US, yet USDA had no knowledge of it," said Tom Bellamore, vice president of the California Avocado Commission (CAC). "It's proof positive that fruit can move illegally through the US and escape the agency (USDA) whose job it is to prevent such shipments," Bellamore said.

The CAC, along with many members of the California avocado industry, has been fighting a USDA proposal to allow shipments of Mexican avocados into the Northeast US on grounds that pest-infested fruit could easily make its way into the avocado-producing areas of California, and contaminate groves.

"It is difficult to believe that this is an isolated incident," said Bob Tobias, vice-president of domestic operations for avocado packer/shipper Mission Produce, Inc. in Oxnard. Mission has a branch operation in Mexico that exports Mexican avocados overseas. "What we're hearing is that they (USDA) have a file full of labels," said Tobias, suggesting that other masked shipments have been seized before.

The USDA has not made any official announcement of the seizure.

Bellamore said the CAC would highlight the incident in its communications with the USDA on the proposed lifting of the Mexican avocado ban, as proof that the precautions currently in place are insufficient to ensure Mexican avocados would not end up in California.

The illegally imported avocados were reportedly destroyed by the USDA.