

6-4-1997

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Recommended Citation

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U.S.-Mexico Disputes over Trucks, Tuna, Strawberries Take Center Stage

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 1997-06-04

In late May, the US House of Representatives approved a measure to eliminate a US embargo on imports of tuna from Mexico and other countries. The ongoing tuna conflict is one of several US-Mexico trade disputes that came to the forefront in recent weeks. Others include the still-unresolved question of Mexican truck access to US roads and a complaint filed by Mexican strawberry producers against US counterparts.

US House ends ban on tuna imports, but Senate action uncertain

The decision to eliminate the embargo was based on data compiled by a House committee last year, which determined that Mexico and five other countries had implemented sufficient changes to greatly reduce the number of dolphins caught in fishing nets.

Furthermore, sponsors of the House bill led by Wayne Gilchrest (R-Md) argued that the import ban was outdated, and that future protection of dolphins depends on convincing Mexico and other countries to commit to binding international agreements to protect dolphins, sea turtles, and other marine life. The legislation is nearly identical to a bill approved by the House in July 1996. Both bills set a total limit of 5,000 dolphin deaths annually for all the countries before any restrictions would be imposed (see SourceMex, 08/14/96).

Last year, the Senate failed to act on a similar bill before the end of the legislative session, thus forcing a delay on any US action to lift the embargo (see SourceMex, 10/09/96). And, as was the case last year, the fate of the legislation remains uncertain in the Senate. Opponents, such as Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif) and Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Del), have vowed to oppose the measure. However, both senators said they would be willing to accept a compromise proposed by the international environmental organization Greenpeace, by which the embargo against Mexico and five other countries would be lifted in exchange for a new three-year study on the impact of tuna-catching nets on dolphins.

Meanwhile, Mexican Environment Secretary Julia Carabias Lillo said the Mexican government has adopted a cautious approach to the recent legislation passed by the House. "The most difficult part is still ahead," said Carabias. "There could be a reversal." According to Carabias, Mexico is concerned that the measure approved in the House this year carried 46 fewer votes than a similar bill approved last year.

US Teamsters renew effort to block access to Mexican trucks

The uncertainty on whether the US will lift the tuna embargo is overshadowed somewhat by even greater uncertainty on whether the US and Mexico will resolve a dispute over access of Mexican truckers to US territory. In late May, the US Teamsters Union reiterated its opposition to a section of

the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which would allow Mexican truckers to carry cargo on US roads.

Under the original NAFTA timeline, US and Mexican truckers would have been allowed to carry cargo within the states on the US-Mexican border between 1996 and 1999. In the year 2000, complete cross-border access would be granted. Citing concerns about the safety of Mexican trucks and the lack of insurance coverage, the US government implemented a 14-month delay in opening US roads to Mexican truckers beyond a 20-mile border trade zone. Besides the safety concerns, the Teamsters have cited the possibility that US truckers could lose as many as 5,000 jobs to Mexican competitors.

In addition, the Teamsters suggest that US Customs personnel are unable to physically inspect all Mexican trucks crossing the border, which allows some truckers from that country to carry drugs into the US. "The trucking delay should be made permanent, and the NAFTA trucking provisions should be renegotiated," said Teamsters president Ron Carey. Mexico's Secretaria de Comunicaciones y Transportes (SCT) acknowledges that a large percentage of Mexico's fleet does not meet US standards regarding size and weight.

On the other hand, SCT official Jose Aguilar Alcorrea suggests there is no reason for the US to restrict access to Mexican trucks that do comply with US standards. "The US has disqualified all Mexican truck companies," said Aguilar, who is in charge of the SCT's division on land transportation. "But there are companies that comply with US regulations and could compete effectively with US carriers."

According to Aguilar, an estimated 10,000 of Mexico's total fleet of 300,000 trucks are newer models, which comply with US regulations regarding size and weight. Aguilar expressed hope that the US and Mexico will make some progress on the truck-access issue at a meeting of the NAFTA transportation committee in Puerto Vallarta on July 17-18.

Mexican strawberry growers file complaint against US producers

Separately, strawberry producers in Baja California state have asked the Secretaria de Comercio y Fomento Industrial (SECOFI) to initiate an investigation to determine whether US strawberries are being sold in Mexico at less-than-market value. According to the Union Agricola Regional (UAR) of Baja California state, US growers have begun selling boxes of strawberries in Mexico for 20 pesos (US\$2.52), even though packaging costs not including freight, production, and export fees amount to 9 pesos (US\$1.14).

In an interview with the official news service Notimex, UAR president Conrado Gonzalez Sandoval said the strategy of US growers is to saturate the Mexican market with US-grown strawberries, wiping out Mexican growers who have still not recovered from negative publicity surrounding a recent outbreak of hepatitis in the US. The outbreak, which was blamed on strawberries imported from Baja California, led US authorities to temporarily ban imports of strawberries from that region (see SourceMex, 04/09/97). The case caused strawberry sales to the US to plummet by between 75% and 80%, resulting in total losses of around US\$5 million. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on June 4, reported at 7.91 pesos per US \$1.00] (Sources: Siglo 21, El Financiero International, 05/26/97; The News, 05/30/97; El Economista, 05/16/97, 05/21/97, 05/22/97, 05/30/97, 06/02/97)

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