

## **The Threat From Without: St. George (Science) vs. Dragon (Politics)**

A hearing by the U. S. Department of Agriculture—of major importance to the avocado industry of the United States—was convened in San Diego, November 29, 1994, for the purpose of receiving comments from the public regarding requests from the Mexican avocado industry for permission to enter the United States market with their avocados, subject to conditions to be specified by the United States government. Such permission, if granted, would at least partially nullify the present quarantine of avocados from Mexico in effect since 1914—imposed to safeguard the United States from the importation of certain pests of avocado that exist in Mexico, but not in the United States.

A significant number of avocado growers attended the hearing, and many entered statements into the record. Among others, the California Avocado Society gave testimony, presented by President Larry Rose and Executive Secretary James McCormac. Their statements, taken from the official transcript of the hearing and slightly edited, are presented below.

**Hearing Officer:** ... Now I would like to call Mr. Larry Rose.

**Mr. Rose:** Thank you, gentlemen. ... I'm serving as a volunteer director of the California Avocado Society and currently serving as its president.

The Avocado Society is an 80-year-old association of avocado growers in California that maintains a membership that includes 80 percent of the [avocado] acreage in California, and an international membership and directorship throughout the avocado regions of the world. Our purpose is dissemination of cultural information and management of a production research program that benefits ... growers not only in California but worldwide.

I'm going to shorten my address here a bit because much of it is redundant, but I wanted to point out some unique characteristics of avocado culture in California that greatly limit growers' ability to respond to pest infestations.

Avocado acreage is not farmed in large contiguous sections as many other commodities and crops are nationwide, [but] adapts itself to canyons and ridge tops and geography that isolates itself to frost-free areas along a strip within California. Though this marginal land is classified by USDA soil surveys in many cases as wasteland, growers can produce revenues in excess of \$10,000 per acre on land that is otherwise useless. But the small, inaccessible areas and niches [where] avocados are grown—oftentimes commingled with suburban and even urban areas—make it virtually impossible to conduct standard pest control operations.

In the last few years we've been severely challenged ... with a pest that has migrated from Mexico, the *Persea* mite. There have been millions of dollars of crop loss and millions of dollars of ineffectual chemical control. The California Avocado Society's research program has a huge focus on biological control, and it is striving to develop and maintain a balance with this newly-introduced pest.

But what are growers afraid of? Much of this has been voiced today. We're afraid that the evidence that Mexico has presented is scientifically flawed; and I'm sure that after today's testimony, that will be revisited. We are afraid that the regulations that may be proposed will be unenforceable.

The distinction of the cultural difference, the awareness of regulations, the enforceability of laws and regulation in the two different countries has to be recognized. Anyone who has traveled or done business to any extent in Mexico recognizes that, at the village level through the upper echelon of the P.R.I, government, well placed and well timed gratuities facilitate business operations throughout Mexico. The relative characteristics of so-called certification can only be maintained with constant vigilance by the United States Department of Agriculture. It would be a joke to consider, with what is at stake, that Mexico will be enforcing regulations imposed by the United States.

Growers are afraid, too, that ... in spite of the best designed and best laid out regulatory plans, the real market forces will determine where [the Mexican] fruit ends up. The northern tier states that are originally designed for the first entry of Mexican avocados into the contiguous states [constitute] a very minor market for avocados and [are but] a very thin facade for the actual need of Mexico to market avocados in southern California where the market exists.

What growers are afraid of is that scientific method has been fabricated to prove needed conclusions. This science has to be verified and monitored by the USDA.

Finally, California [avocado] growers are afraid that political decisions have already been made. I'm fully aware of your statements today that that is not the case. But since the post-frost disaster of 1990, on a fateful day in Orange Cove, in the County of Fresno, with an entourage accompanied by Vice President Dan Quayle . . . agreements were made that we can see unfolding here today. Your presence here alone demonstrates that an inordinate amount of resources are being applied to this project.

We do recognize that California avocados, on a nationwide basis, [are insignificant]. In relation to the importance of Mexican avocados to that country, we play a very minor role. California growers are afraid of becoming pawns in the game. Believe me, we will be tenacious and we will be relentless to see that the scientific method to devise the proposed plan [will] not be compromised by political decisions.

**Hearing Officer:** Mr. James McCormac.

**Mr. McCormac:** ... I'd like to thank you gentlemen for coming out to San Diego and for your patience today. It's going to take some courage to go back to Washington and when your colleagues as you how was San Diego, to say that the Pacific Ballroom had pretty good air conditioning— at least enough to protect you from the heat of avocado growers.

I make my living as an avocado grower. I'm also the executive secretary of the California Avocado Society ... my income [is from] agriculture and agriculture-related products. I'm a third generation avocado grower. My grandfather began farming in the Fallbrook area in the 1920s, and for 70 years we've farmed in Fallbrook.

Much has been said today regarding the work plan and its deficiencies, and so I won't belabor those points. My comments here today are to urge you at the USDA to be good

stewards towards American agriculture. Recently, the Med-fly has been an issue in two areas here in California that produce avocados and citrus—and I also grow citrus and deciduous fruits on my operation. We have seen during the process of eradicating exotic pests in these areas how the representatives of Japanese agriculture have been on the scene immediately and persistently. They, the Japanese, have not relied on work plans; rather, they have been insistent that all means be used to ensure that tainted fruit would not get to Japan. I urge — I insist — that the USDA offer no less protection to American agriculture.

Thank you.