

Lawsuit challenges lifting of Argentinian lemon ban

Citrus growers claim USDA decision motivated by foreign policy, not science

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI
Capital Press

A group of U.S. citrus growers has accused the USDA of unlawfully accepting imports of Argentinian lemons based on foreign policy rather than science.

The U.S. Citrus Science Council, a nonprofit representing 750 lemon growers, and five individual California farms have filed a lawsuit



Tim Hearden/Capital Press
U.S. citrus growers are challenging the USDA's decision to allow imports of lemons from Argentina in federal court, arguing the decision was based on foreign policy rather than science.

claiming the USDA's decision violated federal laws.

Due to concerns about pests and diseases, the USDA has largely prohibited lemon imports from Argentina for

seven decades. The agency briefly opened the U.S. border to Argentinian lemons in 2000, but that decision was soon struck down by a federal court.

The lawsuit argues USDA began to reconsider the ban last year because the Obama administration "wished to accommodate" Argentina's new president, Mauricio Macri, "whom it viewed as a potential ally after years of difficult U.S.-Argentine relations."

A proposed rule allowing imports of lemons from Argentina was finalized by USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, or APHIS, in late 2016 and affirmed by the Trump ad-

ministration this year due to "extraneous foreign policy considerations," the complaint said.

The rule, set to become effective on May 26, violates the Plant Protection Act by taking into account factors other than the risk posed by plant pests, the plaintiffs argue.

"Nothing in the Act authorizes APHIS, at the behest of the president, to convert import decisions into bargaining chips to achieve unrelated foreign policy objectives. Yet that appears to be exactly what happened here," the complaint said.

A spokesman for USDA said the agency is aware of the lawsuit challenging its

decision to allow imports of lemons grown under a "systems approach" in Northwest Argentina.

"APHIS made this decision because our extensive review and analysis of the science shows that importing Argentinian lemons can be safely done while protecting U.S. agriculture from plant pests. APHIS is currently reviewing the lawsuit and will not comment on pending litigation," the spokesman said in an email.

According to the complaint, USDA has justified its decision by pointing to a 2015 trip to Argentina during which APHIS officials assessed citrus harvest practices, but the agency has refused to disclose

key details from the visit.

The plaintiffs allege that USDA has placed an unreasonable amount of confidence in Argentinian regulators' ability to mitigate pest and disease risks, despite their shortcomings in the past.

Aside from violating the Plant Protection Act and administrative law, USDA also failed to conduct an environmental analysis of its decision as required under the National Environmental Policy Act, the lawsuit claims.

The plaintiffs have asked U.S. Magistrate Judge Stanley Boone in Fresno, Calif., to overturn the import rule and block shipments of lemons from Argentina.



Wikipedia

Researchers in Oregon and Idaho are trying to develop a line of stevia seeds that would make growing the plant economically viable in the U.S.

Idaho, Oregon researchers work on stevia seed line

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

NAMPA, Idaho — Researchers in the Treasure Valley area of Idaho and Oregon are trying to develop a reliable seed line for stevia, a plant that is 200 to 300 times sweeter than sugar.

Once that happens, the plant could be an attractive option for the region's farmers.

But the plant likely won't be grown commercially here until researchers learn how to reliably produce the small shrub from seed.

Stevia is used as a natural sweetener in drinks and food.

Unlike potatoes, corn and other crops that farmers have bred for hundreds of years, stevia has only been researched for about 50 years, said Cheryl Parris, research and development manager at S&W Seed Co.

Because of that, there is currently too much genetic diversity in stevia to grow it from seed, so it's being grown from clones, or rooted cuttings, that are produced in a greenhouse and then transplanted into the field.

The labor and expense involved in growing stevia that way at 40,000 plants an acre makes it too expensive to be an attractive alternative to commercial farmers in the U.S., Parris said.

The company's stevia research is centered in Nampa. Parris is trying to develop a reliable seed line that farmers can plant.

She said this is an ideal region for growing stevia. The company has received a lot of inquiries from farmers interested in growing stevia seed.

"There is a lot of variability in the plants because there is so much that hasn't been bred out yet," she said. "It will become more ideal as we develop a seed line. It's still really an emerging market in the United States because of the cost at this point."

The wide genetic diversity in stevia means the progeny is usually not as good as the parents, said Clint Shock, director of Oregon State University's research station in Ontario.

"How to efficiently propagate stevia by seed hasn't been solved," said Shock, who has researched the plant for more than a decade. "In order for it to be competitive in the U.S., you need to be able to cross reliably and efficiently from seed. That is the Achilles heel of growing stevia in the United States."

Most of the world's stevia is grown in nations with much lower labor costs, Shock said.

"The competitive advantage now is for places that have super cheap labor," he said.

Parris and Shock are also trying to breed out the sometimes bitter aftertaste associated with stevia.

"We're trying to develop a plant that tastes better, doesn't have a bitter aftertaste and can be used more as an additive to food products," Parris said.

Growers rush to finish rice planting after field work delays

By TIM HEARDEN
Capital Press

WILLOWS, Calif. — Rice growers are scrambling to finish planting after persistent winter and early-spring rains delayed their ability to prepare their fields.

Growers face an unofficial June 1 deadline for getting their rice seed down, as planting any later would likely push harvests into the rainy season.

Rice is typically planted between mid-April and mid-May, with harvests coming six months later. But soggy fields prevented growers from working in them until recently — particularly on the west side of the Sacramento Valley, where fields were flooded by torrential rains in February.

"I've got a little bit left (to plant), but for the most part we're wrapping it up," said Charley Mathews, a Marysville area grower and a USA Rice Federation executive committee member.

"I don't know what normal is anymore," he said of the weather. "We didn't get to start field work until about the 28th of April. Usually we like to start around the first week of April."

Willows farmer Larry Maben said he'll get all his 800 rice acres planted, but he's aware of other area growers in low-lying areas that have struggled to get going because



Tim Hearden/Capital Press

A rice field near Williams, Calif., is prepared in late April for planting. Rice growers are scrambling to finish planting by June 1 after early spring rains delayed their field work.

of wet ground.

"I'm a couple of weeks behind, but we should be fine unless we have an early fall," Maben said.

The delays could cause a dip in overall acreage. California rice farms are expected to plant 539,000 acres this year, down slightly from the 541,000 acres planted in 2016, according to the USDA.

Rice planting rebounded last year from the 421,000 acres planted at the height of the drought in 2015, the agen-

cy reported. That year, planting was delayed because of the slow pace of water deliveries as exchange contractors along the Sacramento River agreed to shift their delivery schedules to maintain the right river temperatures for winter run salmon.

Growers with crop insurance could seek compensation for any ground they can't get to by June 1, the California Farm Bureau Federation advises.

Among other field crops in California, according to a

USDA prospective plantings report:

- Growers expect to plant 430,000 acres of corn, up from 420,000 acres planted last year.

- Cotton acreage continues to rebound after the drought stifled planting. Growers expect to plant 85,000 acres of upland cotton in 2017, up from 66,000 last year and 47,000 in 2015. In addition, growers were seeding 190,000 acres of American Pima cotton, up from 117,000 and 155,000, respectively, the last two years.

- Producers intend to harvest hay of all types from 1.1 million acres, down from 1.2 million acres last year.

- Acreage planted to winter wheat is forecast at 350,000 acres, down from 425,000 acres last year, while another 40,000 acres are planted to Durum wheat, down from 55,000 acres in 2016.

- California growers plan to plant 27,000 acres of spring potatoes and 21,000 acres of sweet potatoes, up from last year's 26,000 and 20,000, respectively.

- Growers intend to plant 25,300 acres of sugar beets, unchanged from last year.

- Plantings of sunflowers for oil are expected to total 39,000 acres in California, down from last year's 45,000 acres. Non-oil sunflower acres are expected to total 4,000, up from 1,600 in 2016.

U.S. growers face loan defaults over Mexican sugar dispute

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

A national sugar expert says U.S. sugar growers could face loan forfeitures this summer if nothing is done to stop Mexico from dumping subsidized sugar here.

Jack Roney, director of economics and policy analysis with American Sugar Alliance, explained under a 2014 agreement Mexico is allowed to export sugar duty-free to the U.S. In exchange, U.S. corn syrup is granted open access into Mexico.

While the U.S. has shipped

Mexico about 800,000 tons of corn syrup per year, Mexican sugar exports doubled in 2013 to 2 million tons, contributing to a U.S. sugar price collapse, Roney said. The U.S. International Trade Commission and the U.S. Department of Commerce ruled in response to a complaint by U.S. sugar growers that the combination of subsidization and dumping by Mexico warranted sugar duties of 48 to 84 percent.

But in December 2014, the governments signed an agreement to suspend tariffs in favor of reference prices and limits on the refined share of Mexi-

can sugar exports. Roney said Mexico hasn't met the reference prices — the U.S. refined sugar price has dropped from 37.5 cents per pound when the agreement was signed to a current rate of 29 cents per pound. At 26 cents, Roney said growers come out ahead by forfeiting their sugar to the U.S. government rather than repaying their federal loans. Furthermore, Mexico has been shipping the U.S. mostly finished sugar, though the country would rather import raw cane to keep domestic mills in production. Roney holds Mexico accountable for the recent closings of sugar mills in Hawaii and Wyoming.

"Our guys are in danger of forfeiture this summer," Roney said. "We've got to get this settled now."

In early May, the U.S. Department of Commerce sent a letter to the Mexican government threatening to impose duties of 80 percent on Mexican sugar if new agreements can't be reached by June 5.

Based on price declines following sugar dumping, Roney calculated Mexico cost U.S. sugar producer \$2 billion during 2013 and 2014 combined, and another \$2 billion since the suspension agreement was signed.

Duane Grant, chairman of Idaho-based Snake River

Sugar Co., said his growers had a profitable 2016 season, but only because they produced record yields and sugar levels. This season, however, cold weather has slowed beet growth.

"We're well behind in our accumulation of heat units," Grant said. "That needs to change in order for our crop to get its legs underneath it and start to move toward a yield that would be acceptable."

Grant said members of his company are optimistic the Mexican dumping problem will be addressed in time to improve prices of the current crop.

Opponents of strengthening the suspension agreements, including sugary food and beverage manufacturers, warn the action would lead to increased food costs for consumers. In a letter dated May 19, 51 members of Congress urged Department of Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross to "consult with and take into account the interests of the companies that make food products and beverages using sugar."

The lawmakers asked the secretary to avoid setting any reference prices higher than prices included in the original suspension agreement and advised "bilateral negotiations should not be an excuse for the U.S. sugar lobby to extract yet more benefits from its customers through market manipulation that flies in the face of open and fair competition."

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