

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2004 | 3C

AGRICULTURE

All states to import Mexican avocados

■ The United States will allow imports of Mexican avocados to all 50 states, a development that could erode growers' profits in Florida and California.

BY JERRY HIRSCH
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The United States plans to lift a 90-year-old ban on importing Haas avocados from Mexico into California over the strenuous objections of the state's growers, who say an infestation of bugs from south of the border could damage their orchards.

The arrival of the Mexican fruit in California, scheduled to begin in 2007, could reduce prices for consumers, but it could also slash state growers' sales by as much as 20 percent, according to federal estimates. The new avocados also could damage a \$40 million industry in South Miami-Dade County, where farmers grow a lower-fat and larger variety of the fruit.

Under new rules issued Tuesday, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said it would

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allow Mexico to ship avocados to all 50 states year round. Previous regulations limited Mexican avocados to 31 Northern and Midwestern states far from the nation's avocado-growing regions. What's more, imports were confined to between Oct. 15 and April 15, when the population of insects that could damage the U.S. crop thins out.

The ban on Mexican avocados was based on a fear of the pests hitching rides into the United States on imported fruit. But Mexican growers charged that the restrictions were merely a form of economic protectionism and a violation of free trade agreements.

The impending influx of Mexican avocados is part of a broader trend in which looser trade rules, coupled with rising demand for fresh produce, have cut into the United States' historic position as a net exporter of agricultural products.

A decade ago, South Dade farmers saw their tomato profits disappear after the North American Free Trade Agreement allowed Mexican crops to cross the border.

This year, the USDA projects, national farm exports will fall 10 percent to \$56 billion while imports will rise 6.3 percent to \$56 billion, leaving the nation without an agricultural trade surplus for the first time since 1959. Just a decade ago, the United States regularly posted farm trade surpluses above \$20 billion.

"This is what happens when people want to buy blueberries in January," said Nancy Hirschhorn, a USDA economist. "They have to be imported."

In the eyes of critics, however, the United States is ceding too much of its own farmers' turf, without doing enough to pry open markets abroad, where tariffs and duties remain quite high.

"We have signed all these free trade agreements with countries that export to the United States but provide very few market opportunities for us," said Bob Schramm, a produce industry lobbyist in Washington.

Avocado exports to 47 states are set to start at the end of January. At the request of growers, the primary avocado producing states of California, Florida and Hawaii will stay closed for two years.

Times staff writer Marla Dickerson in Mexico City and The Herald's business staff contributed to this report.