

A USDA spokesperson has said that the [suspension of Mexican avocado imports](#) will remain in place "for as long as necessary", while an unnamed source has told Fresh Fruit Portal why he believes the official received a threatening call last week.

The USDA representative confirmed on Monday that one of its officials working in the Mexican state of Michoacan was threatened verbally on Feb. 9, 2022.

This led to the entity's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) halting all export inspections on Feb. 11, marking another source of trade tension between Washington and Mexico City.

All U.S.-bound avocado crops must be inspected for safety, and those approved before Feb. 11 could still be exported, the agency said.

USDA said the suspension was ordered "following a security incident (verbal threat) involving our employees. The suspension will remain in place for as long as necessary to ensure the appropriate actions are taken, to secure the safety of APHIS personnel working in Mexico."

Michoacan, Mexico's top avocado producing state and the only one certified to export to the U.S., has long had security issues linked to problems with drug gangs.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador said on Monday authorities are looking at the U.S. decision and suggested there may be political motivations behind the suspension.

Speaking at a regular government news conference, Lopez Obrador said the matter may have been influenced by groups with something to gain from the suspension, without elaborating.

"The truth is, there's always an economic, a commercial interest behind it," he said. "Or there's a political attitude."

Possible reason for threat to USDA official

On Monday, an unnamed source in the Mexican avocado industry said that he believed the USDA inspector working in a town in Michoacan discovered that there was an attempt to include avocados for export inspections that had come from unauthorized orchards, possibly from another state.

"After rejecting it, the head of the USDA inspectors, who works in Uruapan, received threats. That is why they suspended the program," the source said.

He added: "We have no evidence as to whether these people acted under threat from criminals, or whether they did so of their own free will to benefit from the high prices of fruit from orchards authorized to export to the U.S."

Michoacán Governor pushing for meetings with U.S. officials

The Governor of the Mexican state of Michoacán Alfredo Ramírez Bedolla on Monday said he is pushing for meetings with U.S. officials to quickly revert the recent ban on avocado imports from his state into the country.

[On his Twitter account](#), Ramírez said that local authorities will back avocado producers, and that the crop represents an important pillar for the region's economy.

A local news outlet, Sol of Morelia, [also reported that local Mexican authorities](#) are conducting safety inspections in the area and aim for a meeting on Wednesday to address U.S. concerns.

The report said that APHIS officials also received threats in 2019, and warned at the time that if these incidents continued a suspension of activities could occur.

A meeting between local law enforcement officials, APHIS and representatives of the Mexican avocado industry association APEAM also took place this past Saturday, according to the local press report said.

The influence of organized crime over the production and export of Mexican crops has been a repeated concern for authorities on both sides of the border.

Mexico's service for agrofood safety, Senasica, said [in a statement on February 12th](#) that the USDA-APHIS informed it of the decision to halt inspections in Michoacán after an inspector received threats on an official cell phone while working in the region.

APEAM confirmed its participation in meetings with authorities, and [said in a statement](#) that it hoped the suspension could be lifted against the avocado ban "in coming days".

U.S. authorities have been more aggressive in recent weeks with Mexican counterparts over provisions in the USMCA Trade Agreement, and recently filed its first environmental complaint against Mexico through the agreement over fishing practices.

As a result, Mexican fishing boats are banned from landing at U.S. ports in the Gulf of Mexico as of Feb. 7, 2022.

The APHIS led inspections are part of a work plan enacted in December 2021, also part of the USMCA. Local reports mention the suspension only for Michoacán, and it is not yet clear if it could affect a recent agreement to allow Jalisco avocados across the northern border.

The suspension came on the eve of the NFL Superbowl, an event where the APEAM has focused most of its marketing efforts and budget.