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Before the U.S. House Committee on Agriculture

Increasing Demand and Opportunities for Homegrown Products, Here and Abroad

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Introduction

Chairman Thompson, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on behalf of the International Fresh Produce Association (IFPA), the largest and most diverse association representing the full supply chain, including growers, shippers, distributors, wholesalers, retailers, foodservice partners, and allied companies, of fresh fruits, vegetables, and floral. Our members include thousands of U.S. growers whose work not only feeds American families, but strengthens rural communities, supports more than 2 million jobs, and contributes over $335 billion to the national economy.

American specialty crop growers are under real economic strain as they confront a host of unprecedented challenges, from rising input costs and burdensome regulations to persistent workforce shortages and market access challenges. Meeting this moment requires supporting the economic viability of U.S. production while growing demand for that production, both here at home and abroad.

At home, meeting this opportunity requires systemic solutions that increase Americans' consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables: strengthening federal nutrition programs, modernizing procurement practices, and connecting federal efforts to improve Americans' health to the programs that can help families make healthier dietary choices. When we support evidence-based policies, we create the opportunity to increase consumption and improve health outcomes — but we cannot lose sight of the need to make U.S. production economically viable for growers so they are able to thrive while meeting that increased demand. In the short term, this includes economic assistance to growers to help them recover as Congress and industry work together to improve long-term competitiveness and resilience.

Abroad, U.S. growers continue to face tariff and non-tariff barriers that constrain their ability to compete. Removing these barriers and investing in proven export development programs can open new markets and build the lasting demand American growers need to compete and win in those markets.

Supporting growers' economic viability, building demand at home through increased consumption, and opening new markets abroad are interconnected goals that will support opportunity for fresh fruit, vegetable, and floral growers.

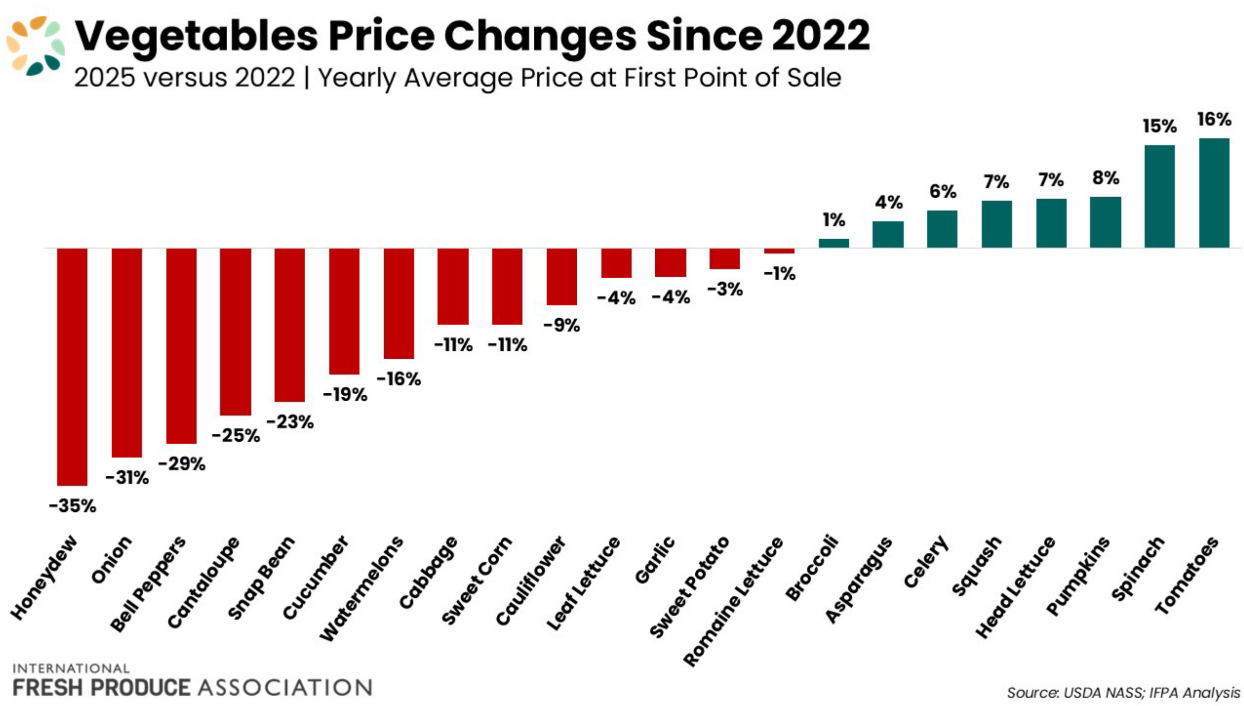
The Need for Markets

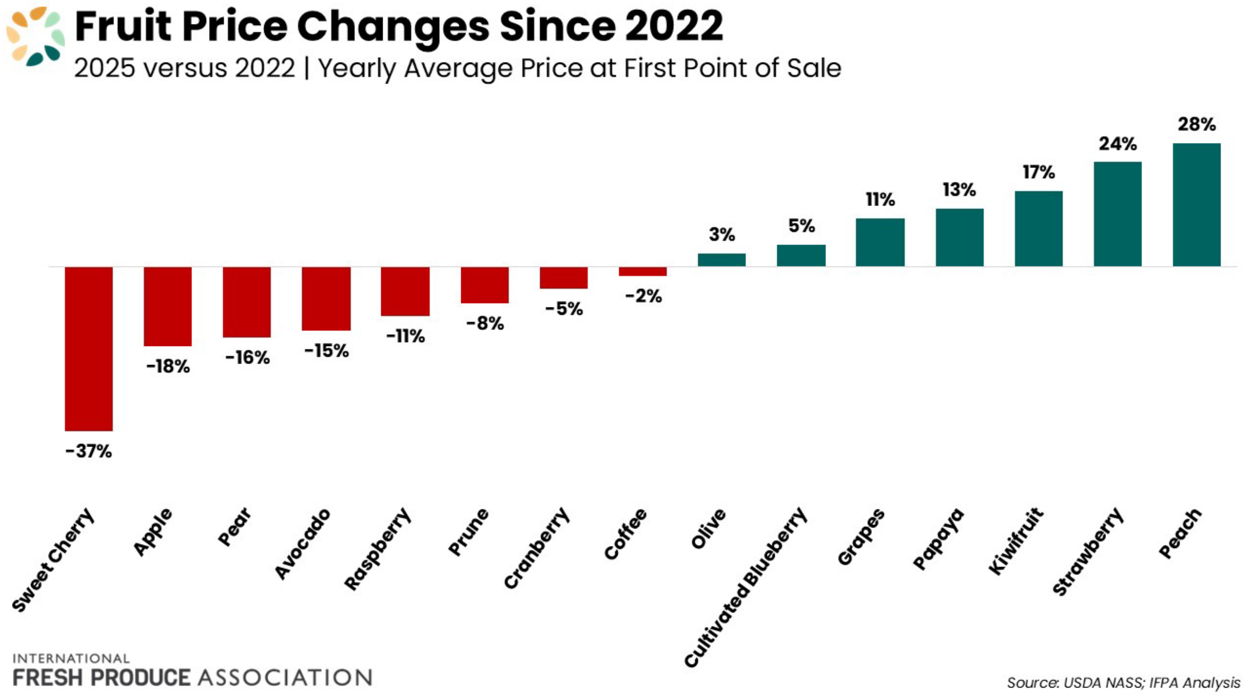
The need for additional opportunity for American specialty crop growers is clear. Crop markets have been plagued by years of financial pressures, with flatlined or diminishing farm returns not meeting the rapidly rising input costs required to grow these crops. Specialty crops, which are high-value but can cost thousands of dollars per acre to grow, are also plagued by additional regulatory costs, workforce shortages, and recent market trust challenges.

For specialty crop growers, the challenge is not simply growing more fruits and vegetables, it is finding and expanding profitable markets, increasing consumption, removing market access barriers, and improving competitiveness to ensuring U.S. producers remain in business and can meet consumer demand.

Economic Conditions

Farmers have faced a convergence of economic pressures over the past several years. Labor costs continue to rise. Regulatory requirements and compliance costs have increased. Input costs for fertilizer, packaging, transportation, and crop protection products remain elevated. At the same time, farmer returns have not kept pace. Unlike many other sectors of agriculture, specialty crop producers often have limited ability to absorb these increases or wait for more favorable prices because of the perishable nature of fresh produce.





Even for products like tomatoes which saw modest increases in price, those commodity prices have not kept up with rising production input costs. University of California, Davis estimates that production costs for irrigated tomatoes in California increased almost 60% from 2017 to 2023[1], and costs continue to rise. Similarly, strawberry costs on the central coast of California increased 18% in just three years, from 2021 to 2024, to over $105,000 per acre[2]. From 2014 to 2024, the cost of operating a fully established Gala apple orchard on a vertical trellis increased 89%, to over $46,543 per acre according to Washington State University, with an estimated loss of $18,000 per acre in 2024[3]. This is the case across the United States, with Georgia cucumber and bell pepper farmers estimated to lose thousands of dollars per acre in 2025.

This also reflects additional regulatory burdens on specialty crop growers. A study by the California Polytechnic State University found that regulatory costs increased over 1300% for lettuce farmers in the Salinas Valley from 2006 to 2024.[4] This reflects a move from just 1% of production costs being consumed by regulatory compliance in 2006 to over 12.5% in 2024.

Persistent workforce shortages also continue to pressure U.S. specialty crop growers and drive-up regulatory costs. In fiscal year 2025, less than 0.04% of agricultural roles advertised through the H-2A program received a domestic application[5], providing hard evidence of the true workforce

[1] https://coststudies.ucdavis.edu/current/commodities/tomatoes

[2] https://coststudies.ucdavis.edu/current/commodities/strawberries

[3] https://ses.wsu.edu/enterprise_budgets/

[4] https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?params=/context/agb_fac/article/1164/&path_info=2024_Final_Report_Lettuce_Regulatory_Costs__FINAL.pdf

[5] https://www.fb.org/intel/markets/h-2a-program-use-continues-to-soar

crisis in agriculture. Meanwhile, the H-2A program has gone 40 years without significant reform, continuing to challenge growers with an outdated system that does not meet the needs of modern agriculture. Alongside rapidly rising costs, including nonwage benefits which competitor nations do not provide to their migrant workers, we also exclude the greenhouse and controlled environment agriculture industry from H-2A use altogether, stunting an industry which could assist Americans in producing year-round fresh produce domestically. IFPA sincerely appreciates Chairman Thompson's leadership in addressing these issues through the introduction of the Securing Agriculture's Workforce Act, which many members of this committee have cosponsored. We urge swift passage of this bill to ensure that American specialty crop growers can continue producing and competing.

These challenges have all pressured the competitiveness of U.S. specialty crop growers, particularly in a global marketplace. However, there are many opportunities to address these challenges at home while also building demand for U.S. products around the globe.

Outbreak Losses

Recent foodborne illness events have also imposed economic costs that extend well beyond the implicated product. Retail sales data showed that the first week of August 2026 experienced the largest year-over-year decline in produce sales seen in the last ten years. Importantly, the economic effects extended far beyond the product under investigation with raspberry sales, a category with no connection to the implicated product, falling as much as 31%. Salads and leafy greens, the category most directly tied to the outbreak, fell as much as 32.1% and remained down 20.4% five weeks later.

IFPA polling through September 9, 2026 found that 87% of consumers said the outbreak continued to affect their confidence in fresh produce; 26% continued to avoid certain fresh produce items temporarily, the same share recorded when polling began in July. These findings underscore how foodborne illness events can depress demand across entire and unrelated categories even when an investigation is limited to a specific product and supply chain.

History shows these effects can persist well after an investigation concludes and can land on products never implicated, as when 2006's E. coli spinach outbreak left an estimated $60.6 million in leafy greens losses lingering more than a year later.

These losses fall on the entire supply chain including growers and retailers with no role in the event, and one challenge this latest outbreak has shown is the lack of ability to quantify the impact on the full fresh produce sector. It is important to note that, even as confidence declined, nearly seven in ten consumers identified CDC, FDA, or USDA as their most trusted source during an outbreak. Fully resourcing these agencies is critical not only to investigate and respond to foodborne outbreaks, but also to communicate clearly and precisely with consumers about which products are implicated (and which remain safe to eat) so that public health is protected without unnecessarily undermining confidence in unaffected commodities – particularly given the importance of fruits and vegetables to long-term health.

Domestic Opportunities

Support Domestic Production and Provide Meaningful Economic Assistance

The economic pressures facing U.S. agriculture are not abstract. USDA Census of Agriculture data show that the number of U.S. farms declined by approximately 230,000, or 11%, between 2005 and 2025. Specialty crop producers face many of the same pressures as the broader farm economy, but often with substantially higher per-acre production costs, fewer traditional safety-net tools, and limited ability to pass rising costs through the supply chain, as outlined above.

- Near-term economic assistance is urgently needed. USDA's $1.625 billion Assistance for Specialty Crop Farmers (ASCF) program provided some assistance, but the scale of remaining losses is significant. IFPA, working closely with the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance, is calling for no less than $5 billion in dedicated economic assistance for specialty crop producers in any additional farmer aid package.

The amount of assistance is only part of the equation; program structure matters just as much. For specialty crops, assistance should be designed to reflect actual sales losses, which provide a more accurate measure of economic harm across a sector with widely varying crops, production costs, yields, and market values. Acreage-based or broad payment categories can significantly understate losses for high-value specialty crops and fail to capture the real revenue lost when markets are disrupted. Future assistance should prioritize a sales-loss-based structure that measures the decline in producer revenue and provides support proportionate to that loss, while ensuring the full statutory definition of specialty crops, including horticulture, floriculture, and controlled-environment production, is eligible. This approach would better reflect growers' actual economic exposure and ensure assistance reaches producres based on the losses they have sustained, rather than forcing the highly diverse specialty crop sector into a one-size-fits-all payment structure.

Congress has an opportunity to address both the immediate need and the longer-term structural gap. The House-passed Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026 directs USDA to establish a standing framework for specialty crop assistance during periods of economic peril. IFPA supports building on that framework so future assistance can be deployed quickly, uses the full statutory specialty crop definition, and is backed by resources commensurate with the scale of losses facing the sector.

Lastly, a continued strategic investment in specialty crop research, technical assistance, risk management, conservation, and the Specialty Crop Block Grant Program to improve long-term competitiveness and resilience.

Strengthen Federal Nutrition Programs

Federal nutrition programs feed tens of millions of Americans every day. Ensuring these programs provide consistent access to fresh fruits and vegetables is one of the most direct strategies to increase consumption of U.S.-grown produce. Investing in nutrition programs can make individuals healthy eaters for life – providing longer-term benefits to both health and grower outcomes.

- Fully fund the Women's Infants & Children (WIC) fruit and vegetable benefit, maintain the current WIC food package guidelines that prioritize whole fruits and vegetables, and expedite online redemption. Stable funding and online purchasing options will create a more consistent and reliable experience for producers, retailers, and participants.
- Support school meal standards that ensure a wide variety of fresh produce and expand the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program (FFVP) to more elementary schools nationwide. Children consume up to half their daily calories in school, including an estimated six billion cups of fruits and vegetables annually. The National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program, and FFVP improves lifelong eating habits and are among the most consistent markets for U.S. producers.
- Increase USDA procurement of fresh produce and transition from low-cost to values-based purchasing. Today, only five fresh produce options are consistently available in the USDA Foods direct purchasing program, leaving most varieties of U.S. grown produce out.
- Allow states to use up to 20% of their Temporary Emergency Feeding Assistance Program (TEFAP) funds for fresh produce through the USDA DoD Fresh Program. We appreciate the inclusion of this language in the House-passed Farm Bill.
- Expand produce incentives in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Healthy incentive models help low-income families purchase more fruits and vegetables while directly supporting U.S. producers.

These opportunities are among a broader set of opportunities IFPA has presented to the Make America Healthy Again (MAHA) Commission to increase Americans' fruit and vegetable consumption, including recommendations to incorporate produce prescriptions and other diet interventions into healthcare.[6]

[6] https://www.freshproduce.com/who-we-are/press-center/2025/ifpa-presents-policy-solutions-to-maha-commission-for-a-healthier-america/

Modernize Food Safety Regulation

Consumer confidence depends on a risk-based and preventive food safety system with the capacity to identify problems early, act quickly, determine root causes, and communicate clearly. Giving regulators and public health partners sufficient resources to strengthen risk-based oversight, implement practical food traceability requirements, and conduct timely investigations is one of the most direct ways Congress can help prevent future foodborne illness events from becoming prolonged public health events and demand shocks.

- Restore and stabilize funding for state cooperative agreements that carry out produce safety inspections, education, training, and compliance activities, so states have the capacity to implement federal standards consistently and participate fully in food safety investigations.
- Invest in CDC and state and local public health laboratory capacity to detect and characterize foodborne illnesses, identify and link illness clusters, support epidemiologic and root-cause investigations, and rapidly share actionable information with regulatory agencies and industry. A strong surveillance and laboratory network allows each food safety event to inform a continuous-improvement model, turning what we learn from outbreaks into better prevention.
- Push for improvements at FDA that build a fully resourced, prevention-focused Human Foods Program, including timely completion of FSMA 204 implementation and recognition of technology-enabled traceability systems.
- Meaningfully invest in federal research to develop robust tools for the detection of Cyclospora, it's genotyping and control in drinking, processing and irrigation water. Continued research is essential to better understand environmental pathways, identify root causes, and translate scientific findings into practical prevention measures.
- Apply consistent, science- and risk-based food safety oversight to all foods, regardless of origin, so consumers can have confidence that the same strong public health standards protect all produce. Oversight should be driven by the relevant hazard, commodity, practices, and other evidence of risk.

A More Streamlined Supply Chain

Fresh produce moves fast, and it depends on a reliable, efficient supply chain to get it to consumers. To expand domestic consumption, fruits and vegetables must be affordable, accessible, high-quality, and convenient for consumers.

- Ensure infrastructure is adequately maintained for transportation of perishable products, including roads, rail, and ports, while also encouraging continued workforce development in transportation sectors.
- Counter unworkable produce and floral packaging bans, while encouraging reform and supporting research and development of packaging alternatives. A patchwork of state

regulations on Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) threatens to reduce access to fresh produce. Encourage local and state governments to exempt packaging that reduces food loss and waste, prevents cross-contamination, and extends the shelf life of most fresh and fresh cut products.

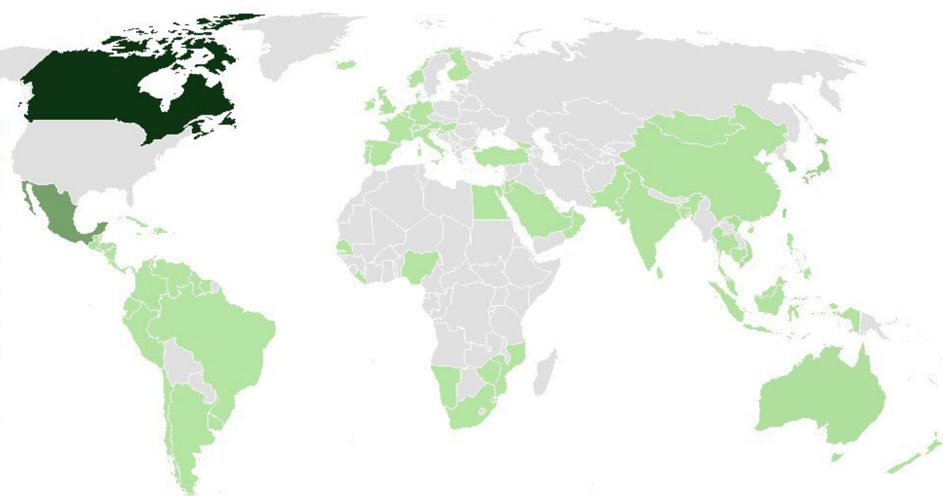
These items also play a role in opening international markets for U.S. specialty crops. Without access to reliable cold chain and transportation infrastructure, and as more countries look to institute packaging regulations, perishable U.S. produce is unable to enter global markets as quality and freshness may be compromised.

Opportunities Abroad

International markets represent critical growth opportunities for U.S. specialty crop producers. While domestic demand remains important, exports provide an essential avenue for farm profitability, diversification, and long-term growth. The United States exported over $7.3 billion of fresh fruit, vegetables, and floral, led heavily by billions of dollars in exports to Canada and Mexico in 2025[7]. To compete successfully abroad in more markets, farmers need access to affordable production inputs, predictable trading relationships, and timely resolution of barriers that restrict market access.

U.S. Fresh Produce and Floral Exports by Country

2025 | Million Dollars | Including Fresh Fruit, Fresh Vegetables, Fresh & Seed Potatoes, and Cut Flowers



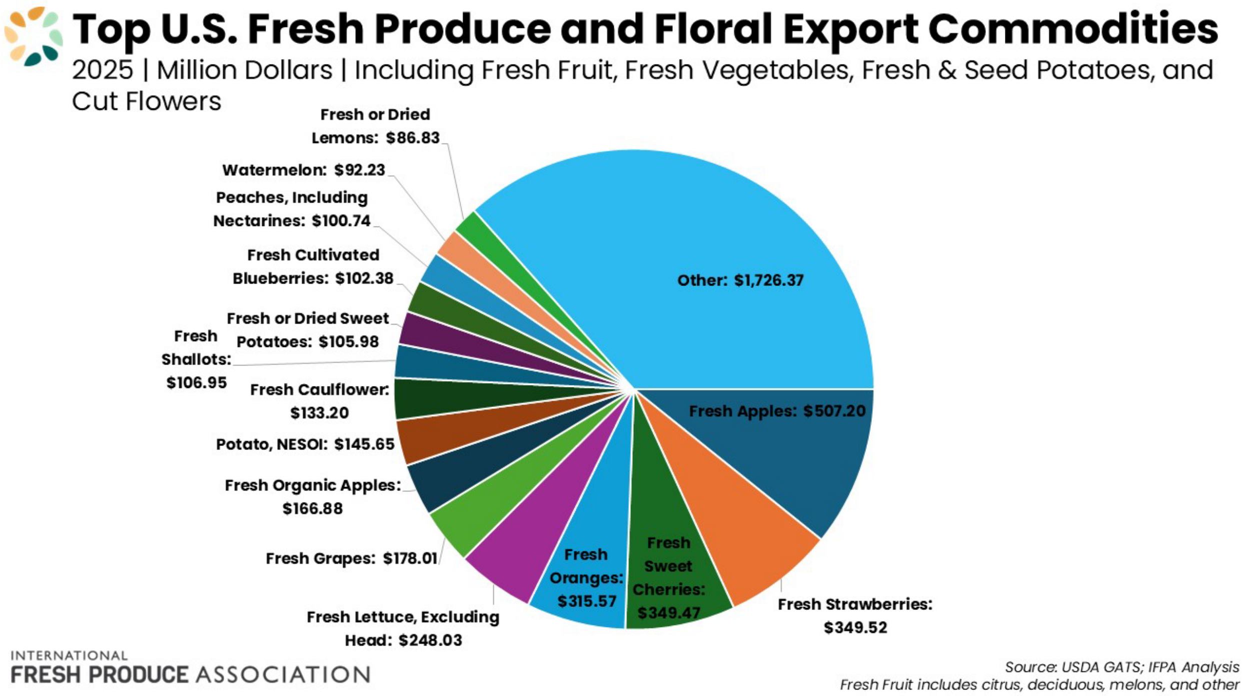
Top 10 Markets

Partner	Value
Canada	$3,542
Mexico	$1,323
South Korea	$371
Taiwan	$359
Japan	$307
Hong Kong	$117
Australia	$104
Vietnam	$92
Dominican Republic	$84
Guatemala	$64

INTERNATIONAL FRESH PRODUCE ASSOCIATION

Source: USDA GATS; IFPA Analysis
Fresh Fruit includes citrus, deciduous, melons, and other

[7] https://apps.fas.usda.gov/gats/Default.aspx



Tariffs

Tariffs raise costs throughout the supply chain and can limit competitiveness for U.S. specialty crop exports. Specialty crops often operate on narrow margins and face intense international competition. Policies that reduce tariff-related uncertainty and expand market access help ensure American growers can compete on a level playing field.

Due to the diversity and concentration of specialty crop markets, many U.S. growers are also reliant on imported inputs, including fertilizer, pesticides, and plant seeds, to soil mulches, potting mixes such as coconut coir, perlite, vermiculite, packaging, and many of the advanced automation technologies that help the sector produce more efficiently. Many of these products, including starter material for much of our perennial production including seeds, vegetative cuttings, bulbs are captured under the Section 338 tariffs on Canada[8], and included in various Section 301 investigations. These changing and often unpredictable landscapes increase costs of production that are either absorbed by producers already stressed by a difficult agricultural economy or passed on to consumers currently burdened by increasing costs of living.

Tariffs can continue to raise prices for U.S. production when products are unable to be sourced from alternative regions, especially when tariffs are placed broadly across many economies. At the same time, the U.S. fresh produce industry is uniquely dependent on year-round supply

[8] https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/ANNEX-I-3.pdf

chains that provide consumers with continuous access to affordable fruits and vegetables, including produce we produce very little or none of here in the U.S. We appreciate the Administration's acknowledgement that some crops – such as mangoes, coconuts, bananas, avocados and floriculture – are either not produced in the U.S. or cannot be produced in sufficient quantity to meet consumer demands. These crops and others have regularly been excluded from tariffs. While domestic production remains the foundation of our food system, seasonal production cycles and consumer demand require a complementary flow of produce across international markets. Some of our most common produce exports may also be imported in other parts of the year when domestic supply does not match demand. Tariffs can increase costs throughout the supply chain, reducing affordability for consumers, and limiting access to fresh fruits and vegetables at a time when policymakers are working to increase consumption.

The goal should be a trade environment that supports both U.S. producers and consumers by maintaining reliable, year-round access to fresh produce while expanding market opportunities for American growers. While unfair trade practices of other countries should be appropriately addressed, when uncertainty is added to trade relationships, through tariffs or otherwise, that also impact the future planning for American growers. Apples, for example, are our largest single produce commodity exported; however, they require years of advance planning to become productive. If markets erode today, growers may choose not to plant new trees, impacting our potential for both domestic and global sales into the next decade. Policies that promote predictability, reduce unnecessary trade disruptions, and preserve access to key trading partners help strengthen the competitiveness of the U.S. produce industry and support public health objectives by keeping fruits and vegetables accessible and affordable.

- Exempt critical inputs important to agriculture broadly and the specialty crop sector discretely including seed, fertilizer, soil materials, greenhouse components and packaging necessary to preserve many fresh produce and floral items;
- Maintain and expand current exemptions for perishable agricultural products not produced domestically in sufficient quantity or on a year-round basis.

Non-tariff Barriers

Non-tariff barriers increasingly represent some of the most significant obstacles facing specialty crop exports. These barriers can include burdensome certification requirements, unscientific sanitary and phytosanitary measures, inconsistent residue standards, lengthy approval processes, and other regulatory requirements that limit access to foreign markets. Addressing these barriers is often more important than reducing tariffs, because they can effectively prevent products from entering a market altogether.

For example, the European Union (EU) and some Asian trading partners have continued to either lower or threaten to lower pesticide maximum residue levels (MRLs) on specialty crops, eroding the utility of the international Codex Committee on Pesticide Residues. Often these decisions by foreign trade partners are not science-based but instead are intended to act as non-tariff trade barriers or enforce their regulatory decisions on producers outside their country or region.

Export Promotion Programs

Continued federal investment in programs such as the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC), Market Access Program (MAP), and Foreign Market Development Program (FMD) provides U.S. growers and businesses with critical tools to address trade barriers, promote U.S. products abroad, and expand export opportunities. These investments help producers compete in increasingly sophisticated global markets and deliver strong returns by opening new destinations for American-grown fruits and vegetables.

Studies regularly show the significant return on investment (ROI) of these programs. A 2022 study conducted by Texas A&M found that for every $1 invested through USDA export programs a $24.50 return in export value[9] was generated, a significant sum and indication that more resources invested in these programs are likely to yield significant growth in both domestic and foreign consumption. Again, we appreciate the support this committee has exhibited for these programs both historically and through passage of the Farm, Food, and National Security Act of 2026.

For the fresh produce industry, these programs play complementary roles in strengthening U.S. competitiveness abroad. TASC helps industry and government partners address technical and regulatory barriers, including sanitary and phytosanitary restrictions, that can limit or prevent market access. Current IFPA projects include developing tools to help exporters evaluate and comply with emerging reusable packaging requirements in export markets, improving logistics and supply chain efficiency through data-driven decision-support tools, and creating scalable digital traceability and compliance frameworks to facilitate specialty crop exports to Canada. These efforts help reduce compliance burdens, address technical trade barriers, and ensure U.S. growers are prepared to meet changing regulatory expectations abroad.

Additionally, the Assisting Specialty Crop Exports (ASCE) initiative, a USDA created program, complements TASC by helping the industry address emerging trade and regulatory barriers that impact export competitiveness. Through support for regulatory engagement, market access initiatives, and exporter readiness activities, ASCE helps U.S. specialty crop growers navigate evolving international requirements and maintain access to key foreign markets. As global regulations related to sustainability, packaging, food safety, and pesticide residues continue to evolve, ASCE provides an important tool for keeping U.S. produce competitive abroad.

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[9] https://grains.org/study-public-private-ag-market-development-adds-9-6-billion-in-export-value-annually/

Once access to foreign markets is secured, MAP and FMD allow the industry to invest in the relationships, market development activities, and consumer outreach necessary to build long-term demand for U.S.-grown products, supporting farm income and strengthening the long-term competitiveness of the U.S. specialty crop sector.

These complementary programs support everything from trade missions and buyer engagement to retail promotions, consumer education campaigns, and in-store marketing efforts that increase awareness and demand for American fruits and vegetables. Together, these programs help translate market access into market opportunity, supporting farm income, expanding export sales, and strengthening the long-term competitiveness of U.S. specialty crop producers.

Conclusion

Increasing demand for fresh fruits and vegetables and strengthening opportunities for U.S. growers are not separate goals. They are mutually reinforcing. By investing in nutrition programs, supporting domestic production, maintaining consumer confidence, modernizing food safety systems, protecting existing export markets, and expanding access to further international markets, Congress can help ensure American specialty crop producers remain competitive and prosperous for generations to come.

On behalf of the International Fresh Produce Association and the many U.S. growers we represent, thank you for your leadership and partnership. I am happy to answer any questions.