

USTR Field Hearings (Virtual)
Public Testimony of John L. Hoblick, President
Florida Farm Bureau Federation
August 13, 2020

Good morning, Ambassador Doud, Undersecretary McKinney, and Asst. Secy. Kessler.

I am John Hoblick, President of the Florida Farm Bureau Federation, representing nearly 140,000 member-families. Today, I am honored to bring a testimony of gratitude for the hearing today and for the pledges made by officials to develop and implement a plan to address the trade inequities that have plagued the Florida grower for decades.

I also bring remarks of urgency and strong encouragement for immediate action to enact a solution for our producers of seasonal and perishable products.

Like Ambassador Lighthizer and the Administration, Florida agriculture saw the imperative to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement. In fact, Florida Farm Bureau was the only state Farm Bureau to oppose NAFTA in the 1990s because of the unfair trade environment it would create and obvious damage it would cause our produce growers.

That damage has been documented over the past couple of years, thanks to the work of our industry leaders, experts at our state department of agriculture, and the economists at the University of Florida.

The data compiled by these institutions is compelling and staggering, which I believe you now have in your possession.

For instance, in the past 20 years, the estimated domestic market share for Florida alone has declined 40% among specialty crop categories, whereas Mexico's market share has skyrocketed 217%.

Furthermore - based on value among the commodity categories of strawberries, blueberries, sweet corn, watermelons, tomatoes, and peppers – Mexican imports increased 413% (to \$4.31B) over the same time period, while Florida's production remained relatively static (\$1.05B to \$1.16B in 2018).

And perhaps more shocking is that this data is only reflective of impacts to one state's agricultural sector.

Let me be clear – no longer is this a dilemma confined to one state or one commodity. In addition to story after story from Florida specialty crop producers, you will likely receive insightful comments from the asparagus farmer in Michigan, the blueberry grower in Georgia, and the onion producer in New York. All experiencing the similarly unfair trade practices that will persist without a remedy.

Rest assured, these effects of high volumes and low prices are spreading with a fierceness not unlike the current pandemic we are all working under today.

As it has for the past 25 years, Florida agriculture will continue to experience declining markets unless federal officials choose to respond with a seriousness and resolve unlike they have ever done before.

That seriousness shows in the good-faith commitments you've made and have lived up to with this hearing today. But much work remains to be done.

When your due diligence is complete, the comments considered and the data analyzed, I hope you will arrive at the same conclusion that we have:

A Section 301 investigation initiated by the U.S. Trade Representative is clearly warranted. Such an investigation will back up the detailed analyses by the University of Florida and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, and will hopefully deliver a result that is timely, durable, and effectively addresses the discriminatory trade practices at play.

It is abundantly clear that we rest at a critical juncture today. As they have in the past, farm families, some who openly consider how much longer they can stay in business and sustain their livelihoods, will likely approach the leaders present today and ask, "What did you do for fair trade when you had the chance?"

I hope we can tell them that we, as industry, and you, as federal policymakers, did absolutely everything within our influence and your authority to advance the principles of fair trade for the hard-working family farmers of Florida.

Again, on behalf of Florida producers, present and past, I thank you for your time and efforts thus far for our domestic growers, and urge your continued partnership toward the best long-term solution for our industry.

Thank you.