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## **My View: Potential tomato import ruling would hurt Arizona businesses**



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By Jaime S. Chamberlain – Contributing writer  
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In the bustling Arizona border town of Nogales, the tomato industry is not just about agriculture; it's about economic vitality, cross-border cooperation and shared prosperity. For decades, the importation of Mexican produce, especially tomatoes, has been a cornerstone of the local economy. It provides jobs, drives economic activity and fosters a trading relationship that stretches far beyond state lines.

With recent developments threatening this delicate balance, it's essential to consider the wider implications for Arizona and the entire United States.

Amid growing concerns about supposed unfair trade practices, the Florida Tomato Exchange, a conglomerate of large corporate tomato growers and packers, has requested the termination of the 2019 Tomato Suspension Agreement (TSA), which governs the importation of tomatoes into the U.S. Their claim is that imported tomatoes benefit from these practices, allowing them to sell higher-quality produce at lower prices. As a professional in the produce business for 30-plus years, I can confidently say that the explanation is rooted in the mutually beneficial trade relationship that Mexican tomatoes share with Arizona.

The 2019 TSA, which sought to strike a balance between protecting the interests of U.S. tomato growers, treating importers fairly and ensuring a year-round supply of quality produce for American consumers, has been pivotal in maintaining equilibrium. Terminating it in favor of a few mega-industrial growers in Florida would undermine decades of cross-border cooperation, with severe economic consequences for Arizona, especially businesses that rely on a robust agricultural trading relationship with Mexico.

A recent report by the Arizona State University Morrison School of Agribusiness estimated the immediate consequences of abandoning the current agreement. The most glaring impact would be a significant surge in tomato prices for American consumers, with projections of prices soaring 50% higher. American retailers would also suffer, with potential revenue losses reaching \$7.53 billion. In the long term, these effects could ripple through the state's economy, jeopardizing over 22,700 jobs.

These negative repercussions would not be limited to Nogales or Arizona; they would echo across the nation. Mexico is Arizona's largest trade partner, with annual total trade likely to surpass \$30 billion in 2023. Implementing protectionist policies to benefit Florida corporate growers could lead to retaliatory tariffs imposed by Mexico, harming farmers across the United States and threatening a vital trade relationship.

The economic data and analysis make one thing abundantly clear: preserving the Tomato Suspension Agreement is in the best interest of our state and our nation. It is a testament to the success of international collaboration and trade, a model that has benefited both sides of the border for decades. As we navigate the turbulent waters of trade policy, let us prioritize the preservation of the TSA, safeguarding our shared prosperity and the well-being of millions of Americans who rely on this vital economic lifeline.

*Jaime S. Chamberlain is president of Nogales-based Chamberlain Distributing Inc., an importer of Mexican fruit and vegetables, and is past board chairman of the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas.*

