

Title Constructing quality: The political economy of standards in Mexico's avocado industry
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Abstract

As the world's leader in avocado production, Mexico produces an estimated 900,000 tons/year, of which the state of Michoacán produces 83% of national production and 40% of world avocado production within five regional districts. In 1914 the United States imposed a phytosanitary ban against Mexican avocado exports to the US market, a non-tariff barrier that stood despite NAFTA. This paper examines increased standardization of product quality in avocado as a political process in Michoacán during the 1980s and 1990s, during which different regional groups and firms struggled to impose their standards and defend their economic interests in the market. In the 1990s, allied with the Mexican government, elite avocado growers mounted a phytosanitary campaign that convinced the USDA and US government to lift the ban and allow Mexican avocado imports into the US market in 1997. Since 1997 the Mexican government has expanded Michoacán's phytosanitary campaign, imposing international standards on all avocado growers, even those producing for the national market. By expanding the campaign and institutionalizing new standards of quality, industry experts now consciously link phytosanitary quality to commercial quality. They propose a transformation of previously accepted production and post-harvest practices. Theoretically, increased standards of quality, accompanied by systematic methods of evaluation and verification, should benefit all producers. However those growers producing for the national market adhere to new rules designed to improve product quality yet receive no immediate, tangible economic benefits. This case study demonstrates that the institutionalization of product standards is carried out within an existing political system. Understanding whose standards count requires careful analysis of how powerful actors in specific agricultural industries reshape and define standards of quality in terms that benefit themselves.