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## Mexican produce flow clogs border

### Security inspections mean long lines at Nogales ports

**By Thomas Stauffer**

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Heightened security measures in Mexico and a dearth of truckers in the United States have exacerbated what's already crunch time for the flow of winter season produce across the border and into market.

Produce shippers and brokers are hoping border officials from both countries will open up the Mariposa Port of Entry in Nogales on Sundays to alleviate the congestion.

But U.S. officials say they'll shut down the Sunday opening if fewer than 150 trucks move through the port on Sundays.

"We've actually had test periods where we've been open Sunday and the volume didn't justify being open the extra day," said Brian Levin, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection spokesman in Tucson.

Mariposa currently sees an average of 1,200 trucks Monday through Friday, with the majority during the winter season carrying produce, Levin said.

In fiscal year 2005, which ended Sept. 30, 268,163 commercial trucks moved through the port, up from 242,435 in fiscal 2004, he said.

An eight-mile line of trucks waiting for inspections is common at a recently deployed station at Benjamin Hill, about 11 miles north of Hermosillo in the Mexican state of Sonora, said Lee Frankel, president of the Nogales-based Fresh Produce Association of the Americas.

Other inspection stations near Vicam, Sonora, and another near the border of Sonora and Sinaloa has led to significant delays, he said.

"With all the bioterrorism measures that have been put in place, the trucks are just getting more and more bunched up and coming later," Frankel said. "A lot of trucks aren't getting across the border on the same day."

The crunch continues when the produce reaches coolers and warehouses in Nogales, Ariz., and Rio Rico because of a shortage of long-haul truck drivers, said Brian Vandervoet, a broker distributor and owner of Rio Rico-based Vandervoet & Associates.

"In the past five to 10 years, truckers are making less and less, and a big wave of them are retiring and not getting replaced, so there are just a lot fewer truckers in circulation," Vandervoet said.

The congestion and delays mean more produce rots before it can get to the consumer, and companies pay higher labor costs to drivers waiting for hours on end at inspection points, Frankel said.

"If this is something that lasted the whole season, it could cost the industry about \$200 million in revenue," he said.

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