



## **Opinion: The need for change in the avocado industry**

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*By Oke USA staff member Jennie Msall*

In this week leading up to the Super Bowl, 120 million pounds of avocados are expected to be sold in the United States.

As importers of fair trade avocados at Equal Exchange, a 100% fair trade company, we're busy filling Super Bowl orders with our customers, but we're also asking ourselves how our work importing Mexican avocados relates to issues illustrated in the [LA Times piece about the Mexican produce industry](#). Reporter Richard Marosi traveled across nine Mexican states over 18 months, meeting with workers at the giant farms that export much of the produce sold in the United States. The result was a four-part series exposing the hardships that Mexican laborers endure, including poor living conditions and work without pay.

Many people have responded to the article, calling for reforms to current trade policies and practices. As we reflect on this piece of the food system that seems so broken, we want to push the conversation beyond calls for reform. Instead of just reforming the existing policies and practices, we want to talk about what it would look like to truly transform the way Mexican produce is grown and exported to the United States.

What do we mean when we talk about building a transformative trade model versus reforming the current model? Reform means taking what already exists, and then tweaking it. It means making amendments and revisions until it is better. But when we transform something, we start from scratch, moving beyond what has worked in the past and completely reconstructing the system. Reform is easier, safer, and faster; transformation is harder, riskier, and happens over time.

At Equal Exchange, our work partnering with PRAGOR, a cooperative of small-scale avocado farmers, produce distributors, and natural food stores to build a more just and sustainable avocado supply chain has been incredibly challenging. For the past year, we have all taken tremendous risks, and while our first season was successful in many ways, we are still slowly figuring out how to make this a sustainable program for all stakeholders.

There are days when this work feels small. PRAGOR represents just 20 farmers. We import small volumes of avocados for only a portion of the year. We sell these avocados to small stores. Operating on a small scale means our supply chain has some challenges. But the basic ideas behind this model are big ideas, and they are the foundation for what our food system should- and can- look like. These ideas include:

1. Farmers own their own land. PRAGOR is a cooperative of 20 producer members who each own an average of 10 acres of land, all 100% organic. Many of the members transitioned to organic 10 or more years ago, a revolutionary move at the time. At Equal Exchange, we have seen that when farmers own their own land, they are more likely to take measures to ensure the environmental sustainability of the land. Owning land is inherently more empowering than working as a laborer on a plantation, and provides producers with greater economic security and opportunity.

2. Small-scale farmers have access to the global marketplace. Avocado agribusinesses have a heavy presence in the region where PRAGOR members farm. For many avocado farmers, their only option is to sell their avocados to big companies. The price fluctuates greatly throughout the season. Producers do not have enough information, power, or volume to negotiate an appropriate price. By organizing into a cooperative, PRAGOR has built power for these 20 producers. They now have the infrastructure to export their avocados on their own, instead of being at the mercy of middlemen or corporate buyers. As a result, more money goes back to each farmer.
3. The real cost of food is reflected in consumer prices. To keep farmers farming, we must recognize the need to pay higher prices for our food. In the United States, consumers expect cheap produce year-round. But poverty level wages in Mexico are the cost of this relentless emphasis on bargains. It is critical that we start factoring the true costs of social and environmental sustainability into the price of our food. Fair trade certification, which guarantees a minimum floor price for producers, is one way to guarantee that farmers receive an adequate price for their product.
4. Consumers are connected to producers around transparent supply chains. The LA Times piece illustrated the lack of transparency in global supply chains. At Equal Exchange, our mission has always been to connect farmers and consumers through our supply chain. We are committed to the integrity of our supply chains, and we have open and transparent conversations with our customers about our work.

When we think about a thriving fair trade avocado program, we think about the local produce programs that so many co-ops, natural food stores, and distributors have committed to. Through local programs, stores support farmers who are operating on a smaller scale than large agribusinesses in Mexico. Stores have relationships with their local farmers, and are able to ask them questions about their products. And consumers have been educated to understand how local produce is different from global produce, and they know to expect different quality, availability, and pricing on local products.

With Equal Exchange's avocado program, we're hoping to bring these local values into global supply chains. What would it look like for people to commit to sourcing and purchasing only fair trade, organic avocados from small-scale farmers? What would it look like for consumers to recognize the difference between that avocado and a conventional avocado, and be willing to pay more for it? What would it look like to ask questions about conventional avocado suppliers, growers, and their supply chains?

These aren't easy questions, and we don't expect to transform the avocado industry overnight. But if we really want to build a successful model for small-farmer, fair trade avocados, we have to take risks as importers, distributors, and stores. Instead of merely responding to consumer demand, we must actively work together to educate consumers and generate demand for alternatives. This is the only way to turn our vision for a more just and sustainable food system into a reality.

*Oke USA is the importing arm of Equal Exchange.*

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