

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 7, 2024

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary
Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

The Honorable Thomas Vilsack
Secretary
Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

The Honorable Katherine Tai
Ambassador
Office of the U.S. Trade Representative
600 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20508

Dear Secretary Blinken, Secretary Vilsack, and Ambassador Tai:

We write regarding reports of widespread illegal deforestation and unsustainable water use linked to avocados imported from Mexico. We request additional information regarding the Administration's efforts to address environmental degradation linked to these imports and work with our Mexican partners to prevent the sale of avocados grown on illegally deforested lands to American consumers.

Two states in Mexico—Michoacán and Jalisco—supply almost all avocados consumed in the United States. According to a recent article in the *New York Times*, avocado production in these states has had a catastrophic impact on the environment and local communities.¹ A report by Climate Rights International further outlines the devastating toll of the U.S.-Mexico avocado trade: government officials in Michoacán and Jalisco identify avocado production as “a central cause of deforestation and environmental destruction in their states,” including water theft. The report also outlines how Indigenous leaders and others seeking to defend their forests and water have been threatened, attacked, and killed.²

The U.S. and Mexico are both parties to the Paris Agreement, which includes a commitment to reduce deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions causing climate change. In addition, both countries signed the Glasgow Leaders Declaration at COP26, which includes a commitment to trade policies that promote sustainable commodity production and consumption and reduce deforestation.

¹ New York Times, *Americans Love Avocados. It's Killing Mexico's Forests* (online at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/28/us/mexico-avocado-deforestation.html>) (accessed Jan. 25, 2024).

² Climate Rights International, *Unholy Guacamole, Deforestation, Water Capture, and Violence Behind Mexico's Avocado Exports to the U.S. and Other Major Markets* (online at <https://cri.org/reports/unholy-guacamole/>) (accessed Jan. 25, 2024).

To help meet these commitments, the Administration, in cooperation with our Mexican partners, should work to prevent Mexican avocados produced on illegally deforested land from reaching U.S. markets. For example, the U.S. and Mexico are currently subject to an Operational Work Plan (OWP) agreement that requires U.S. and Mexican authorities to certify Mexican avocado orchards that export to the U.S. Currently, the OWP certification requirement only includes evaluation of pest control. The Administration should consider expanding the certification requirement to include a review of deforestation impacts, denying certification to orchards installed on recently illegally deforested land—a change that senior Mexican officials have reportedly expressed interest in making. Because most Mexican avocado orchards are not on recently deforested land, the Administration could implement policy changes without significantly reducing American consumers' access to avocados or harming the livelihood of law-abiding avocado farmers.³

To better understand the steps the Administration is taking, and could take in the future, to prevent the sale of avocados in the United States linked to deforestation, unsustainable water use, and violence against Indigenous and other local communities, we request a staff briefing with your agencies within the next 45 days.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Peter Welch
United States Senator



Benjamin Cardin
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Martin Heinrich
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Jeff Merkley
United States Senator

cc: Ambassador Ken Salazar

³ Climate Rights International, *Unholy Guacamole, Deforestation, Water Capture, and Violence Behind Mexico's Avocado Exports to the U.S. and Other Major Markets* (online at <https://cri.org/reports/unholy-guacamole/>) (accessed Jan. 25, 2024).