

Dumping, Cost Externalization, and Agro-Export Traceability in Mexico

"A Technical-Legal Approach to the US Preliminary Determination on Winter Strawberries"

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100800433>

Received: 19 August 2026; Accepted: 24 August 2026; Published: 08 September 2026

ABSTRACT

The affirmative preliminary determination issued on August 18, 2026, by the United States Department of Commerce regarding fresh winter strawberries from Mexico constitutes a strategic case study for analyzing the technical and legal limits of antidumping investigations applied to agricultural exports. Commerce established preliminary margins of 5.28% for Driscoll's Operaciones S.A. de C.V., 3.37% for Mainland Farms S.A. de C.V., and 4.83% for all other producers and exporters. The present study proposes an interdisciplinary approach integrating international commercial law, agricultural economics, environmental sciences, and territorial analysis. As a methodological axis, it incorporates a multidimensional analysis of regional berry production scenarios in Huiramba, Michoacán, particularly examining the indicators of Hydric Coefficient (QH), Productive Potential (PP), and Environmental Impact (IA), complemented by recent research on forest transformation and water availability in Michoacán. The hypothesis posits that an antidumping determination may present technical-legal vulnerabilities when the comparison between normal value and export price fails to adequately distinguish the productive, seasonal, environmental, and economic conditions that explain price formation, or when the determination of injury and causality does not separate the effects of the investigated imports from other factors. A rigorous distinction is made between dumping, subsidy, competitive advantage, and cost externalization, avoiding the conflation of environmental externalities into an antidumping category. A technical-commercial traceability model is proposed, articulating the plot, resources, production, costs, commercialization, export, antidumping comparison, injury, and causality. Results demonstrate that the QH-PP-IA model constitutes a useful scientific tool for identifying structural variables capable of affecting the competitiveness and sustainability of the production of these so-called soft fruits or berries. It is concluded that the Mexican defense must evolve toward a multilevel evidentiary model capable of integrating productive, environmental, economic, and legal evidence, sustainable simultaneously before US authorities, the USMCA mechanisms, and the WTO multilateral system.

Keywords: dumping; agro-exports; berries; environmental externalities; legal traceability.

INTRODUCTION

Mexico's integration into North American agrifood chains has profoundly transformed certain rural regions of the country. Export-oriented agriculture has allowed an increase in Mexican participation in international markets, generated foreign exchange, and developed specialized supply chains; however, it has also intensified pressure on natural resources, particularly water, soil, and forest cover.

Michoacán represents one of the territories where this transformation is most evident. The expansion of high commercial-value crops, including avocados and red berries, has generated a territorial reconfiguration that

cannot be exclusively explained by agricultural production indicators. Recent research by Reyes Cázarez demonstrates that the expansion of export agriculture is correlated with processes of forest ecosystem transformation, pressure on water resources, and the decline of environmental and ecosystem services. The study published in 2026 identifies an approximate loss of 4% of temperate forests and 1.7% of jungles in Michoacán, primarily associated with intensive agricultural expansion, alongside a sustained decrease in the availability of renewable water per inhabitant in certain hydrological regions.

This territorial context acquires a new dimension when a Mexican agrifood commodity becomes the subject of an antidumping investigation.

On August 18, 2026, the United States Department of Commerce announced an affirmative preliminary determination in the antidumping investigation concerning fresh winter strawberries from Mexico. Commerce established preliminary margins of 5.28% for Driscoll's Operaciones S.A. de C.V., 3.37% for Mainland Farms S.A. de C.V., and 4.83% for all other producers and exporters. During the periods of November 2022 to March 2023, November 2023 to March 2024, and November 2024 to March 2025, the considered Mexican imports reached approximately 188.5, 194.0, and 200.6 million kilograms, respectively.

The preliminary determination should not be confused with a final determination. Commerce indicates that the final determination should occur approximately in January 2027 and that the United States International Trade Commission is concurrently conducting the injury investigation.

The World Trade Organization's Anti-Dumping Agreement stipulates that dumping is determined through a comparison between the export price and the normal value of a like product in the ordinary course of trade, mandating a fair comparison. Likewise, the determination of injury must be based on positive evidence and an objective examination of the volume of dumped imports, their effect on prices, and their consequent impact on the domestic industry.

The issue gains greater complexity when dealing with agricultural products.

The price of an agricultural commodity does not rely solely on corporate decisions. It is conditioned by water availability, precipitation, temperature, productivity, fertilization, energy, labor, irrigation infrastructure, transportation, seasonality, quality, post-harvest losses, demand, and market conditions.

Consequently, an observed difference between two prices does not necessarily articulate a deliberate strategy of price discrimination; it may reflect a combination of productive factors. Dumping is an unfair trade practice wherein a company exports a product at a price lower than its production costs or normal market value; environmental externality is a market failure resulting from ecological costs unassumed by the firm and transferred to society; subsidy responds to direct state intervention that artificially reduces the financial burden of an industry; and competitive advantage stems from efficiency, innovation, or genuine differentiation that a firm achieves over its rivals. Erroneously assimilating these categories distorts any economic or regulatory diagnosis, as it equates commercial illegality, market failures, and public policy distortions with authentic business productivity.

Dumping is a specific legal category, subsidy corresponds to a different legal category, externality is an economic and environmental concept, while competitive advantage represents a productive or commercial condition.

However, these variables can interact.

If a commodity is produced by intensively utilizing a natural resource whose replacement, treatment, or deterioration cost is not fully incorporated into the private price, the cost structure observed by a trade authority may differ from the comprehensive economic-social cost of production.

This does not imply the existence of dumping. It signifies the presence of a structural economic variable that must be identified before attributing a price differential exclusively to unfair trade practices

This point connects directly with Reyes Cázares's work on regional berry production in Huiramba, Michoacán. The research, published in 2023 but investigated over a decade ago, analyzes the technical, social, and environmental factors associated with red berry production, particularly strawberries destined for export, utilizing a methodology that incorporates water footprint, productive potential, and environmental impact.

The study develops three primary indicators:

- a) Hydric Coefficient (QH);
- b) Productive Potential (PP);
- c) Environmental Impact (IA).

Its significance for trade analysis lies in shifting the unit of analysis from the isolated price to the productive system generating that price.

The paper reports values for 2023 of $QH=39.15$, $PP=20.37$, and $IA=43.11$, and elaborates prospective scenarios reaching values in 2033 of $QH=72.14$, $PP=23.12$, and $IA=74.18$. The projected trajectory is scientifically relevant because it evidences a relationship among increased water pressure, productivity, and environmental impact.

It is crucial to mention that currently, the state of Michoacán is considered the leading producer in the berry agro-export sector; the production potential was generated more than three decades ago in the Zamora and Jacona regions. However, environmental conditions have transitioned such that a large part of production is now generated in the central region of the federative entity, with municipalities like Morelia, Lagunillas, Huiramba, Madero, and Acuitzio del Canje serving as expanding territories for these crops.

Therefore, the present study departs from a central premise:

"The legal determination of dumping requires an adequate understanding of the economic structure generating the price; in agro-exports, such structure is linked to productive, environmental, territorial, and social conditions that do not necessarily appear in conventional commercial records."

The general objective consists of developing a technical-legal consolidation that permits the identification of the primary methodological vulnerabilities of an antidumping determination applied to Mexican agricultural exports, taking the US preliminary determination on fresh winter strawberries as a case study and utilizing the productive system associated with water resources and territorial transformation as research support.

THEORETICAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Dumping as a Legal Category

Article 2 of the Anti-Dumping Agreement establishes that a product is considered to be dumped when its export price is less than the comparable price, in the ordinary course of trade, for the like product destined for consumption in the exporting country.

From the perspective of international trade law, the regulation of unfair practices applicable to agrifood products is grounded in the regulatory framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and free trade agreements such as the USMCA. In this context, Article 2 of the WTO Anti-Dumping Agreement constitutes the technical pillar for evaluating whether export flows of Mexican strawberries violate free competition principles, by mandating an objective comparison between the normal value in the domestic market and the sales price in the receiving market (WTO, 1994, Art. 2).

For the effective application of this provision in the horticultural sector, the international legal framework contemplates specific tools that address the perishable and seasonal nature of the Mexican strawberry.

Notable among these instruments are commercial investigation procedures conducted by investigating authorities (such as the International Trade Commission or ministries of economy), methodological adjustments for seasonal price volatility, the determination of constructed value when ordinary commercial operations do not exist in the origin market, and the review and dispute settlement mechanisms contemplated in Chapter 10 of the USMCA. In this manner, legal tools ensure that any accusation or sanction against the Mexican strawberry responds to strict evidentiary verification of the dumping margin and the existence of injury to the domestic industry, thereby preventing the arbitrary use of protectionist measures (USMCA, 2020, Ch. 10).

Dumping, Injury, and Causality

The existence of dumping does not automatically imply the existence of injury.

Article 3 requires the determination of injury to be based on positive evidence and an objective examination of the volume and effects of the imports, as well as their impact on the domestic industry.

The existence of dumping does not automatically imply the presence of injury to the domestic industry. For countervailing measures to be imposed, Article 3 of the Anti-Dumping Agreement establishes that the determination of injury must be strictly based on positive evidence and on an objective examination of both the volume and effects of the imports concerned and their direct impact on domestic producers (World Trade Organization [WTO], 1994, Art. 3.1). Accordingly, the mere establishment of price discrimination is insufficient unless a causal link with the economic deterioration of the affected sector is formally demonstrated.

To establish such a causal link, the international legal framework requires the application of the non-attribution principle, which seeks to isolate the effects of the unfair trade practice from those of other independent factors. A domestic industry may simultaneously face increased production costs, adverse climatic conditions, declining productivity, competition from third countries, changes in consumption patterns, technological disruptions, labor disputes, plant diseases, fluctuations in energy input prices, and broader changes in demand (WTO, 1994, Art. 3.5). When such concurrent factors are present, the investigating authority must identify and distinguish their effects from those of the imports under investigation, thereby ensuring that injury resulting from unrelated factors is not improperly attributed to the investigated imports.

HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Main Hypothesis

An antidumping determination applied to Mexican agro-exports presents technical-legal vulnerability when the comparison between normal value and export price fails to incorporate or adequately explain the productive, seasonal, environmental, and socio-economic conditions determining price formation, or when the determination of injury fails to separate the effects of the investigated imports from other causal factors.

Research Questions

1. What productive variables must be considered to interpret the export price of berries?
2. What relationship exists between water availability, productivity, and environmental impact?
3. What differences exist between private cost and economic-social cost?
4. What variables must be verified before accepting a determination of dumping?
5. What points of legal vulnerability can be derived from insufficient traceability?
6. How can the new Mexican structure of judicial precedents be integrated into a commercial defense strategy?

METHODOLOGY

Interdisciplinary Design

The research utilizes a socio-legal, economic-environmental, and territorial approach, articulated through documentary analysis and causal reconstruction.

Five dimensions are integrated:

- i. international commercial law;
- ii. Mexican law;
- iii. agricultural economics;
- iv. environmental sciences;
- v. territorial analysis.

The methodology is built upon research in the municipality of Huiramba, Michoacán, Mexico, particularly through the interaction of water footprint, production, productive potential, and environmental impact. The unit of analysis is defined as:

"Fresh winter strawberry: a Mexican agro-exportable commodity and the chain of conditions determining its export price."

The economic and commercial process of an agrifood product originates in the territory, where the specific conditions of each plot and the efficient allocation of resources determine production levels and structure the crop cost matrix. This productive base articulates the phases of internal commercialization and subsequent export, dynamics that together define the final sales price fixing in the destination market.

From this international price, commercial authorities execute the antidumping comparison against the product's normal value in its country of origin to verify the presence of price discrimination. If the alteration is confirmed, the analysis shifts towards verifying the economic or material injury in the receiving industry and establishing the causal nexus, an indispensable step to prove that the detriment is a direct consequence of the unfair practice and not of factors alien to the operation.

QH–PP–IA Indicators

The proposed model of medium and short-term scenarios for regional berry production in Huiramba, Michoacán, Mexico, constitutes the scientific core of the analysis.

Hydric Coefficient (QH)

QH represents the productive pressure on the water resource.

$$[QH=f(P,W,H,R)]$$

where:

- (P) = production;
- (W) = water footprint or consumption;
- (H) = precipitation;
- (R) = resource availability.

Productive Potential (PP)

$$[PP=f(Y,L,S,T)]$$

where:

- (Y) = yield;
- (L) = labor availability;
- (S) = social structure;
- (T) = technological conditions.

Environmental Impact (IA)

The model integrates water pressure, productivity, and costs associated with extraction and treatment:

$$[IA=f(QH,PP,C_e,C_t)]$$

donde:

- (C_e) = extraction cost;
- (C_t) = treatment cost.

This structure allows linking environmental, social, and production variables with economic variables for the total costing of the production and consumer sales price.

RESULTS

Commercial Evidence

The preliminary determination by Commerce established the following:

U.S. Department of Commerce (ITA - International Trade Administration)

Producer/Exporter	Preliminary Margin
Driscoll's Operaciones S.A. de C.V.	5.28%
Mainland Farms S.A. de C.V.	3.37%
Todos los demás	4.83%

Registered imports entering the US of Mexican origin considered were:

Period	Volume
Nov. 2022–mar. 2023	188,526,684 kg
Nov. 2023–mar. 2024	193,977,343 kg
Nov. 2024–mar. 2025	200,649,474 kg

The growth between the first and third period is approximately 6.4% in volume. Associating this with the proposition in the 2023 study in the Huiramba municipality, the productive potential suggests an increase in production in the short-term scenario due to technical production stability, laborer capacity, and plant adaptation to climatic, seasonal, pedological conditions, and agro-input usage.

This demonstrates commercial expansion, but it does not, in itself, demonstrate dumping or injury causality. This precision is fundamental.

Technical-Productive Evidence

Research associated with strawberry production in the Huiramba municipality provides a second scale of evidence.

Year	QH	PP	IA
2023	39.15	20.37	43.11
2025	41.25	22.14	47.28
2029	49.58	26.18	60.55
2033	72.14	23.12	74.18

The reported data illustrate a trajectory in which the hydric coefficient and environmental impact increase considerably in the prospective horizon, while the productive potential reaches a peak and subsequently declines.

The 2023–2033 variation is approximately:

$$[QH = +84.2\%]$$

$$[IA = +72.1\%]$$

whereas:

$$[PP = +13.5\%]$$

This identifies a relationship that can be termed progressive decoupling between resource pressure and productive capacity. This aligns with the magnitude of the aforementioned 6.4% volume growth between the first and third periods.

Simply stated:

“Pressure on resources can grow more rapidly than the capacity to generate additional productivity.”

This specifies that while production growth decelerates and crop-associated natural resource costs increase exponentially, the economic factor and the restoration burden due to environmental components and water provision scale costs will be asymmetrical to the productive model and export yields.

Private, Environmental, and Social Cost

To accurately evaluate the competitiveness of an agro-export in international trade, a conceptual framework is proposed that transcends conventional corporate accounting through the equation $CI = CP + CA + CS$, where CI represents the integral cost. This model decomposes the cost structure into three interconnected dimensions. The first corresponds to the private cost (CP), encompassing exclusively the financial expenses directly recorded and assumed by the company, such as inputs, labor, machinery, packaging, and logistics.

However, the agro-productive process generates impacts that transcend the firms' financial balance. Secondly, the environmental cost (CA) contemplates the set of ecological externalities derived from agricultural activity; prominent components include massive water extraction, water treatment requirements, aquifer contamination, agro-industrial waste generation, arable soil layer degradation, and consequent loss of ecosystem services. The social cost (CS) incorporates the affections on the community and territorial environment, evaluating the pressure exerted on local public services, the decrease in water availability for

human consumption, the emergence of territorial conflicts, the direct effects on neighboring populations' well-being, and costs derived from accumulated environmental deterioration.

It is imperative to clarify that the integral cost concept should not be artificially introduced into the legal definition of dumping. International trade regulation strictly defines dumping as commercial price discrimination—when the export price is lower than the normal value in the origin market. Conflating environmental and social externalities within the dumping figure would violate the legal certainty of free trade agreements and distort the normative criteria of antidumping investigations.

The utility of integral cost lies in a fundamentally different analytical and public policy plane. Its strategic value resides in enabling the following question: what portion of the real cost of sustaining production actually appears in the private price? Thus, the tool visualizes the extent to which a seemingly high competitiveness in international markets may be sustained by transferring environmental and social costs to the collectivity, offering a rigorous diagnosis regarding the true sustainability of the agro-export model.

The Evidence from Research in the Municipality of Huiramba, Michoacan, as Frontier Science

The conceptual framework developed herein situates the research at the vanguard of territorial analysis by systemically articulating agronomy, hydrology, economics, social sciences, and prospective studies. Its principal methodological contribution consists of eradicating mono-causal explanations: productive behavior does not derive exclusively from territorial extension, water access, or commercial demand. Conversely, production emerges as the dynamic and interdependent result of the convergence of all these variables within a given space.

This integral vision offers highly effective tools for analyzing international commercial disputes. While antidumping procedures tend to rely on accounting metrics and highly aggregated financial data, the true origin conditions of such indicators are generated at the local scale. As the Huiramba study evinces, productive expansion directly alters water availability, soil quality, and the environmental cost structure. Therefore, information regarding the state and use of natural resources ceases to be a mere ecological datum and functions as an alternative evidentiary input, capable of substantiating or refuting the coherence of the price structure in the legal and commercial spheres.

Technical Vulnerabilities and Analysis of the Antidumping Resolution

The legal and technical contestation of a commercial measure demands rigorously identifying the technical vulnerabilities of the antidumping determination, structured across six critical points capable of vitiating the procedure with nullity.

1. **Equitable Price Comparability:** Pursuant to Article 2 of the Anti-Dumping Agreement, the investigating authority is obliged to conduct an objective comparison at the same level of trade. This comparability is breached if the methodology omits necessary adjustments derived from differences in variety, quality, presentation, size, production season, contractual conditions, sales volume, transport costs, and specific market dynamics.
2. **Reconstruction and Reproducibility of Normal Value:** To validate the determination, auditing the methodology by which the normal value was established in the country of origin is indispensable. If the authority fails to provide the data or formulas necessary for independent recalculation by the affected parties, the capacity for contradiction and technical defense guarantees are severely undermined.
3. **Representativeness of the Export Price:** The analysis requires precisely determining whether the utilized export price effectively reflects the relevant commercial operation. The inclusion of unrepresentative, distorted transactions, or atypical samples alters the calculation basis of the dumping margin.
4. **Evidentiary Standard of Injury:** The declaration of material injury to the domestic industry cannot be based on conjectures. The regulatory framework dictates that the existence of prejudice must be

demonstrated through the irrefutable provision of positive evidence and an objective examination of the volume of imports and their effects on local prices.

5. Severance of the Causal Nexus: It is mandatory to isolate the actual effect of imports from factors alien to the unfair practice. If the deterioration of the domestic industry is provoked by climate shocks, demand contraction, or input cost increments, attributing such injury to the imported product invalidates the causal relationship.

6. Methodological Motivation: Any resolution must possess a sufficient and transparent explanation of the adopted technical decisions. The lack of justification concerning data selection criteria or the arbitrary dismissal of evidence renders the determination an act devoid of methodological sustenance.

In a strategic working session to establish the posture before the panel, verifying the review of Article 17.6 of the WTO Anti-Dumping Agreement will be crucial; limiting ourselves to arguing that the U.S. Department of Commerce incorrectly interpreted data is a tactical error. If Commerce established the facts and made an impartial evaluation, a mere differing panel conclusion will not invalidate the measure. The evidentiary line must emphatically demonstrate that Commerce did not properly establish the facts, omitted an objective and impartial examination of available evidence, or applied an interpretation inadmissible under international law.

From a multilevel perspective, a unified evidentiary dossier must be constructed, capable of simultaneous deployment across three fronts: the domestic administrative and appeals level in the United States before Commerce and the ITC; the regional sphere via the USMCA Chapter 10 review mechanisms; and the WTO multilateral dispute settlement pathway.

It is important to identify the national sphere in Mexico; the reform and the Amparo Law modified jurisprudential articulation through binding precedents, reiteration, and contradiction. Citing an isolated thesis with a seemingly relevant title is no longer sufficient. The sector's defense must structure a formal traceability explicitly traversing: facts associated with the legal problem, the precedent, and its applicability. Each technical argument must transparently link the norm, precedent, fact, evidence, causal relation, and consequence.

Given that the determination is still preliminary, it is vital to analyze the proposed models: Level I (Technical) to counter deficiencies in measurement, classification, and adjustments; Level II (Economic) to evidence the omission of productivity, water, and energy variables; Level III (Causal) to dismantle injury attribution without separating alien factors; and Level IV (Legal) to highlight flaws in motivation, substantiation, and objectivity. This will integrate a relationship of compliance versus non-compliance without prematurely making absolute and procedurally inadmissible assertions of illegality.

DISCUSSION

The dynamism of contemporary agrifood commerce presents a structural divergence between private competitiveness and comprehensive sustainability. While international market metrics record high export capacity driven by productivity increments, territorial ecological analysis reveals growing pressure on the water and soil supply sustaining that yield (Reyes Cázares, 2026). Under the traditional economic paradigm, increased agricultural yield is directly associated with greater competitive advantage; nevertheless, incorporating environmental variables demonstrates that productive intensification accelerates natural resource degradation and elevates indirect ecological costs. Consequently, the financial efficiency of agroexporting companies does not equate to systemic sustainability. Although this discrepancy does not automatically qualify export price-setting as an illegal or unfair practice under international commercial law, it highlights that the cost structure necessitates a rigorous, quantifiable socio-environmental explanation.

To confront international trade disputes and mitigate protectionist risks, agro-export policy must transition from a purely extractive scheme toward a strategy founded on evidence, monitoring, and preventive legal defense (Secretaría de Economía [SE], 2025). It is indispensable to substitute the conventional vision geared

merely toward foreign exchange generation with an institutionalized model that contemplates continuous measurement, documentation, tracking, and certification of the productive process.

CONCLUSIONS

It is imperative to maintain a strict conceptual separation among dumping, subsidies, competitive advantages, and environmental externalities. Conflating price discrimination with ecological market failures strips technical solidity from any legal defense strategy and distorts the economic analysis of production (WTO, 1994; Reyes Cázarez, 2023).

Quantitative models demonstrate that rising export volumes can coexist with sustained natural capital degradation. In the territorial analysis of Huiramba, it is observed that while the water footprint (QH) increases from 39.15% to 72.14% and environmental impact (IA) from 43.11% to 74.18%, productive potential (PP) reaches a maximum threshold before initiating a downward trajectory due to forest cover loss and water overexploitation (Reyes Cázarez, 2023).

The omission of ecosystem losses in financial balances generates a structure where the integral cost surpasses the private cost ($CI > CP$). Nonetheless, externalities do not, in themselves, constitute proof of dumping; rather, they are explanatory variables of the actual cost matrix that must be isolated to avoid erroneous causal attributions (Reyes Cázarez, 2023).

According to Articles 2, 3, and 17.6 of the Anti-Dumping Agreement, an injury or price discrimination determination must be sustained by an objective examination and the impartial establishment of facts (WTO, 1994). Any evidentiary rupture in the chain linking territory, resources, costs, price, and market representativeness dismantles the causal nexus and generates a technical vulnerability contestable before international panels (ITA, 2026).

The articulation of the new doctrine of precedents within the Mexican judicial system, coupled with the rigor of international disputes, demands transitioning from a reactive defensive scheme towards a preventive model.

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