

WHERE DOES THE COOP'S FOOD ACTUALLY COME FROM?

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By Dan Bergsagel

You may think you know where the Coop's Brazil nuts and French couscous come from. But what about the English and Persian cucumbers? Or the Japanese eggplant and Jerusalem artichokes?

If you understand the origin of food and its journey from farms and other producers to the Coop's aisles, you may be able to better grasp the potential impact of tariffs during this tumultuous economic period.

Leila Darabi's insightful article from December 2024 outlined some of the potential

overall impacts that the Trump administration's tariffs could have on the agricultural sector and, consequently, prices at the Coop. Here's a further exploration of tariffs and the Coop, based on an examination of the origins of the products lining the Coop's aisles.

BUYING STRATEGY

The Coop seeks out food using two complementary aims: to source the best and to source locally. This approach is clearest with fresh produce.

"We try to source the best representation of the item," explained Cecelia Rembert, the Coop's fruit buyer. But buyers also try to prioritize sourcing from producers who are local, which the Coop defines as being within a 500-mile radius—a one-day drive—of Brooklyn. Using local suppliers ensures products are fresh and supports the regional economy.

Of course, not all produce can be bought locally.

"The local growing season is from May to September or October. During the season a lot of the food comes locally from the North East," Rembert said. "Outside of the local growing season, a lot of our produce comes from California and Mexico. Certain items are never grown in the United States, so we are always sourcing them from afar. Pineapples always come from Costa Rica. Bananas always come from Ecuador. Avocados come from Mexico almost all year round."

FOOD ORIGINS

What's more, even mapping the origins of the Coop's food is not easy.

"A lot of the data depends on what information is recorded when the food is received. Often we're more interested in getting it on the shelf and selling it than extra paperwork," said Ken Macdonald, a Receiving Coordinator who is involved in IT at the Coop.

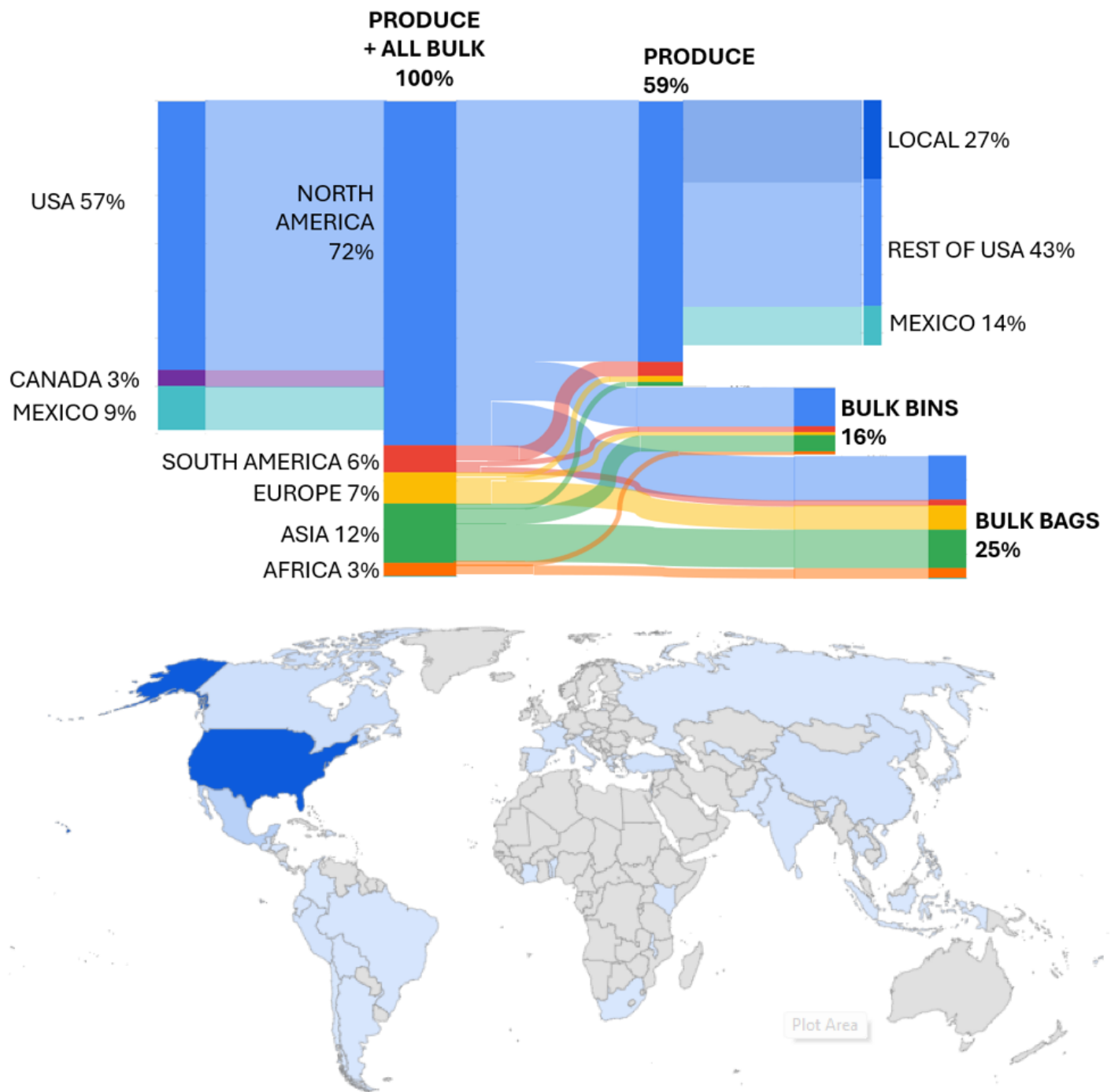
Yet Macdonald provides a glimmer of hope for data enthusiasts: “We are in the middle of a big shift to a new database system right now, so probably in a year or two we will have more access to origin information.”

While not all origin data is currently accessible, the Coop does record and publish weekly information on the origin of produce as well as occasional updates on the origin of bulk items, both in bins and in bags. This does not provide information on many items on our shelves, but it does enable us to generate a snapshot of where we currently source the food placed in the aisles on the far right as one enters the Coop.

Produce and bulk items sourced from North America make up 72 percent of the total, with U.S.-grown food accounting for 57 percent of the total, Mexican-grown for 9 percent, and Canadian-grown for 3 percent. All other countries individually contribute less than 3 percent.

Even though we are not currently in the local growing season, 27 percent of our produce items are sourced within a 500-mile radius, while 92 percent of our produce comes from North America. Some current locally grown produce include famous New York apples and hardy root vegetables like beets, potatoes, turnips and celeriac. Some items are even sourced from within a 5-mile radius, such as Brooklyn-grown Gotham Greens salad and basil.

The Coop’s reliance on other countries and regions increases for bulk items, with only 58 percent of our bulk bin items and 36 percent of our bulk bagged items coming from North America. Additionally, 25 percent of our bulk binned items and 31 percent of our bulk bagged items come from Asia, while 20 percent of our bulk bagged items come from Europe.



The data presented here is based on the variety of items on sale, not on the volume of each item of food sold. Two Coop produce staples skew these statistics significantly when the quantities sold are considered instead of the variety. Rembert estimates that around \$13 million worth of produce is sold at the Coop each year, including \$500,000 of bananas and \$750,000 of avocados. These foods—both sourced almost exclusively from outside the US—together account for over 10% of produce sales by volume.

THE TARIFFS TODAY

Most of our produce and bulk items are sourced within the U.S., but certainly not all of them. Does this leave the Coop open to price volatility caused by tariffs?

Since President Trump has taken office, there has been significant confusion and instability associated with his tariff policies. Has there been any change in the Coop's food supply? "We haven't heard anything from our distributors," Rembert explained. "The produce business is pretty matter-of-fact. People just do their thing. The market will reflect the supply or the demand, but nothing has changed yet."

It is tempting to try and anticipate food distribution disruption based on prior experience. Does the COVID-19 pandemic offer any lessons?

For Rembert, the banana supply was an interesting case study in supply chain dynamics. "We get our bananas from Equal Exchange—a small cooperative importer. When there was high demand for cargo ships during the pandemic, as a small distributor, they were often bumped. So we had some trouble getting bananas."

Rembert added that "the tariffs are different as there isn't really any supply chain disruption—things are just going to cost more. We're not going to do anything different. The price will go up, and we'll continue to apply the same markup. That might affect member purchasing, and we may see that demand goes down."

The recent headlines have all been about the impact of tariffs on exporting Kentucky bourbon and on importing European wine. Is it only a matter of time before they come for our fabled cheese case? Rembert, again: "It will be interesting to see what kind of impact this trade war—if it continues as a trade war for years—will have on reshaping what the Coop carries and what members are buying."

And finally, for the trivia fans: Our Brazil nuts and French couscous come from Brazil and France, but the English cucumbers are Canadian, the Persian cucumbers are Do-

minican, the Japanese eggplant are Honduran and the Jerusalem artichokes are American.

Dan Bergsagel is a structural engineer from London. He likes to talk about the unexpected things hiding in plain sight.