

# Mushroom industry reacts to fixed quota

BY DON CUNNION  
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NOTTINGHAM — Pennsylvania mushroom growers finally may get long-sought

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relief from cheap canned imports.

The U.S. International Trade Commission has unanimously recommended that President Carter impose absolute (fixed) quotas which would cut the import share of the U.S. canned mushroom market from 56 percent to 40 percent or less.

President Carter has 60 days from August 14, when he officially received the recommendation, to accept one of two ITC proposals to restrict imports, come up with a solution of his own, or ignore the whole thing.

Martin S. Gaston, executive secretary of the

American Mushroom Institute, which represents the mushroom industry nationwide, says he feels optimistic about positive Presidential action since the ITC recommendation was passed unanimously.

Two previous recommendations by the ITC to control imports were turned down by the White House. In fact, one of President Carter's first acts when he took office was to refuse relief through import controls.

Canned mushroom imports hit a record high of 112 million pounds in the fiscal year 1979-80, which ended

June 30. This was 30 percent more than the previous year.

That total actually exceeded total sales of U.S. canned mushrooms by 23 million pounds.

As a result of the flood of imports, prices paid to U.S. growers for fiscal 1979-80 dropped 1.3 cents a pound from the previous year, according to the USDA Crop Reporting Board.

Things were worse for Pennsylvania growers, with prices dropping nearly five cents a pound.

Pennsylvania is the nation's leading grower of mushrooms, accounting for 45 percent of the total. No

other state comes close. But a few years ago Pennsylvania accounted for 65 percent of the total.

Mushroom prices have been weak in Pennsylvania and other states through the new crop year which began July 1. Little increase has been shown in the hot months, when production usually drops off.

Mack Reece, Nottingham grower, who sells to both the fresh and canned market, told us he has been losing money ever since the first of the calendar year.

"The fresh market just can't absorb the mushrooms our beleaguered canners no

longer buy because of lack of a market," he said. "That forces more mushrooms onto the fresh market and weakens the price structure."

Bill Lane, vice president in charge of sales for Butler Mushroom Farms, the state's larger grower, agrees that prices are bad.

"The prices being offered by our canners because of the flood of imports are disastrously low," he said. "Domestic production has out-paced the sale of domestic mushrooms."

Even though Butler stresses sales to the fresh market it depends on processors to buy surpluses and product that doesn't meet the firm's grade standards for fresh sale.

Lane points out that the over-supply situation in Pennsylvania might have been worse during the last two fiscal years if a prolonged strike at Butlers hadn't sharply cut production there. Butler lost about 20 million pounds.

Lewe B. Martin, of the Washington law firm of Pope, Ballard & Loos, which represents the U.S. mushroom industry, reports three members of the ITC proposed a three-year import quota plan which would start at 86 million pounds for 1980-81, increase to 94 million pounds in 1981-82 and hit 103 million pounds for 1982-83.

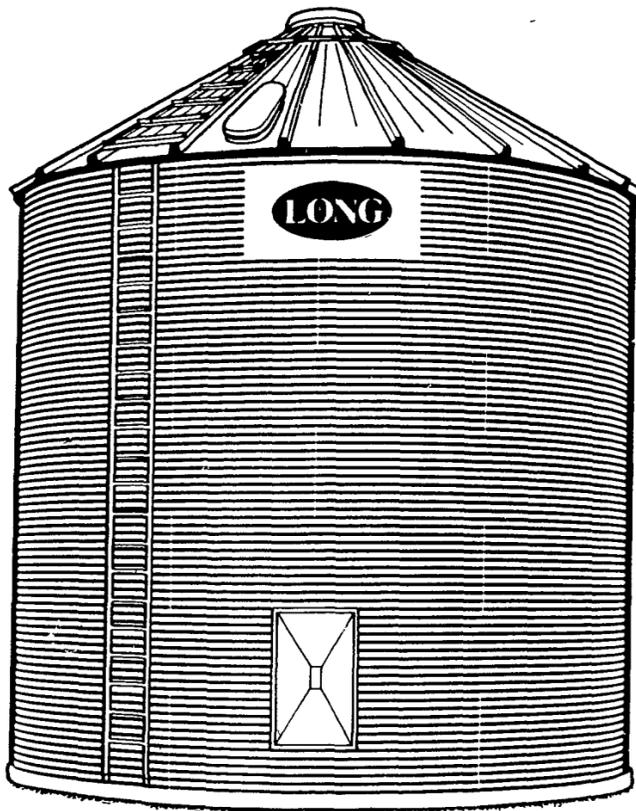
A fourth member of the ITC came up with a "minority" proposal calling for a five-year plan which would start at 78 million pounds and reach 102 million by 1984-85. Both proposals were based on an average of 78 million pounds of imports over the past six years.

No one we talked with in the mushroom industry felt the ITC proposals went far enough to provide needed protection, but the general feeling was that "they are better than nothing" or "at least they are a start."

Some pessimism was expressed about the chances of approval by President Carter of the ITC recommendations. Conversely, it was noted that the deadline for Presidential action, October 14, comes shortly before an election in which President Carter will be out for every possible vote.

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