

Fighting Goliath head-on

By Meghan Sapp

Coca Cola has set itself up as the bad guy in the Philippines over the HFCS import spat, leaving itself with few moves that won't jeopardise its reputation for a long time to come.

In a classic David and Goliath story, the Philippines' sugar industry is battling Coca Cola Femsa head-on for what the cane farmers and sugar producers see as a struggle over for their livelihoods. High fructose corn syrup imports [cost sugar producers US\\$212 million in 2016](#), they say, leading the Sugar Regulatory Authority to step in and regulate HFCS to protect the industry.

Not surprisingly, [Coca Cola Femsa sought a temporary restraining order](#) against the SRA's rule that heavily regulated HFCS imports and classifies them as "C" quota sugarsⁱ, reserve sugar rather than sugar for use in the domestic market. So in turn, [SRA fought back with a legal opposition](#) against the TRO request. Now the TRO request is up for a second hearing on March 20 after a judge refused to make a ruling on March 10, saying more information was needed.

The question of HFCS imports and their impacts on the sugar industry have, if anything, [forced the industry to look hard at itself](#), its efficiency, its capacity to compete with other sweeteners, and the [impacts on the millions of small farmers and farm workers](#) who depend on sugarcane for their livelihood.

They're not easy questions and what to do with the hard answers will pave the way for the future of the industry.

But in the meantime, the issue has become extremely divisive, as any good David and Goliath story is, with the big guy pitched against the little guy. With Coca Cola Femsa taking the legal route from the start, issuing [a cease and desist letter to the sugar industry](#) back in January to try to end public complaints about the impacts of HFCS imports, it set itself up as the bad guy. That put everyone on alert, which later led to [calls by Senators to look closer at the HFCS issue](#) and eventually led to the new regulations that Coca Cola Femsa is fighting so vehemently against.

So is there any surprise that there would be calls for [a boycott against soft drinks](#) as well? There shouldn't be. Why then would the [agriculture minister publicly suggest that the import restrictions be lifted](#), raising questions as to possible ties with the company rather than supporting the farmers he is charged to protect?

The lines are clearly drawn and any wrong move could result in a public relations backfire for Coca Cola and HFCS overall. They must tread carefully on Monday or risk the entire country rising up against them for going after the helpless little farmer.

ⁱ Though interesting that while the US corn industry has been fighting for years for HFCS to be recognised legally as sugar that this is what the Philippines has gone ahead and done