

Country Profile: Nicaragua

Market Overview

Focus Economics reports that after accelerating in annual terms in earlier in 2023 the economy seemingly gained further momentum by the midpoint. Economic activity expanded at a brisker pace relative to the prior quarter on the back of upturns in the agriculture, communications, manufacturing, and mining sectors. Moreover, merchandise exports rebounded in the period. That said, construction output grew less, while remittances inflows eased. Early data for 2023 is promising. In October, inflation fell to a 25-month low, which should support household spending.

In other news, in late October 2023, Vice President Rosario Murillo initiated a purge of the judicial system, dismissing close to 1,000 officials and replacing them with loyalists.

The main challenge for 2024 and beyond is to stay on course to preserve macroeconomic and financial stability. Restoring confidence and external financing flows is critical to avoid a further contraction in credit and jobs, which would continue to hold back investment and consumption, implying a significant headwind to economic activity. Restoring business confidence and addressing supply-side bottlenecks are key elements to promote sustainable economic growth.

Policies to bring back private sector confidence, including a frank evaluation of the impact of recent measures, are essential to promote economic recovery and offset an increase in poverty. Euromonitor reports that gross domestic product (GDP) growth was 3.7% in 2022 but should recede down to 3% in 2023 and then 3.3% in 2024.

Nicaragua's population was 6.3 million (CIA World Factbook Est.). The median age is 28.5 years, which means it is still a relatively young country. The percentage of those older than the age of 65 is only 6.5%. The population growth rate is only 0.97%.

USDA's Office of Agricultural Affairs, OAA, in Managua, hereinafter referred to as FAS Post Managua, reports that some 140,000 formal sector jobs have disappeared from the economy since 2018, and Nicaraguan families now earn 15% less on average than in 2018. Remittances from the Nicaraguan diaspora through September 2023 were US\$3.4 billion, up 52% over the same period in 2022; Nicaraguans remitted a record US\$3.25 billion in all of 2022, equal to 20% of GDP. Remittances are supporting basic consumption in Nicaragua, preventing thousands of vulnerable families from falling further into poverty and facilitating the Central Bank's accumulation of reserves, which can help the government avoid the most destabilizing effects of international economic sanctions.

Nearly all U.S. products have duty free access to Nicaragua under the Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR). Remaining tariff rate quotas (TRQs) on rice, chicken meat, and dairy products will phase out by January 1, 2025. Among the best prospects for export growth are feed grains and soybean meal as

well as rice, chicken meat, pork, and snack foods, but deteriorating economic conditions or terms of trade could diminish prospects.

Nicaragua is the smallest export market for U.S. processed foods in Central America, even smaller than Belize. In 2022, U.S. exports of processed food products to Nicaragua grew 20% to US\$76.3 million. In 2023, U.S. processed food exports to Nicaragua increased 12% to US\$85.3 million.

Top processed food exports to Nicaragua in 2023 included:

- Processed/Prepared Dairy Products – down 2%.
- Food Preparations & Ingredients – up 2%.
- Soups – up 75%.
- Condiments, Sauces, Jams, and Jellies – up 50%.
- Processed Vegetables and Pulses – up 57%.
- Snack Foods – up 21%.
- Fats & Oils – down 18%.

Market Opportunities and Key Issues for U.S. Exporters of Processed Food in Nicaragua

Market Opportunities:

- Nicaraguan importers trust the quality and value of U.S. products.
- Preferential access and reduced tariff rates under the CAFTA-DR trade agreement.
- Proximity to Nicaragua provides lower shipping costs and shorter shipping times.
- Increased remittances support higher consumer spending levels .

Key Issues:

- Limited purchasing power and uncertain economic outlook.
- Weak rule of law and arbitrary rulings by customs agents may result in delays, fees, and/or rejections.
- Without an Atlantic port, shipments must cross Honduras overland or transit the Panama Canal.
- Increased immigration shrinks market size.

Retail Sector Highlights:

Euromonitor has estimated that the retail sales of packaged food products in Nicaragua will reach just over US\$1.3 billion in 2023. This also represents an increase of US\$296.8 million or 28.1% from 2019. Euromonitor also forecasts the packaged food market to grow to nearly US\$1.9 billion by 2028, an increase of US\$431.1 million and 29.6% from 2024.

High growth categories in the forecast include:

- Pet Food
- Soup
- Meals & Soups

- Rice, Pasta, and Noodles
- Processed Meat, Seafood & Alternatives to Meat
- Cheese
- Dairy (ex. Cheese)
- Savory Snacks

FAS Post Managua reports that supermarket chains have continued to expand and modernize, supporting increased distribution of imported high-value perishable products (like pork and chicken meat) as well as consumer-packaged goods. Expansion of supermarket infrastructure has also driven growing demand for, and popularity of, retailers' own private label branded products. However, if the Nicaraguan economy continues to deteriorate, FAS Post Managua anticipates reduced demand for high value, consumer-oriented foods.

More than 1,000 wholesalers, retailers, and distributors operate in Nicaragua. Supermarkets with a wider variety of products are increasingly popular and expanding. Walmart operates 92 supermarkets under several banners serviced by a national distribution center. The Pali and Maxi Pali banners are discount supermarkets targeting smaller cities and towns as well as populous neighborhoods in Managua; customers generally seek the lowest prices and typically express low levels of brand loyalty. La Union and La Colonia cater to a more upscale segment, offering a variety of innovative and imported products.

Bulk-format products from U.S.-based PriceSmart, which carries a wide variety of imported products, are attractive to smaller businesses and restaurants. Two additional stores, Porta's and Economart, target higher-end consumers in Managua with a variety of imported products. Convenience chains AM/PM and Super Express operate more than 100 locations combined across the country, featuring a variety of imported snack foods and confections, though regional suppliers more common than U.S. brands.

Best Product Prospects:

Among shelf-stable products, the best export prospects are food preparations, non-alcoholic and alcoholic beverages, snack foods (including cookies and crackers), rice, dry beans, canned goods, and breakfast cereals. Relative to other Central American countries, Nicaragua's food processing sector is limited, but there are still export opportunities for ingredients and raw materials in food processing. However, if the Nicaraguan economy continues to deteriorate, FAS Post Managua anticipates reduced demand for high value, consumer-oriented foods.

Foodservice Sector Highlights:

FAS Post Managua reports that the hotel, restaurant, and institutional (HRI) sector had been hard hit by the 2018 social political crisis, which discouraged international tourism, even before COVID-19 pandemic caused many hotels and restaurants to close temporarily in the first half of 2020. International tourism only began to recover (albeit tentatively) in summer 2021 and has been slowly increasing as more airlines resumed flights to Nicaragua in 2022. The loss of formal jobs due to the 2018 crisis and the

pandemic has contributed to a significant increase in informal economic activity, including HRI businesses like food trucks, which are becoming more popular in urban areas. A number of delivery service providers have also emerged from the pandemic – including Hugo, Piki, Jumpers, Get My Food, Aventon, Yolo, and Pedidos Ya – offering not just restaurant meals, but also groceries and home goods.

Food Processing Sector Highlights:

FAS Post Managua reports that Nicaragua’s food processing sector is largely focused on primary processing of meat and sugar for export. Apart from a small number of snack foods and confections, there are few locally produced consumer-oriented products. Cost-competitive regional suppliers have established recognizable brands and comprised 80% of Nicaraguan snack food imports in 2022. FAS Post Managua anticipates sustained opportunities for U.S. processed products suppliers prepared to navigate the challenges of the Nicaraguan market, given the local sector’s relative underdevelopment and low levels of anticipated investment in the sector.

In addition to meat and sugar, food products processed in Nicaragua consist primarily of cookies and crackers. The local supply of various food products, especially those in the consumer-oriented groups, is limited. The Nicaraguan food industry is mostly engaged in primary processing of local products for the export market. Very few snacks, chips, biscuits, and sugar confectionery are produced locally. This provides opportunities for foreign suppliers. Nicaraguan industries import high volumes of intermediate products such as additives and ingredients from foreign suppliers. The sector is still underdeveloped when compared with the rest of Central America.

Domestic food production does not satisfy consumer demand for a variety of products; Most of the products found in the supermarkets come from Central American countries and the United States. The United States is the top trading partner, followed by China, Mexico, Honduras, and Costa Rica. Food imports have increased by 20% in the last five years.

Intermediate products are where most food processing products are classified. U.S. exports of intermediate products to Nicaragua in 2022 grew 23% to US\$113 million. The top products exported included soybean meal and soybean oil, vegetable oils, sugars, sweeteners, beverage bases, essential oils, distiller’s gains and dextrins, peptones and proteins.

Best Product Prospects:

FAS Post Managua reports that as the Nicaraguan economy continues to contract, there will be less demand for high-value foods and greater demand for basic grains and lower priced processed products. The best prospects for 2024 are yellow corn, rice, soybean meal, pork meat, chicken leg quarters and a wide variety of lower priced processed products. Despite a surge in imports of U.S. wheat in 2021, FAS Post Managua would not classify wheat as a best prospect in Nicaragua. A 2011 arrangement between Nicaragua and Russia has practically displaced all wheat from other origins, except when Russian exportable supplies are tight, as in 2021.

After a decade of Russian dominance in the market, U.S. wheat exports to Nicaragua continued to climb in 2022, due primarily to shipping disruptions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. At 130,000 metric tons, U.S. wheat shipments to Nicaragua through September 2022 were nearly 10 times greater than pre-COVID-19 levels in 2019. However, this export success could prove temporary, as Nicaragua is increasingly a Russian client state.

Panama

Euromonitor reports that the economy in Panama grew in real terms in 2022, driven by rising public and private spending, capital investment, and external demand. In 2023, however, the global economic slowdown, elevated inflation, and tightening financial conditions were set to hamper business and consumer confidence globally, weighing the country's economic outlook.

Focus Economics reports that Panama Canal activity was curbed by restrictions imposed due to the protracted drought amid the El Niño weather event: In November 2023, traffic fell by over 20% year on year, and toll revenues shrank for the first time in 11 months. Protests that erupted in the fall of 2023 due to environmental and economic concerns over the Cobre Panama copper mine deal also hit activity, causing the mine's closure and up to US\$80 million in lost activity daily.

- Following real gross domestic product (GDP) growth of 7.9% in 2022, Panama's economy is expected to expand at an average annual real rate of 5.8% in 2023 and 2.5% in 2024.
- Inflation in Panama is forecast to slow down to 2.5% in 2023 from 2.9% in 2022.
- While Panama's merchandise exports increased by 0.5% and imports rose by 36.3% during 2022, the country remained a net importer of goods.
- Gross fixed capital formation (GFCF) continued to increase over 2022, accounting for 29.0% of GDP.
- The public debt-to-GDP ratio in Panama fell to 54.9% in 2022, standing below the regional average of 67.1%.

Panama's dollar-based economy rests primarily on a well-developed services sector that accounts for more than three-quarters of GDP. Services include operating the Panama Canal, logistics, banking, the Colon Free Trade Zone, insurance, container ports, flagship registry, and tourism. Additionally, Panama is a center for offshore banking. Panama's transportation and logistics services sectors, along with infrastructure development projects, have boosted economic growth, and the U.S.-Panama Trade Promotion Agreement (USPTPA) was approved by Congress, signed into law in October 2011, and entered into force in October 2012.

Panama recognizes the clear link between free trade and competitiveness and seeks to join an elite group of countries that have achieved growth and development through trade. Panama has full FTAs that cover goods and services in force with the following

countries or economies: El Salvador, Singapore, Chile, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Peru, the United States, Canada, the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) countries, Mexico, South Korea, and Israel. Panama has partial trade agreements with the Dominican Republic and Cuba. In 2013, Panama and Colombia signed a free trade agreement, the culmination of three years of negotiations between both countries.

USDA's Office of Agricultural Affairs, OAA, in Panama City, hereinafter referred to as FAS Post Panama City, reports Panama is an attractive market for exporting U.S. agricultural food products. With a 2023 population of 4.4 million (CIA World Factbook Estimate) its culturally diverse population, geographical location, and love for American food and culture provide for increasing export opportunities for U.S. high value food and beverage products. Panama has an ambitious public infrastructure plan and an expanding services sector that benefits from the country's emerging role as a regional hub for trade.

Panama is the second largest export market in Central America for processed food products from the U.S., importing US\$546 million in 2022, growth of 19%. In 2023, U.S. processed food exports to Panama dropped 12% to US\$482.8 million. This equates to US\$64 million in losses which adds to the U.S. trade deficit in food and agricultural products.

Top processed food exports to Panama in 2023 included:

- Food Preparations & Ingredients – up 19%.
- Processed/Prepared Dairy Products – down 22%.
- Alcoholic Beverages – down 45%.
- Snack Foods – up 2%.
- Non-Alcoholic Beverages – up 7%.
- Prepared/Preserved Meats – down 25%.
- Processed Vegetables & Pulses – up 3%.
- Chocolate and Confectionery – up 7%.

Market Opportunities and Key Issues for U.S. Processed Food Exporters to Panama

Market Opportunities:

- Strategic geographical location and its service-oriented economy. Panama will continue to strengthen its seaports and logistics assets (Panama Canal, seaports, airports, special economic zones, logistics parks, and railroad) over the coming years.
- Diverse ethnic backgrounds of thousands of tourist and U.S. expatriates coming to Panama each year. Increased immigration with permanent residents from Venezuela, Colombia, Nicaragua, The Antilles, Asia, Europe, Canada, and others.
- Static production of agricultural products led to strong demand for food and feed imports. The U.S.-Panama Trade Promotion Agreement and associated agreements created a fair, transparent playing field for trade.

Key Issues:

- Cost competitiveness of some U.S.-origin products. The Panama Canal is facing an unprecedented drought due to El Nino and climate change, which is reducing the number of vessels that can transit through the route.
- Strong competition in the region with seaports in Colombia, Costa Rica, the Caribbean, and Mexico, including the recently announced interoceanic train of the isthmus of Tehuantepec, which would be a dry canal for containers.
- Recent governmental protectionist policies are making importing food, beverages, and agricultural products more burdensome.

Retail Sector Highlights:

Euromonitor has estimated that the retail sales of packaged food products in Panama reached just over US\$3.5 billion in 2023. This also represents an increase of US\$866.4 million or 32.5% from 2019. Euromonitor also forecast the packaged food market to grow to US\$4.7 billion by 2028, an increase of US\$1 billion and 27.1% from 2024.

High growth categories in the forecast include:

- Pet food
- Confectionery
- Cheese
- Sweet Biscuits, Snack Bars, and Fruit Snacks
- Breakfast Cereals
- Baked Goods
- Savory Snacks

FAS Post Panama City reports that supermarkets, hypermarkets, and independent food stores dominate the grocery sector in Panama. Supermarket chains are opening new stores in populated areas across the country and offering online grocery shopping and delivery services. There are more store brands in these chains and the brands allow retailers to offer customers more choice. High-end and specialty retail outlets continue to grow. Independent grocery and convenience stores are also opening stores in local neighborhoods.

Today's supermarkets can offer reduced consumer prices relative to traditional, family-owned retail. Supermarkets exhibit increasing product safety and diversity, and robust e-commerce platforms with delivery services exist within the supermarket chains and specialty stores: Super 99, Supermercado Rey, Super Xtra, Riba Smith, Machtetazo, El Fuerte, Jumbo market, Super Kosher, Felipe Motta, Organica Store, Foodie Market, Pretelt Gourmet Meats, among others.

There are approximately 11,000 independent grocery and convenience stores in Panama. There are also mini-convenience stores that are conventionally sized stores with expanded foodservice, as well as hyper-convenience stores with an extensive variety of product offerings and in-store seating for foodservice. Pharmacies have leveraged their small size, convenient locations, and proximity to consumers to offer more consumer-oriented products such as canned and dry food, snacks, dairy, ethnic specialties, wine, beer, and pet food.

Sabor USA plays an important role in the promotion of U.S. consumer-oriented products in Panama. With a complete digital platform, Sabor USA works with over 40 U.S. trade associations targeting the end consumer and a growing list of U.S. brands and Panamanian importers, distributors, and retailers. The platform develops creative content under #UnidosPorLosSabores (United by flavor), typically utilizing local talent from the culinary and food influencers fields to connect and promote U.S. brands.

The U.S. faces stiff competition from other food exporting countries. In addition to the U.S., Panama has free trade agreements with Canada, the European Union, Mexico, Colombia, Peru, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Chile, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Singapore, Israel, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland.

Best Product Prospects:

FAS Post Panama City reports that high growth categories for U.S. processed food products include snacks, processed meats, seafood, sauces, and condiments, processed fruits, vegetables, and dairy products. Competition is based primarily on price and convenience.

In recent years, the consumption of more convenience and healthy foods has been a trend that resulted in good prospects for U.S. food exports. These include categories like low fat, low sodium, gluten free, and sugar free, Keto, fresh fruits (such as apples, grapes, peaches, and pears), organic foods, processed fruits (especially canned fruits). Processed canned vegetables (especially canned mixed vegetables, yellow sweet corn, peas, mushrooms, and garbanzo beans), snack foods (including corn chips, popcorn, cookies, candy, and frozen processed products (pizzas and ready-to-eat food) also have high import demand.

Foodservice Sector Highlights:

FAS Post Panama City reports that the increased flow of tourists from January to July 2023 with a total of 1,531,641 visitors was an indicator of excellent market opportunities for U.S. exporters of food and beverages bound for Panama's hotel, restaurant, and institutional (HRI) sector. The increase of international visitors is from the following regions: 34.6% from North America, 21.4% Antilles 72.9% Oceania, 15.8% Africa, 20.9% Europe, 14.2% Central America, 46.6% Asia, 13.2% South America. Panama is rebuilding the sector through innovation, digitization, sustainability, and partnerships.

International foodservice operators and local companies such as Sysco, H.T. Tzanetatos, Proserv, Procesadora Monte Azul, Dicarina, and others have been serving the foodservice sector for more than 50 years, providing imports of U.S. food and beverages, logistics in warehousing/transportation, and product sales and marketing. With these institutions and facilities, fueling both local and international cuisines, Panama's foodservice industry is among the strongest in the country. In fact, fast food franchises, cafes, bars, bakeries, ice cream shops, family-owned restaurants, food trucks, street side vendors, convenience stores, and catering services all benefit from this strong trade framework.

Panama is receptive to U.S. style franchising and the market for specific and general franchising opportunities is attractive. Recreation, entertainment services, fast food, automotive, hotel and motel franchises are readily marketable as the local market demands better facilities and services. The U.S. Embassy recommends consulting a local attorney for details on how to set up a franchise in Panama. Some examples of common U.S. food and beverage franchises found in the market include Krispy Kreme, McDonald's, Starbucks, Olive Garden, Pinkberry, KFC, Burger King, Domino's Pizza, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Carl's Jr., Papa Johns, Applebee's, and IHOP.

Restaurants in Panama City are well-developed and feature highly ranked world-class chefs in international cuisine. Due to expanding tourism, growing immigration, and higher consumer purchasing power, the selection of restaurants and international cuisine is expected to continue to grow. Currently, the Panamanian Restaurant Association and related business (ARAP) have more than 400 active members.

The travel and tourism sector are an engine of economic development and a vehicle for sharing cultures. Many factors influence the flow of travelers visiting the country. Panama is an attractive destination, and its dollarized currency is strength. U.S. and international hotel chains' presence in Panama include the Waldorf, Hilton, Marriott and J.W. Marriott, Bristol, Country Inn, Sheraton, Radisson, Holiday Inn, Intercontinental, Riu, Westin, Wyndham Garden, Novotel, Hotel Las Americas Golden Tower, and Tryp Hotel. Panamanian hotels and resorts primarily procure food and beverages from foodservice companies and/or directly from distributors, supermarkets, and restaurants.

Panama's cruise ship market is expanding from both the U.S. and Europe as Panama continues to grow as a premier travel destination. Cruise ships to Panama City anchor either at Fuerte Amador and Balboa located at Panama Canal's Pacific Ocean entrance, or Port Colon 2000 in the Caribbean. From January through July 2023, total visitors by port of entrance through the cruise ports was 233,809 passengers.

Best Product Prospects:

FAS Post Panama City reports that high value products offer good market opportunities in Panama, especially ready-made or convenience food, wholesome and healthy products. A list of favorite imports from the HRI sector includes beer, wine and spirits, condiments and food ingredients, pre-cooked potatoes, snacks, frozen or ready-made food, seafood, cheese, vegetable oil, frozen vegetables, ready to eat single meals and rice, pasta, and noodles.

Food Processing Sector Highlights:

FAS Post Panama City report that it is primarily a service-based economy, but food processing is one of its top industries. With 150 food-processing companies which include dairy processors, meat, poultry, fishery, fruits, beverages and spirits, bakery, and snacks, among others. The dynamic culinary culture combines with strong tourism and processing industries mean significant business opportunities for U.S.-origin ingredient suppliers. Its geographical proximity and cultural ties to the United States continue to drive a strong preference for U.S.-origin products. The food processing industry

experienced 12% growth over the last few years due to increases in local food processing facilities, tourism, and foreigners relocating to Panama.

Large multinational companies have a competitive advantage over smaller domestic producers in certain product categories such as frozen foods, soups, specialty canned and preserved products, and well-known condiments and flavors that cater to the international pallet. Because of this, companies able to meet the demands of this competitive processed food sector must have the means to invest in technology and innovation to not only meet consumer demands but also maintain low, competitive prices. [OBJ]

Panama's main trading partner is the U.S. in the food processing industry. As an example, in the category of miscellaneous edible preparations, exports to Panama from the United States accounts for 35% of total imports of these products. Overall, 75% of these imports into Panama are from the U.S., Costa Rica, and Mexico.

Best Prospect Products:

FAS Post Panama City reports that the Panamanian market offers good export opportunities in the food processing sector for additives, preservatives, flavorings, vegetable colorings, sauces and condiments, grains (wheat, yellow corn, and rice), vegetable and soybean oils and sweeteners and beverage bases, soybean meal, food preparations, dairy products, and pork & pork products.