A FORZA EXECUTIVE WHITEPAPER

Protecting Produce Margins

The business case for integrated produce freight management

For produce buyers, distributors and retail supply chain leaders

Forza Logistics Group | October 2026



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Manage freight as a margin decision

Produce buyers purchase transportation to deliver usable inventory into a selling window. The freight invoice captures only part of that outcome. A missed receiving appointment, an unresolved product concern or an unapproved recovery charge can change the economics of an otherwise competitive quote.

Our recommendation is to manage produce freight as an integrated commercial decision. Procurement, quality, operations and finance should agree what successful delivery means, what evidence supports it and who can authorize a change. The broker's value lies in connecting those decisions across organizations while alternatives remain available.



Product characteristics and receiving needs should shape the transportation plan. Illustrative Forza imagery.

01

Define the outcome

Agree service scope and product requirements.

02

Connect decisions

Give exceptions a named decision owner.

03

Measure the result

Evaluate accepted product and total cost.

The executive implication

A lower quote remains valuable when the service assumptions are comparable. When they differ, the purchasing decision needs a broader view. This paper examines the market context, product exposure and economic measures that help buyers make that comparison. It concludes with a focused way to evaluate one lane before expanding the model.

Scope: U.S. produce truck transportation. Public evidence is cited by number; analysis and recommendations are Forza's. This is an executive whitepaper, not a commodity handling specification or a promise of particular shipment results.

01 / MARKET CONTEXT

A national average cannot price a lane

USDA reported a weighted average of $2.56 per mile for selected 501–1,500-mile routes in Q1 2026, up from $2.23 in Q4 2025. Its rounded quarterly increase was 15 percent. These historical results illustrate why buyers should test an aggregate trend against the conditions of the actual shipment. [1]

Produce truck rates for selected routes

501–1,500 miles | U.S. weighted average | dollars per mile



Figure 1. USDA AMS, Q1 2026, published May 2026, table 1. Selected corridors weighted by commodity and origin volume. Bars start at zero; source values are rounded.

The management response should be disciplined, rather than automatic. An aggregate increase is a reason to recheck a budget and its assumptions. It is not sufficient evidence to apply the same adjustment to every origin, appointment or equipment requirement. A shipper can face a difficult pickup even when broader capacity appears available.

Separate the benchmark from the buying decision

Use market intelligence to frame questions for a lane: has the shipping region changed, is volume firm, and does the receiving window permit realistic transit? Then obtain comparable quotes for the actual service. Record fuel treatment, stop requirements, accessorial terms and quote validity so a rate comparison reflects the same purchase.

Our interpretation

Market data is most useful when it prompts a better lane decision. Preserve its reporting period and methodology, then test the actual shipment constraints before committing capacity.

[1] Historical context, not an October 2026 quote or a lane-specific forecast.

02 / PRODUCT EXPOSURE

The product determines the service



A product inspection and an equipment reading answer different questions. Illustrative image; no specific inspection result is represented.

Fresh produce has different handling and temperature sensitivities by commodity. USDA's technical transport handbook addresses pre-cooling, airflow and compatibility as separate factors in protecting perishable loads. It supports a product-specific plan rather than a universal instruction for "produce." The handbook is foundational technical guidance, not a current equipment specification. [2]

A specification must survive the handoffs

The commercial issue is whether the instruction reaches every party that must act on it. A buyer may negotiate the product requirement, a shipper may release the load and a carrier may control the equipment. If their assumptions differ, the gap can remain hidden until arrival. Written requirements give the team a basis for resolving the difference before departure.

For covered transportation, FDA's sanitary transportation rule addresses equipment suitability, sanitary operations and role-specific responsibilities, subject to its scope and exceptions. Written agreements can affect how certain responsibilities are allocated. Buyers should ensure their operating arrangements identify the applicable duties rather than assume a single party owns every requirement. [3]

Make the evidence interpretable

An equipment setpoint, an air-temperature record and a product sample describe different observations. Agree what is measured, how and when it is measured, and who evaluates an exception. A tracking location alone does not establish product condition.

[2] USDA AMS, Agriculture Handbook 669, reprinted July 2008. [3] FDA, FSMA Final Rule on Sanitary Transportation of Human and Animal Food, reviewed October 30, 2026. Use current approved product instructions for each load.

03 / GOVERNANCE

Make accountability travel with the load

A shipment crosses several organizational boundaries before a receiver accepts it. The risk at those boundaries is often a missing decision: who confirms a substituted driver, who approves a changed destination, or who can authorize a recovery cost? Technology can surface a concern, but it cannot resolve an unclear assignment of authority.



Identity, custody and condition are separate controls. A seal supports a custody record; it does not prove the complete history or condition of a load.

Connect identity with execution

Carrier review at onboarding should connect to the actual assignment. A changed dispatch contact or equipment detail needs a defined verification path before release. The same principle applies to receiving instructions: a last-minute destination change should be confirmed through an established contact, rather than accepted solely because it arrived in an email chain.

Decision	Accountability to establish
Release	Who confirms the approved assignment and resolves a mismatch.
Exception	Who evaluates the concern and authorizes the next action.
Closeout	Who reconciles delivery evidence, charges and unresolved questions.

Preserve a usable record

USDA PACA guidance highlights the importance of sale terms, transit conditions and inspection evidence when evaluating produce transactions. Those transaction questions should be distinguished from a separate determination of carrier responsibility. A rejection by itself does not explain where a problem began. [4]

Forza’s recommendation is to keep origin observations, transit events, receiving findings and approvals together. A coherent record helps the parties evaluate the facts and prevents the next shift from having to reconstruct the decision. The account’s service scope should specify which verification, tracking and escalation activities Forza will provide.

[4] USDA AMS PACA, Top 10 Contracting Issues, reviewed October 30, 2026. Applicable sale terms and transportation agreements must be evaluated on their own facts.

04 / COMMERCIAL ECONOMICS

Measure the cost of the accepted product

Cost per load is easy to compare and incomplete when the delivered outcomes differ. Cost per accepted case adds an important denominator: the quantity accepted under the transaction's criteria. It does not replace product margin, quality or service measures, but it can reveal a freight decision that looks inexpensive only at tender.

A practical comparison

Cost per accepted case = agreed freight and attributable transportation charges ÷ accepted cases. Define the accounting scope consistently. Evaluate product losses and recoveries separately so they are neither omitted nor counted twice.

Illustrative outcomes for two service options

Measure	Option A	Option B
Quoted freight including fuel	$3,000	$3,250
Additional transportation charges	$500	$150
Total transportation cost	$3,500	$3,400
Cases accepted	1,750	2,000
Transportation cost per accepted case	$2.00	$1.70

Figure 2. Entirely hypothetical management illustration, not a Forza customer result, forecast or evidence that higher rates cause better outcomes. Acceptance criteria and charge scope are assumed comparable. Product value, resale, claims recoveries and lost sales are excluded.

$250

Higher initial quote

Option B's quoted premium.

$100

Lower total cost

After the assumed additional charges.

15%

Lower unit cost

Calculated from $2.00 to $1.70.

Use the result to investigate the cause

The example shows why the initial quote cannot answer the entire question. It does not show which party caused a shortage or whether the cost difference will recur. Compare repeated shipments on similar lanes and investigate exceptions before attributing a result to the broker, carrier or procurement strategy.

Calculation: ($2.00 − $1.70) ÷ $2.00 = 15%. Use the same period, lane scope and acceptance definition when comparing actual results. Forza analysis; no external benchmark is implied.

05 / STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Test the model on one meaningful lane

An integrated freight program does not require a network-wide redesign on day one. Start with a recurring lane where there is a material decision to improve: uncertain readiness, repeated receiving friction or charges that cannot be explained promptly. A stable lane provides a clearer test than a collection of unrelated emergency shipments.

Agree the outcome before selecting the service

Procurement should define the purchased scope with operations and quality, then involve finance in how the result will be measured. A tight appointment or an unusually sensitive product may justify different capacity and evidence requirements. A predictable, flexible shipment may support a simpler arrangement. The objective is an appropriate service choice, not the most expensive control package.

→ **Compare equivalent proposals** Ask each provider to explain what is included, which assumptions affect the quote and how changes will be approved.

→ **Define authority at the boundaries** Agree who can release a load, alter instructions, approve added cost and determine product disposition.

→ **Evaluate a balanced result** Review appointment performance, exceptions, accepted quantities, total charges and time to reconcile the file together.

Decide what the pilot can actually prove

Set a baseline and a review period long enough to observe more than one outcome. Keep commodity, origin, distance and service requirements visible. A small sample can expose a process problem; it cannot establish a reliable claims rate or prove savings across a network. Record material changes so improvements are not credited to the program when they came from an easier product mix or a different shipping season.

The expansion decision

Expand when the lane shows an executable service plan, usable evidence and consistent ownership of exceptions. If results remain unclear, refine the process or extend the observation period before making a broad savings claim.

These recommendations are Forza's proposed management approach. Pilot duration, service scope and evaluation thresholds should reflect the customer's volume, product exposure and commercial priorities.

CONCLUSION AND REFERENCES

A more complete purchasing decision

Produce freight is a sequence of commercial and physical decisions whose consequences become visible at receiving. Rate discipline matters. So do the assumptions behind the quote, the condition of the product at release and the authority to act when the plan changes. Managing those elements together gives buyers a more complete basis for choosing service and explaining the result.

Forza's position is straightforward: start with one lane, define the outcome and make accountability visible. Use market intelligence as context, product requirements as operating constraints and accepted-product economics as part of the commercial review. That is the foundation for a freight program that can be evaluated and improved.

Sources and research scope

[1] USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. Agricultural Refrigerated Truck Quarterly, Quarter 1 2026, published May 2026. Table 1 and its methodology notes. Historical selected-route rates; not a live quote.

[2] USDA Agricultural Marketing Service. Protecting Perishable Foods During Transport by Truck, Agriculture Handbook 669, 1995, reprinted July 2008. Technical background on preparation, refrigeration, loading and compatibility.

[3] U.S. Food and Drug Administration. FSMA Final Rule on Sanitary Transportation of Human and Animal Food. Public rule overview and scope, reviewed October 30, 2026.

[4] USDA Agricultural Marketing Service, PACA. Top 10 Contracting Issues. Sale terms, transit conditions and inspection considerations, reviewed October 30, 2026.

Research reviewed October 30, 2026. Public sources inform the analysis; they do not validate a Forza performance claim. Figures distinguish reported data from hypothetical examples. This paper contains original Forza analysis and does not reproduce the supplied playbook. Photography is illustrative and includes AI-generated imagery.

Build one Lane with Forza

Bring the origin, destination, product requirements and the recurring issue. We can discuss the service scope, decision owners and measures appropriate to that lane.

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