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Cuba trade pushed in D.C.

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U.S. Rep. Rick Crawford's legislation easing trade restrictions with Cuba could pass the House of Representatives if lawmakers were allowed to vote on it, a fellow congressman said Thursday.

U.S. Rep. Tom Emmer, R-Minn., who wants to end the Cuban embargo, has lined up 14 Republican co-sponsors for his legislation. But Crawford's bill, which focuses on agricultural trade, has 42 Republican co-sponsors, Emmer noted.

Known as the Cuba Agricultural Exports Act, H.R. 525 would allow farmers to extend credit to customers in Cuba. It would also enable Americans to invest in nongovernmental agricultural enterprises there.

"We've got great bipartisan support. There's a majority of the people that actually favor changing this policy. Unfortunately, a very small group within Congress still has the loudest voice. We're trying to change that," Emmer said.

"I think Rick's [legislation] is actually possible today. ... I think now is the time," Emmer said. "The question is whether our leadership will have the political will, in light of all the other things that are going on, to help us move it forward."

Emmer made his comments Thursday at a Cuba trade roundtable titled "Fostering Bilateral Agricultural and Economic Capabilities."

He was joined by Crawford, a Republican from Jonesboro. U.S. Sen. John Boozman, R-Ark., and U.S. Rep. Roger Marshall, R-Kan., were also panelists.

The event was held at the law firm of McDermott, Will & Emery. Engage Cuba, a coalition of businesses and groups that wants the embargo lifted, also participated.

After the end of the Cuban revolution and the rise to power of Fidel Castro in 1959, relations between the U.S. and its southern neighbor quickly soured.

The United States placed a number of economic sanctions on Cuba, the toughest coming in 1962. Many of the restrictions remain in place today, more than 18 months after Castro's death. The revolutionary's political successor, Raul Castro, stepped down as president in April after a decade in office.

Since his election to Congress in 2010, Crawford has worked to remove barriers that hamper Arkansas' rice and poultry producers.

Arkansas' 1st Congressional District, which Crawford represents, grows more rice than any other district in the country.

"What I've encouraged people to do is call your representative, call your congressman and congresswoman, your senator and let them know how you feel about this," he said.

Crawford has faced strong opposition from some members of Florida's congressional delegation; more than 1.3 million people of Cuban descent live in the Sunshine State, according to a 2013 study by the Pew Research Center.

If there's a groundswell of support for easing trade restrictions, Crawford predicted lawmakers will listen to the voters.

"I just think the other 49 states ought to have a voice in this as well," he said.

Boozman, who is co-sponsoring the Senate version of the bill, said trade would be good for Arkansas' economy.

"We're talking about many, many millions of dollars in increased sales. It's a no-brainer in that regard," the lawmaker from Rogers said.

Individuals and businesses who extend credit to Cuba would bear the risk, he said.

"The legislation we're proposing doesn't obligate the United States government at

all. Taxpayers aren't on the hook," he said.

Emmer faulted the White House, in part, for the lack of movement.

"I think the administration so far has been on the wrong side of history on this issue," he said.

Marshall said lawmakers should try to round up more co-sponsors, and argued that eliminating trade barriers benefits everybody.

"It's a win for the president. It's a win for agriculture. It's a win for the United States. It's a win for Cuba," he added.

Jose Ramon Cabanas, Cuba's ambassador to the United States, was on hand for Thursday's event.

Afterward, he said his country would welcome increased trade with Arkansas.

"We eat a lot of rice and poultry. Those are probably among the most important commodities that we import," he said.

Cabanas said he has a good relationship with Boozman and Crawford.

"They're always accessible and the door is open any time we go to their offices," he said.

Both lawmakers have been to Cuba. It's a trip, Cabanas said, he hopes other Arkansans will consider.

"Most people traveling to Cuba these days will tell you they have a good time," he said.

The U.S. and Cuba, Cabanas said, would benefit from better relations.

"We have many, many differences and we will have them for many years and probably forever," he said. "At the same time we have been able, in the last two or three years, to find common ground on many subjects. And that's where we should be focusing."

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