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Improving trade relations with Cuba

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“For 60 years we have been embargoing Cuba and it has not served the people of Cuba or U.S. farmers well,” said Paul Johnson, executive director of the Illinois Cuba Working Group. “We think it is important to allow trade to Cuba.”

Johnson spoke on Aug. 28 at the Farm Progress Show in Decatur, Ill. Also speaking in favor of improving trade relations with Cuba was Mark Albertson, interim CEO of the Illinois Soybean Growers, and Rodney Gonzales, commercial attaché for the Cuban Embassy.

Cuba represents a \$2 billion market, according to Johnson. “The U.S. is only receiving 10% of that,” he said.

Albertson said, “Every market matters -- at a time when we are struggling to build markets for our crops, opening Cuban markets to U.S. soybean growers would help.”

Albertson noted that Cuba imports 80% of their food.

“They are only 90 miles away and we should be able to sell more products to Cuba,” Albertson added.

Gonzales believes Cuba could be a valuable market for the U.S.

While the U.S. can sell agricultural products to Cuba, Cubans must pay cash upfront.

"If Congress would pass a bill to improve trade with Cuba, U.S. companies could use U.S. banks and establish credit terms like they do for other countries," Albertson explained. "This year, a lot of our soybeans are sitting in bins. This would be the year to be selling product to Cuba. What's the difference if we sold product to Cuba and gave them 30-, 60-, or 90-days to pay, we're not getting anything for our soybeans sitting in the bins."

Johnson said the bill before the Senate is SB-1447, the Ag Export Expansion Act of 2019. The same bill before the House is HR-1898, the Cuba Ag Exports Act.

"I think if we asked Congress if they wanted to end this embargo, the majority would say 'yes.' So, call your congresspeople and ask them to support the bill."

Johnson said three U.S. representatives from Illinois already support the bill. They are Rep. Cheri Bustos, Rep. Rodney Davis and Rep. Darin LaHood.

Albertson said another advantage of buying products from Cuba is the ships that transport soybeans there now come back empty.

"The embargo prevents us from getting any two-way trade with Cuba, which adds to the cost of transporting soybeans there," he said. "It would be nice if we could bring back shrimp, fruit or rice from Cuba."

Gonzales said the quality of goods shipped from Cuba to the U.S. is higher than those from other countries.

"Because we are so close, our rice, for example, arrives much quicker than rice from other countries."

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