
Shirkey and other Michigan lawmakers fly to Cuba, a potentially lucrative market for Michigan

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Senate Majority Leader Mike Shirkey and several other members of the Legislature flew to Cuba Monday and will not be in Lansing Thursday for the presentation of Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's second state budget, officials said.

Shirkey, R-Clarklake, joined Michigan Agriculture Department Director Gary McDowell and several other state lawmakers on a trade mission organized by the Michigan-Agri-Business Association. The delegation returns Saturday.

Cuba, which imports more than \$2 billion worth of agriculture annually, is considered a potentially lucrative market for Michigan growers.

But Michigan farmers currently do not export to Cuba because of ongoing trade restrictions first imposed in 1962, after Cuba forged strong ties with the former Soviet Union.

"We want to continue to build relations so that when things change at the federal level, we'll be able to capitalize on them," said Jamie Zmitko-Somers, who leads the international marketing team for the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development.

It's legal for Michigan farmers to sell their product to Cuba, but only if payments go through a third party, such as a bank in a European Union country, Zmitko-Somers said. It's an extra hoop farmers have to jump through, and although some farm corporations have used third-party payments in the past, none are currently doing so, she said.

Cuba is seen as a good potential market for beans apples, pork, and dairy products, among others, she said.

Also on the trip are Rep. Julie Alexander, R-Hanover, who chairs the House Agriculture Committee; Sen. Roger Victory, R-Georgetown Township; Sen. Dan Lauwers, R-Brockway; Sen. Tom Barrett, R-Charlotte; Rep. Brian Elder, D-Bay City, and Rep. Scott VanSingel, R-Grant.

While in Cuba, the delegation is expected to meet with several government ministries, including those responsible for agriculture and trade. Meetings are also planned with cooperatives and individual farmers.

It's not the first time state agriculture directors and lawmakers have made trade missions to Cuba, Zmitko-Somers said. Mitch Irwin, who headed the department under former Gov. Jennifer Granholm, made a similar trip, she said.
