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**Illinois Cuba Working Group Meets with Cuban Officials to Advance Trade Relations**

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WILMETTE, ILL – Nov. 10, 2014 -- The Illinois Cuba Working Group (ICWG) visited the Havana International Fair (FIHAV) last week in an effort to grow the trade relationship between the U.S. and Cuba.

"Cuba relies solely on foreign suppliers for soybeans, so the U.S., and specifically Illinois – the country's No. 1 soybean-producing state – has a big opportunity to gain business that will boost our economy," says John Longley, soybean farmer from Aledo, Ill., and Illinois Soybean Growers (ISG) director. "The U.S. was once the dominant supplier of all Cuba's soy products until Brazil moved in during 2011 and 2012, and Argentina in 2013. We want to get that business back."

On Oct. 28, 2014, 188 United Nations member states supported the resolution to end the commercial, economic and financial embargo against Cuba. Only the U.S. and Israel supported the continued sanctions against Cuba, as they have for the past 23 years.

"We need decision makers to start thinking more progressively and consider expanding trade relations to a country that is so close to home," says Oscar Abraldes, general manager for Cargill. Abraldes joined ICWG for this visit, along with other ICWG delegates from Illinois Department of Agriculture, Koch Foods, Illinois Soybean Growers and Chicago Foods.

The ICWG delegation met with Cuban commodity buyer Alimport, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of External Relations, the Cuba Chamber of Commerce and representatives of the Mariel Special Development Zone. The goal is increasing trade relations and conducting business that would increase exports of agricultural products and food from Illinois to Cuba.

ICWG strives to form strategic relationships in order to amend the Trade Sanction and Reform Act in a way that would:

- Establish an agricultural trade office in Cuba as a show of commitment and to facilitate/assist with communication and market entry.
- Allow U.S. export promotion and assistance to U.S. ag commodities going to Cuba.
- Permit U.S. food companies the ability to negotiate trade terms with Cuba.

The Illinois Cuba Working Group was formed at the request of the Illinois General Assembly. The organization grew out of an initiative that began in 1999 when Illinois was the first state to travel to Cuba during the embargo. Through the collaboration of Illinois political, business and community support, Congress passed the Trade Sanctions and Reform Act in 2001. That act permitted the sale of agricultural products, and represented the first major effort to remove the embargo and barriers to normalized trade relations with Cuba.

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