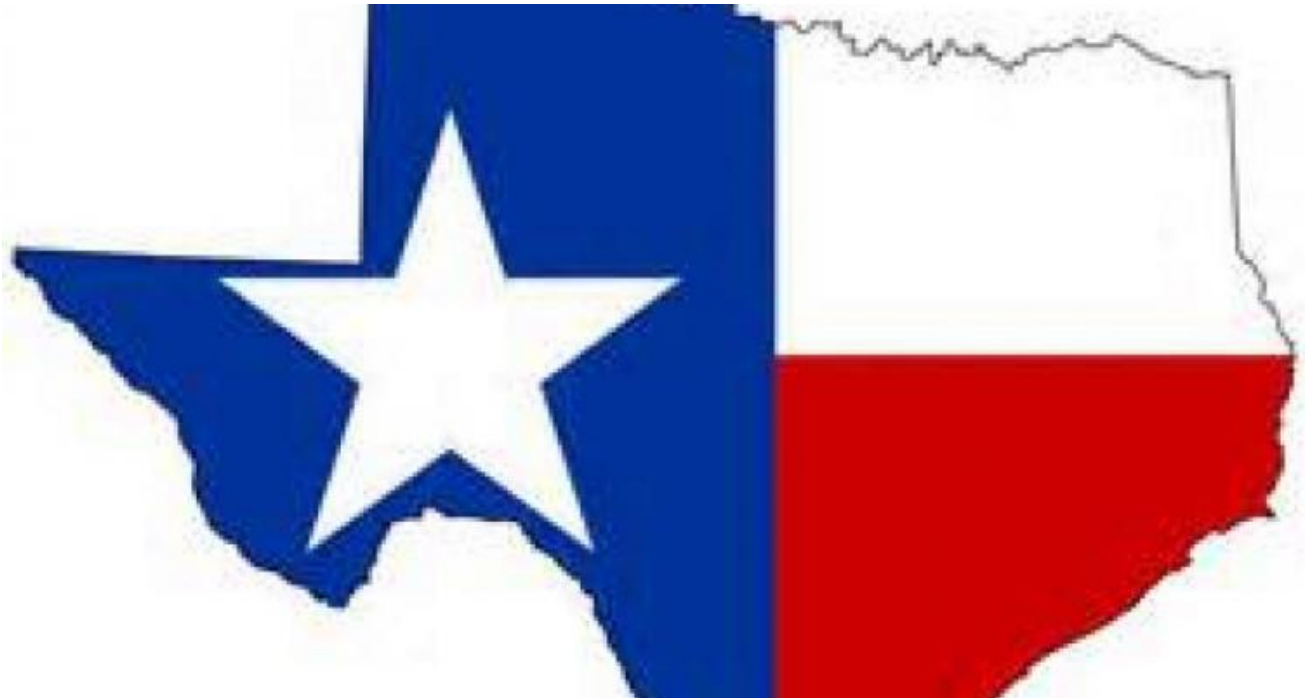

Texas Businesses Stand Ready For Trade With Cuba

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Two years ago, the WestStar Food Company's business with Cuba was good. Patrick Wallesen, the company's president, says West Star exported agricultural products through the port of Corpus Christi for over a decade.

"We averaged about 5000 metric tons a year of product. Primarily into beans, black beans, great northern beans," Wallesen says.

So, how could an American food company export products to Cuba while a trade embargo was in place? Through a complex series of maneuvers, Cuban importers would pay U.S. exporters through third-party country's banks. But two years ago that business just dried up.

"But they were paying through a third party, which they didn't like," Wallesen says. "And part of it is because they didn't like the terms to them— they just quit buying most U.S. products."

With relations thawing, the U.S. embargo on Cuba may become a thing of the past sooner rather than later. Wallesen and other business owners are getting ready for the resetting of trade relations.

Cynthia Thomas is the president of the Texas-Cuba Trade Alliance. It's a group that goes around the state educating businesses on trading with Cuba. Thomas says Texas is poised to thrive when the embargo is lifted for a list of reasons that include the export hubs of Houston and Corpus Christi, and the state's familiarity with Spanish. But she says there's another big

reason.

“Cuba has a certain warmth to Texas, in part because they get a lot of western movies that take place in Texas, that they see still on their TV’s,” Thomas says. “Texas has this sense of independence and pride in being Texan. It’s something that Cuba feels about their own country also, and they can relate to that.”

Both Wallesen and Thomas have been keeping the lines of communication open with their Cuban trading partners. Both are planning a trip to Cuba this month.
