
Tenn. Council Joins Effort to End US-Cuba Trade Embargo

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Tennessee business and community leaders assembled Monday to support a bipartisan public policy group in its effort to end the U.S. trade embargo with Cuba.

Engage Cuba held a round table discussion with the leaders and announced the formation of a 15-member Tennessee State Council, representing an array of sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, business and the arts.

Engage Cuba president James Williams said the group plans to form similar councils in Georgia, Iowa, Louisiana, Ohio and Texas, all of which he considers "natural markets to export to Cuba."

"The idea of what we're trying to do here is to show that this is a relative issue and not just for Washington, but for people all across the country," Williams told The Associated Press before the meeting.

President Barack Obama has said his administration is considering a new set of regulations further loosening the embargo, which is imposed by U.S. law. Cuban officials told reporters last month they expected deals on regularly scheduled flights, anti-drug cooperation and environmental protection by around the end of the year.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack became the third U.S. Cabinet secretary to visit Cuba this year, holding a series of meetings last month with Cuban officials on issues such as fruit

and vegetable export certification and field inspections aimed at laying the groundwork for future agricultural trade between the U.S. and Cuba.

Catherine Glover, president of the Tennessee Chamber of Commerce and Industry and a member of the Tennessee State Council, said Monday that an end to the embargo would be an opportunity for the state to grow customer base and market share.

She noted that every year, Tennessee typically exports \$32.9 billion of merchandise and its export industry supports nearly 159,000 Tennessean jobs.

"If given the opportunity to expand relations with Cuba, we can only expect this number to increase," Glover said. "We're just leaving money on the table if we're not at the table right now and trying to encourage lifting that trade embargo."

Bill Lane, senior director of global government and corporate affairs at Caterpillar, Inc., was among the business leaders who attended the round table.

He listed a number of ways the company could help Cuba, such as providing it with equipment for mining, and assisting the country with improving its infrastructure, which he says is the foundation for economic growth.

"Caterpillar wants to do business in Cuba," Lane said. "Everything that Caterpillar makes is needed in Cuba, and we would like the opportunity to do that."
