

# Idaho governor plans Cuba trip

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BOISE, Idaho --

(AP) -- Like other states before it, Idaho is turning to Cuba in search of new markets for its products.

With Cuba's communist dictator Fidel Castro ailing, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter is among those optimistic that political change will help turn the island's 11 million residents into big consumers. In March, Nebraska Gov. Dave Heineman was the latest U.S. official to visit Cuba, which bought \$340 million (euro254.2 million) in U.S. farm products in 2006.

Otter and his 35-member entourage are scheduled to travel to Cuba on Tuesday for a four-day trade mission,

"He's going down there to sell groceries," said Jon Hanian, Otter's spokesman. "It's an opportunity to make some sales."

In a speech last month, Otter told reporters he had a "respectful" relationship with Castro. The United States has a trade embargo with Cuba that exempts food, and does not allow residents to visit the island nation. It accuses Cuba of jailing political dissidents.

"The thing that irritates me the most about the State Department's policy toward Cuba is that it is not a policy toward Cuba," Otter said at an Idaho Press Club-sponsored event. "You're a free American, you should be able to travel anywhere you want, whenever you want."

This will not be Otter's first visit there: he has already been to Cuba three times as a Republican U.S. House member on lobbyist-funded trips.

In 2004, on a mission to Cuba with Republican U.S. Sen. Larry Craig, of Idaho, Craig and Otter signed a potential \$10 million (euro7.5 million) nonbinding deal with Cuba for Idaho agricultural products. Still, the Idaho Department of Commerce and Labor has on record just \$22,616 (euro16,912) in sales to Cuba in the last decade -- a shipment of frozen potatoes.

Otter maintains Cuba is trying to expand its oil and natural gas, and is experimenting with turning some of its sugar into ethanol. When the natural resources take off, Otter says, so will demand.