

Cuba lifts ban on U.S. long-grain rice

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HAVANA --

Cuba has lifted a ban on imports of U.S. long-grain rice that it put in place last year because of fears about genetic contamination.

Raul Sanchez, director of the U.S. division of the island's food import company Alimport, said Friday the ban was lifted earlier this month and that in recent weeks Cuba has imported 30,000 tons of long-grain U.S. rice and expects to import 10,000 more soon.

A U.S. announcement in August that American long-grain rice samples had tested positive for trace amounts of a genetically modified strain not approved for consumption prompted Japan to suspend its U.S. rice imports. Cuba imposed a ban of its own after conducting independent testing, Sanchez said.

Sanchez, who spoke during a meeting with U.S. medical company representatives, did not provide details about the exact date and why Cuba had lifted the ban, suggesting only that U.S. long-grain rice no longer appeared to be a problem.

Washington's 45-year-old embargo against communist Cuba chokes off most trade between the two countries but U.S. companies can sell medicine and medical supplies directly to the country under the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act. A law approved in 2000 authorized cash-only payments for U.S. food and agricultural products.

Sanchez said that so far this year Cuba has spent \$196.8 million on American food and agricultural products after spending \$578.8 million in all of 2006. Cuba includes shipping and other logistical costs when divulging the total amount paid for U.S. goods.

Addressing representatives from Mercury Medical, a Florida medical supply company visiting Cuba to display equipment, Sanchez said that since 2001, Cuba has spent \$2.2 billion on American food and farm products, but nearly \$340 million of that went to shipping alone.

The New York-based U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council, attempting to estimate the amount Cuba spent on U.S. imports without taking into account logistical costs, reported the island bought about \$340 million in American food and agricultural products last year.