

# North Dakota pushes potatoes in Cuba

The Miami Herald  
May. 22, 2007

HAVANA --

North Dakota wants to ship potatoes to Cuba, and was looking Tuesday for ways to get them to this Caribbean island without spoiling.

Representatives from two potato producing companies and state experts on plant diseases and potatoes were meeting with top representatives from Alimport, Cuba's food import company.

"If we can begin sales of North Dakota potatoes and do it in a way that gets them down here in good shape, that would be a very successful trade mission because we've been talking about it for five years and so far it hasn't happened," said Roger Johnson, agriculture commissioner for the state.

Washington's 45-year-old embargo forbids American tourists from visiting Cuba, and chokes off most trade between the two countries. But direct sale of U.S. food and agricultural products began in late 2001 and continues despite some bureaucratic hurdles.

So far, Cuba has spent more than \$2.2 billion on American food and agricultural imports, including shipping and hefty bank fees to send payments through third nations. North Dakota has sold about \$30 million worth of products to the communist country, mostly peas, as well as garbanzo and lentil beans.

Since 2004, tighter U.S. restrictions have required the island to pay for goods in full before they leave American ports.

Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter traveled to Havana last month to discuss shipping his state's potatoes to Cuba. That trade mission resulted only in a single agreement for an Idaho company to send \$100,000 worth of boneless pork legs here, and Idaho officials said any agreements to ship spuds or seed potatoes hinge on a future visit to the state by Cuban trade officials.

Cuba traditionally produces sweet potatoes, but the island's warm climate makes such crops especially susceptible to blights and pests. Those same diseases can affect potatoes arriving from the U.S., and American trade restrictions sometimes create shipping delays that can make highly perishable potatoes go bad en route.

"The uncertainty shipping, given the ports and all the (U.S. government) rules, that's an enormous concern," said Johnson, who was on his sixth trip to Cuba.

A longtime critic of U.S. trade sanctions, Johnson said North Dakota officials want to build long-term business relationships in Cuba.

"In my judgment, it won't be long before the embargo's going to be lifted," he said. "I don't know anyone who really in their heart or in their mind can make a case for continuing it."