

U.S. lawmakers in Cuba for look at trade opportunities

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HAVANA --

Five U.S. lawmakers made an unannounced visit to Havana on Monday to explore agricultural trade opportunities at a gathering officials hope will lead to contracts to sell up to \$150 million in American goods to Cuba.

The U.S. delegation, headed by Connecticut Democrat Rosa De Lauro, plans to meet with at least one top Cuban official before returning to the United States, said Sarah Stephens, director of the Washington-based Center for Democracy in the Americas, which opposes the U.S. embargo toward Cuba and helped organize the trip.

"We are a diverse group geographically and in our politics toward Cuba," DeLauro said. "But we view this as an opportunity to learn, to create dialogue about issues of mutual concern."

Also in Cuba were Democratic Reps. Marion Berry of Arkansas and Bob Etheridge of North Carolina, as well as Republican lawmakers Rodney Alexander of Louisiana and Jack Kingston of Georgia. All were making their first trips to the island, except Berry, who was here in 2000.

DeLauro, Berry and Etheridge have all supported legislation to ease U.S. trade restrictions toward Cuba in the past, while Kingston has supported the embargo.

The lawmakers said agriculture trade opportunities were a key reason they came, and their visit coincided with a trade fair on the communist-run island bringing together 114 food and agricultural companies from 22 U.S. states.

"This is really not a trade fair, this is a formal meeting to sign agreements with different companies that have been in progress for months," said John Kay, director of international trade for Alabama's Department of Agriculture. "It's an organized madhouse. You only have a certain time frame to get everything done."

Pedro Alvarez, chairman of Cuba's food import company Alimport, said talks should produce more than \$150 million in deals, enough to ensure the island buys as much U.S. goods in 2007 as it did last year, when Cuba spent \$570 million for American food and agricultural products, including shipping and banking costs.

Kirby Jones, founder of the U.S.-Cuba Trade Association in Washington, which has also pushed for an end to the embargo, said "it's important for the visiting members of Congress to hear about what's going on from those who are here doing it."

"There are very particular problems associated with doing business in Cuba because of U.S. policy," he said. "They need to know the kinds of challenges faced."

Alimport knows that bringing in companies from all over the United States helps Cuba drive a harder bargain.

Washington maintains a 45-year-old embargo, but U.S. food and agricultural products can be sold directly to Cuba under a law passed by the U.S. Congress in 2000. Since Havana first took advantage in 2001, it says it has spent more than \$2.2 billion on American farm products and logistical costs.

Cuba says that so far this year, it has spent \$225 million to purchase and import American goods. Subtracting shipping and other costs, the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council in New York puts the figure at more than \$64.7 million through April.

The fair, which ends Wednesday, represented the largest gathering of U.S. farm producers on the island since Fidel Castro fell ill and stepped down in favor of a temporary government headed by his brother Raúl last summer.

But Jones said American businesses have barely noticed Castro's absence.

"Nobody talks about it because in terms of business, it's been seamless," he said. "It's not even a blip that has affected things."