

Cuba eager to buy more U.S. agricultural goods

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¿Hay leche?

More Cuban children will have milk as a result of U.S. trade reforms allowing agricultural exports to the island nation.

Last year, Cuba purchased nearly \$250 million worth of American agricultural goods because of the relaxation on the four-decade embargo on trade with Cuba, said Parr Rosson, international trade economist with Texas A&M University's Center for North American Studies.

But Cuba would buy more goods if the U.S. government would further ease restrictions on trade, Cuban officials, farmers and shippers said. On Wednesday, the Texas-Cuba Trade Alliance sponsored a conference on how to do business with Cuba, where all purchases are made through the Cuban government.

Last December, the Cuban government agreed to purchase \$12 million worth of powdered milk from an unnamed East Texas company, said Cynthia Thomas, president of the trade alliance.

Buying milk from Texas instead of its former source, New Zealand, makes the dairy product cheaper for Cuba, helping the Latin American country afford milk for more children. The Cuban government currently restricts milk consumption to children 6 years old and younger, Thomas said. But with more affordable milk, the age limit for consumption should increase to age 14, she predicted.

Since February 2003, representatives from the trade alliance have tried to match Cuba's demand for agricultural goods with Texas products such as rice, onions and milk.

The alliance has held several conferences across the state, and the next event will be in Corpus Christi, where attendees can see pinto beans bound for Cuba loaded aboard a barge.

Even though the United States can export agricultural goods to Cuba, many obstacles remain,

Cuban diplomat Dagoberto Rodriguez said during a conference call. Such obstacles include requiring that Cuba pay cash in advance for all of its purchases from the United States. And the United States has denied visas to some Cuban officials who planned to inspect U.S. chicken and cattle before approving importation of the products.

But instead of easing restrictions, the Bush administration earlier this month restricted travel and cash transfers to the island by Cuban exiles. Tourism and remittances are Cuba's top sources of income.

The toughened measures are viewed by some critics as a way of winning votes by Cuban-Americans, many of whom want to put more economic pressure on the island's communist dictator, Fidel Castro.

Observers believe that there may not be any loosening in the trade restrictions until after the November election, if at all.

"Until the political winds change, things are going to be pretty tight in expanding trade with Cuba," said Glen Jones, a Texas Farm Bureau director.