

Texas takes lead in attempt to end trade ban with Cuba Farmers, business leaders to lobby Senate on easing embargo

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By TRACEY EATON / *The Dallas Morning News*

SAN ANTONIO DE LOS BAOS, Cuba - Judy Jackson is into carrots. Crunchy maroon-colored carrots developed at Texas A&M. And she wants to sell them to Fidel Castro. "Why not?" she said while touring a farm south of Havana. "They're delicious."

Ms. Jackson, marketing director for J&D Produce in Sugar Land, joins a growing number of Texas residents and business people who oppose the U.S. ban on trade with Cuba. Over the last two years, Texas has quietly taken a lead role in trying to dismantle the trade embargo. Texas state lawmakers were the first to ask President Bush to lift the ban, in May 2001. State leaders in business and agriculture lined up behind the cause, which has spread to Illinois, California and other states.

This week they'll find out just how strong the anti-embargo movement has become when farmers, business leaders and Cuban-American activists from Texas and at least a half-dozen other states converge on Washington to demand that the Senate loosen the trade ban.

"The leadership of a state like Texas has been fundamental in changing the nature and tone of the debate," said Sally Grooms Cowal, a former U.S. diplomat who heads the private Cuba Policy Foundation in Washington, D.C.

"In the past, the debate was between the ideological left and the right. Now people are asking, 'How is our state affected by the embargo?' And the answer in states like Texas is, 'We are hurt by the embargo.'"

The trade ban costs Texans as much as \$ 54 million in agricultural exports every year, according to a January study paid for by the foundation. In all, American farmers lose up to \$ 1.2 billion, the study found.

Meanwhile, Mr. Castro remains firmly in power, said Cynthia Thomas, a Dallas public policy consultant who was instrumental in persuading Texas lawmakers to join the anti-embargo crusade.

"This is the most outrageous example of a failed

policy that has continued and continued with no proven record of results," she said.

Bush administration officials and other Castro foes say lifting the trade ban would only preserve the socialist government, depriving Cubans of freedom and opportunity.

"The record over the past 40 years is clear. Castro reforms when he must, represses when he can. A unilateral lifting of our embargo would give him an undeserved respite," former U.S. diplomat Dennis Hays told a Senate subcommittee in May.

The Case for Sanctions

Mr. Hays is executive vice president of the anti-Castro Cuban American National Foundation, an influential lobbying group.

"Before our sanctions are lifted, prisoners of conscience must be freed, free speech, a free press and the right of association must be restored, and Cuba must commit to a path that leads to free and fair multiple party elections," he said.

Increasing numbers of American business and farm leaders disagree and have been traveling to Cuba to explore the possibilities.

Ms. Thomas, president of TriDimension Strategies in Dallas, recently led a five-member Texas delegation to Cuba. The travelers included Dwight Roberts, president of the U.S. Rice Producers Association in Houston.

He said Texas rice growers are eager to do business with Cubans, who eat more rice per capita - about 120 pounds annually - than people in any other country in Latin America.

"For Texas rice producers, Cuba is the brightest star on the horizon," he said. "Before the embargo was in place, Cuba was our most important market."

After the trade ban, Asian, Mexican and other competitors moved in.

"We want to reopen a market that used to be ours," said Loy Sneary, a Bay City farmer who was part of the delegation. "Cuba could be a first-class trading partner. These are people of integrity."

However, Mr. Hays said, some foreign companies have had trouble collecting debts from the island's state-run companies.

Mr. Sneary said he's not worried.

"There is always risk," he said. "As business people, we shoulder that risk entirely."

U.S. law allows Americans to export food and medicine to Cuba. But no private financing is allowed. Cubans have to pay cash up front.

"It is too restrictive," Mr. Sneary said. "Without the financing restrictions being lifted, it's very difficult to do business."

The Texas Legislature in May 2001 passed a resolution calling for the removal of all financial, trade and travel restrictions.

"Agriculture is the second-largest industry in Texas. ... Texas is ideally positioned to benefit from free trade with Cuba," the resolution said.

Members of the Texas delegation toured a farm cooperative outside the town of San Antonio de los Baos, 19 miles south of Havana.

They drank orange and mango juice produced at the Ctricos Ceiba cooperative. They sampled tropical fruits.

"I wish a lot more Americans could come down and see Cuba," said Mr. Roberts of the rice producers organization. "It's not this big, scary place."

Travel is Restricted

U.S. law restricts most travel to the island as part of the trade ban. Business people exploring potential deals, scholars, students, journalists, diplomats and some others are generally exempt.

Anti-embargo activists say all Americans should be allowed to travel freely to Cuba. They also want to renew trade with the island.

They plan to press their cause Tuesday at the National Summit on Cuba in Washington. Speakers will include Sen. Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., and other lawmakers who oppose the trade ban; retired Gen. Charles Wilhelm, the former chief commander for the U.S. Southern Command, who contends that

Cuba is no longer a military threat; Bay of Pigs veteran Alfredo Duran; and others.

Mr. Duran, who heads an influential exile group called the Cuban Committee for Democracy, said the participation of anti-embargo activists from Texas is "very important and very symbolic since they come from President Bush's home state."

Mr. Bush plans to send Dan Fisk, the deputy assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, to the conference. He is an ex-aide to former Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and supports the trade embargo.

On Wednesday, the debate will continue as about 500 Cuban-Americans meet in Washington to call for an end to the embargo.

Later in the month, the Senate is expected to vote on a measure to lift travel restrictions to Cuba and allow private financing of business deals with companies on the island. In July, the House approved several measures to soften the embargo, including one that would end U.S. enforcement of the travel ban.

"The support for change is overwhelming," said Delvis Fernandez, president of the Cuban American Alliance Education Fund, an umbrella group for many exile organizations.

A Veto Promised

But Mr. Bush has vowed to veto any measures that would weaken sanctions against Cuba.

"The embargo won't end from one day to the next," Mr. Duran said. "But it will end. The writing is on the wall."

Ms. Jackson of J&D Produce just wants to sell her quirky carrots, which are maroon on the outside, orange on the inside.

"Cuba is a logical trading partner," she said. "A premier market for the United States. And to ignore this market would be foolish."