
cuba interesting places Colorado eyes trade with Cuba

Posted by PL - 2009/09/09 10:12

Colorado eyes trade with Cuba By Jessica Fender The Denver Post Updated: 07/27/2009 06:11:58 AM MDT Colorado officials are seeking to establish trade between the state's farmers and Cuba, a practice forbidden by the previous governor but in step with a growing group of U.S. states far from the political pressure of anti-Castro groups. Advocates say the Cuban demand for American foodstuffs is growing too rapidly — from \$260 million annually to \$711 million in six years — for Colorado farmers to ignore a potential customer just 90 miles from the Florida coast. Critics, including Republican former Gov. Bill Owens, call Cuban ex-President Fidel Castro a cold-blooded murderer whose regime is using business ties with states to pressure the U.S. government for the two things it most wants: credit and tourists. Tim Larsen, the state Agriculture Department's senior international marketing specialist, is leading Colorado's exploration of the Cuban market with the support of many farm and business interests across the state. We're complying with U.S. regulations in a growth market, Larsen said. The mood is changing about Cuba. Do we position ourselves to take advantage of it now, or do we wait? Colorado companies already sell some products to Cuba — about \$1 million worth in 2008 — all of them exempt from the long-standing U.S. trade embargo. Now, a request for proposals Colorado recently posted seeks to up that figure considerably, asking for help with the complicated process of traveling to Cuba, setting up meetings and deciding the quantities and packaging of goods, among other tasks. The proposed contract is broken into three phases and can be severed at any point. It's not known by anyone how much the endeavor could cost — or earn — the state. But politically, there is no clear cost here for trading with Castro and his brother, Cuban President Raul Castro. While anti-Castro Cuban expatriates have considerable clout in places such as Florida, Colorado has just 3,701 Cubans, according to the most recent census. Since 2000, when Congress exempted agricultural and medical products from the embargo, at least 21 states have led trade missions to the island nation with varying degrees of success. Only two of those states — New York and California — have sizable populations of Cuban expats. And both of their trade efforts have been exploratory rather than productive, according to State International Development Organizations, a not-for-profit group that advises state governments on trade. Florida — home to 68 percent of the nation's Cuban population, according to the Pew Hispanic Center — has made no effort to trade with Cuba. States without significant Cuban populations have tried harder. Nebraska's Great Northern Bean market was tanking in 2006 before an agreement with Cuba led to more than \$20 million in sales by 2008, according to Stan Garbacz, that state's agricultural trade representative. There's nothing steady about anything down there. It's a constant activity, but I've built up a relationship, he said. It's really been wonderful. Nebraska has 859 Cuban residents. Pro-trade business groups say they realize the Cuban government — which prefers trade envoys that include elected officials — isn't buying American goods purely out of need or altruism. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out they're going to take pictures and say, 'Here's the senator from New Mexico. Here's the Nebraskan governor. Why won't the federal government talk to us?' said Jim Reis, president of the World Trade Center Denver. But this is a great opportunity to help Colorado sell a little more of what we produce and broaden the market for (Cubans). Earlier this year, President Barack Obama opened up increased travel to Cuba for family members of those on the island. He has also proposed other ways to ease the long-standing embargo. And legislation pending in Congress would further open Cuba to American tourists and ease sales practices for U.S. businesses. The state is preparing for the likely adoption of new federal legislation that would allow companies to more actively promote trade exports, said Evan Dreyer, spokesman for Gov. Bill Ritter. We do what the Colorado marketplace demands. We serve them ... within the framework established by the federal government. The Ritter administration's position is a reversal of the posture held by his predecessor, Owens. I too felt the pressure from some in the ag community to do this, but I wouldn't allow state tax dollars to subsidize this kind of mission, Owens said. (The Castros are) directly responsible for personally murdering thousands of people. This will help that regime stay in power. Mauricio Claver-Carone of the U.S.-Cuba Democracy PAC, an anti-Castro group, says Cuba is using the agriculture sales in an effort to influence U.S. policy toward the nation by buying from states and seeking their help lobbying Congress. Claver-Carone said U.S. companies can do business only with a quasi-governmental import agency run by the Castro family. We will be for (opening trade with Cuba) the day when U.S. farmers and the people in Colorado can do business with the Cuban people — when Cubans can open up a business or a fruit stand, Claver-Carone said. This doesn't help the Cuban people. Jessica Fender: 303-954-1244 or jfen...@denverpost.com Colorado eyes trade with Cuba - The Denver Post (27 July 2009) http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_12920052

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