

It's Time To Drop The Ban On Travel To Cuba



by Pettus Read

brother appears on the official government letterhead.

The week I spent in Havana was one I will never forget. It was one

A few of years ago, I traveled to Cuba on a special trade visa with a group of Tennessee farmers and spent a week visiting the country talking with Cuban officials and important leaders in Castro's government. Our goal was to learn what possibilities would be available for Tennessee agricultural products if trade were ever reestablished. Since that time, Fidel Castro has stepped down as president and appointed his brother Raúl Castro as the country's leader. Not much else has really changed beyond the name of which Castro's

that impressed all of us on what could be if things ever changed between our country and theirs. When you traveled the streets of Havana, you immediately saw signs that Cuba is very much a communist country. Billboards everywhere projected images of government leaders, rebellion heroes, support for socialism and the ever-present red star.

But, one thing that seemed to override all of those materialist honors of government was the Cuban people. We were always treated with respect and gratefulness that we were

there. I had the opportunity to meet the Cuban people, walk their streets, talk to them one on one, visit their farms and hear firsthand what some of their real thoughts are when it comes to our two countries becoming trading partners. As one old gentleman told me in a court yard one evening as a large crowd gathered to hear Castro speak, "Our problem is not with you the American people. The problem is with your government and our government getting along."

Since our visit, trade has begun with Cuba. Not because of our efforts, but mainly because of the agricultural community's involvement in this country. Progress is happening, but more is needed.

Just a few days ago, American Farm Bureau President Bob Stallman joined congressional members on Capitol Hill to ad-

vocate the removal of travel restrictions to Cuba. Stallman spoke in support of Senate bill 428, which opens Cuba to travel by U.S. citizens and gives the U.S. president authority to restrict travel to Cuba only in times of war or imminent danger.

"This legislation is an important step in easing trade restrictions on Cuba," Stallman said. "Allowing unrestricted travel to Cuba will increase U.S. agricultural sales and boost tourism." Having seen for myself what the prospects can be if travel restrictions are removed, I have to agree with President Stallman and would also encourage our elected officials to support this very important legislation.

It is reported that U.S. agricultural sales to Cuba have been on an average of \$400 million annually since 2000; with top commodity

sales being poultry, wheat, soybeans, rice and dairy. With passage of S. 428 those sales most surely will increase and benefit both our farmers along with the citizens of Cuba. When you have to wait in line each day to learn if there will be enough food to go around for your family as the Cuban people have to do, increased trade with the U.S. can help feed a lot of hungry people as well as improve their quality of life.

The senate bill if passed, will also allow travel on a general license for those making agricultural sales to Cuba rather than the specific license currently needed. Getting a visa to Cuba is not an easy task and the AFBF says this would ease delays that significantly impact the ability to transact commercial sales with Cuba, which in some cases, have been lost to U.S.

competitors because of the restriction.

During my stay in the Caribbean island country of Cuba I saw the influence that countries like China, Venezuela, Vietnam and our neighbors to the north, Canada were having on the infrastructure in Havana. Now with Russia once again talking to the Castros, it is important that we continue to trade with Cuba. They need food and if we don't sell it to them, some other country will. And, I question whom we really want as a partner with Cuba, just 90 miles off the coast of Florida. Personally, I would rather it be us.

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