

Virginia Eyes Broader Array of Exports to Cuba



Richmond, January 5 (RHC-AP) -- Officials and entrepreneurs from the U.S. state of Virginia are closely following the events related to the thaw in U.S.-Cuba relations, with expectations for increased business opportunities.

Virginia farm products have been on Cuba's import list for some time now, making the state one of the top three U.S. exporters to Cuba. Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry Todd Haymore said he's been mindful of the prospect of a changed relationship with Cuba and the broader array of Virginia products that could be exported as he's worked with Cuban officials.

Haymore said he has invested his time with the Cuban government, visiting annually over the past eight years, with an eye on better relations between the two nations.

Virginia trails Georgia and Louisiana in the value of farm exports to Cuba, which is less than a three-day journey by boat. Soybeans, poultry and apples are the primary Virginia farm exports to Cuba.

A 2000 law relaxed restrictions on U.S. food and medical exports to Cuba. Farm exports now account for \$350 million in rice, corn, soybeans and frozen chicken.

Since the Obama administration's announcement in December to relax curbs on trade with Cuba, U.S. businesses have taken note, seeing another marketplace for their products just 90 miles off the coast of Florida. However, Haymore notes that those opportunities are not likely to occur overnight, as much work is needed on both sides to normalize bilateral relations.

"It's our next-door neighbor, for lack of a better term, and I believe that at some point the doors are going to open further for non-agricultural products to be exported there," Haymore said. "I'd like to think that Virginia could be standing right at the front of the line."

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