

Dairy Exporters and other Agriculture Groups Are eager to Sell to Cuba



Boca Raton, January 28 (RHC), -- California Dairies, a large exporter of milk powder and other products, has never exported to Cuba. But Andrei Mikhalevsky, its president and CEO, would like to enter that market, according to an editorial by Jerry Hagstrom for the National Journal on Tuesday.

That is why Mikhalevsky and the International Dairy Foods Association, which met in Boca Raton, Fla. this week — and just about every other U.S. farm and agribusiness group except sugar growers— have joined the U.S. Agriculture Coalition for Cuba to work toward normalizing U.S.-Cuban relations and ending the blockade.

"We are very supportive of opening Cuba up as a market, primarily because it is a good market," Mikhalevsky said on the sidelines of the IDFA annual Dairy Forum.

Mikhalevsky added, however, that Cuba "is a good market, but a small market," referring to Cuba's 11 million, mostly poor, citizens.

Although there have been some U.S. exports of dairy products to Cuba since a 2000 law allowed an exemption to the Cuban embargo for U.S. agricultural sales, the bigger sellers have been corn, rice, soybeans, poultry, and pork. But Mikhalevsky knows Cuba is a potential dairy market, because his previous job was manager of global ingredients for Fonterra, the giant New Zealand exporter, which does sell to Cuba.

New Zealand dairy's presence in Cuba was noticed this month by no less than Senate Minority Whip Dick Durbin, D-Ill., when he made a trip to Cuba with Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., the No. 1 dairy advocate in the Senate, and Senate Agriculture Committee ranking member Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich.

"We learned that powdered milk comes to Cuban citizens from New Zealand, halfway around the world, when [there] is an ample supply here in the United States," Durbin said in remarks on the Senate floor on Jan. 20.

When the U.S. Agriculture Coalition for Cuba held a news conference at the National Press Club on Jan. 8, the room was packed with lobbyists of every agricultural stripe and more reporters than ever covering the farm bill.

Even the National Farmers Union, which often fears that trade agreements hurt smaller farmers and is opposed to granting trade promotion authority to Obama, supports the opening with Cuba.

"Lifting the embargo not only opens new markets for U.S. agriculture products but also gives new hope of economic prosperity to the good people of Cuba," said NFU President Roger Johnson, who as North Dakota agriculture commissioner led eight sales missions to Cuba.

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