

# Groups Consider Means To Dissolve Cuban Embargo

## Fifth In A Continuing Series

BETTY VALLE GEGG  
JOHN LAROSE

MidAmerica Farmer Grower

(Editor's Note: **MidAmerica Farmer Grower** interviewed the presidents and CEOs of six national commodity organizations and president of the American Farm Bureau to learn their opinions on trade with Cuba. This is the second in the two-part series.)

Commodity groups are looking forward to a change in administration, both here and in Cuba, to begin to crack the bubble of opposition to trade with our nearest neighbor to the south.

### National Association Of Wheat Growers

David Cleavinger, a farmer from Wildorado in the panhandle of Texas and president of the National Association of Wheat Growers (NAWG), said his groups' main focus is on the Farm Bill and Cuban trade is one of the priorities. The group represents 21 wheat-growing states.

"We are their lobbying arm," he added. "Lifting the embargo is very important to us and we would like to see Congress open trade with Cuba.

"One of our Texas delegation members visited with Fidel Castro, sat across the table from him as he told them Cuba is buying agricultural products from many other countries," he related.

This embargo has lasted for 50 years and Castro said "we could go another 50 years, it's O.K. with us. We're doing just fine without you." U.S. agriculture is the one really loosing out.

Cleavinger places the blame for the embargo on personalities. At a recent meeting of high ranking officials, Cuba's Minister of Foreign Affairs stated the United States should not wait too long to lift the embargo because Cuba may soon be in a position where they do not need the United States.

"I think they may already be there," Cleavinger commented.

NAWG sees Cuba as just another opportunity to export wheat. Presently, 50 percent of the U.S. wheat crop is exported.

"Wheat farmers need all the markets that are available and we need to have trade with other nations, and each country is important," Cleavinger said. "I think until there's a change in administration, we won't see a lot of movement. It doesn't make a lot of sense to have a market that is 90 miles from our shore and we are not able to participate in trade there.

"The United States has always been a country

investors from many different countries, except the United States," he said

### National Corn Growers

Richard Tolman, CEO of the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), was the Executive Director of the U.S. Grain Council in previous years.

"What we found before in being involved in this battle is there is very strong political influence from the Cuban-Americans here in the United States and I think there needs to be some changes of attitudes there. Maybe a regime change in Cuba could stimulate some change or some opportunity for them. On the other hand, I would hope that the American public and our Congress starts to realize we've had this embargo since 1962, 48 years and it hasn't done any good. What we were trying to do was get a regime change. That hasn't happened, all we've done is alienated a whole new generation of people and a market that is 90 miles away from us."

Since the United States is trading with Viet-

nam, Korea and China, where is the logic?

"There is no logic and Vietnam is a great example. We normalized our relations with them and look what a tremendous change has occurred there. I think the biggest power we have to change political ideology is through trade and through exchange and again Vietnam is a great example of that."

There are three U.S. Congressmen, two Senators and the Secretary of Commerce in the U.S. government, and these people were all born in Cuba. They are all opposed to normalizing trade with Cuba.

"There's very strong emotional arguments that group has and they feel they were displaced from their homeland; their families lost their fortunes, the things they worked for. So they have a somewhat strong emotional case for what they lost and they want to see some redress. It was taken from them and my sense is it's been 48 years and at some point we have to get over that and move on because there is a whole new generation that was born there.

"When I was there I think about 80 percent of the population had been born since the embargo. It was a huge number. They don't understand it, they don't know what it is, so the implications of what we're trying to do with it is lost. Again I empathize with those people who lost things. They lost their homeland but the best way to change that is through trade."

Tolman said it was difficult to get licenses to travel to Cuba.

"It's crazy that American citizens can't travel there. Europeans can go there, Canadians can go there and again if we believe in our philosophy then we sitting across the table and interacting with you is the best way I can influence you. If I'm not going to talk to you or not trade with you I cannot influence you.

"We just need to get the bureaucracy out of the way and do it," he said.

NCGA has not been strongly active in pushing trade with Cuba in recent years, since the effort seemed futile.

"Not that we're disinterested, I think that we only have a certain amount of bullets in our gun and we've had some bigger issues to deal with. We haven't seen the opportunity to have a big impact because of the entrenched bureaucracy.



David Cleavinger



Bob Stallman



that believes in freedoms and to lock us out of a country just doesn't seem like the way we usually work here," he added. "Other citizens from Europe, Germany visit Cuba quite frequently. We've been down there and it's a beautiful place to be and we feel like our citizens should have that opportunity too."

### American Farm Bureau Federation

American Farm Bureau Federation's (AFBF) President Bob Stallman said the embargo stems from a political component involving voters in Florida. "I am hopeful that with President Raul (Castro) that perhaps some things will change down there.

"Frankly, an expression we have is that some people have to die before you can move forward," he said. "You have the first generation of Cubans who came to the United States that were adamantly anti-Castro and they want all their land returned and they vote in elections to support the candidates that support that. Then the next generation who pretty much followed that first generation's line; they were pretty much indoctrinated with it. Now there is the third generation of Cuban-Americans that are saying 'look we want to go back to our grandparents' country and we want to visit; this embargo hasn't effected any change yet, let's try something different.'"

Instead the United States continues to do the same thing over and over again without getting any results. Now Stallman sees the dynamic changing from the political aspect that has existed in Florida, to a greater integration and globalization.

Stallman recognizes the political standpoint and the disproportionate clout that the Cuban-American voters in Florida have had, but said he thinks when the third generation of Cuban-Americans come along that will diminish.

"With political influence diminished, I think there will be less reason to maintain this embargo," he said.

Farm Bureau has been very active in urging Congress to override a Presidential veto of a bill that would normalize relations with Cuba and bills have come up for vote.

"We've contacted our members, we've talked about the rationale and, frankly, we think, if it wouldn't be for the presidential veto, we have the votes to pass a bill," Stallman said. "Right now I don't think there are enough votes to override a veto, and then you have the dynamic of 'okay if the president is going to veto it, why would a member of Congress vote for it,' but without a presidential veto, I think the dynamic may have changed a little more than it was four to six years ago."

The younger generation may be the key to lifting the embargo.

"It's one of our key trade priorities," he explained. "It's always been an automatic priority, in terms of if the legislation comes up we're going to be supportive of legislation that opens up the market. We have stood up against both the Clinton and Bush administration in that position for a long time now."

AFBF has had a strategy for years of trying to elect supporters in Congress who will attach amendments on key appropriations bills to remove restrictions on Cuban trade.

"We have not yet been successful," Bob Stallman, the AFBF's President, said. "I am hopeful that with President Raul (Castro) perhaps some things will change down there. I was there several years ago and had a four-hour dinner with Fidel Castro and visited the country and I was amazed at how warm and friendly the people are and all the untapped potential that is down there, even for them to do more agricultural production. But the best way to make that happen is to open up their economy and their markets to trade and tourism.

"When I was in Cuba, there were citizens and

So I think when we see an opportunity like we did back in 2000, 2001, we will be very strong. I think if we saw momentum again, we'd be right there, but the way the political winds were with Jeb Bush and President Bush, there was no chance. When Fidel stepped down and Raul stepped up I wondered whether there might be some compromise on both sides a little so you could get some changes there, but so far, a little bit but not a lot."

As Executive Director of the U.S. Grain Council in previous years Tolman did a lot of international travel.

"Prior to my visit to Cuba, I had a perception of what it was going to be like," he said. "That visit was the most surprising visit to any country I made. What I saw was so much different than what I expected. I had been in Communist countries before, I expected to see some repression, I expected to see us being monitored and restricted on what we could do and I saw just the opposite. We could go anywhere we wanted, there was no real animosity towards Americans; there was no surprise as to why we weren't trading with them; there was a lot of really interesting things going on with some of the European countries doing things there and I didn't see the repression, I didn't see a lot of poverty; I saw just really friendly people. I was quite amazed."

Cuba is one of the few cash markets the United States has. It's not a huge market but it's not very far away and it's a lot better for them to be buying U.S. corn, wheat, dry beans and rice than having to go to distant countries where it costs them more.

"It costs us more too, and it just makes sense for us to be trading with them," he said.

Tolman said the businessmen and corn marketers were quite excited about trade with Cuba early in this century. However, the bureaucracy that limits access to financing and requires certain licenses has made it difficult to trade there.

"I think from a pure trade standpoint our marketers would love to trade more directly with them and they'd love to buy from us," he said. "We just need to get the bureaucracy out of the way and do it.

### USA Rice Federation

While there's a tough battle ahead, USA Rice Federation (USARF) president and CEO Betsy Ward promises to regroup to encourage Congressional representatives to override a presidential veto on legislation that seeks to lift restrictions on trade with Cuba. She wants to see a more pro-trade effort in Washington and to see travel opened to this close neighbor.

"It would be a great benefit for our industry if we could establish normal trade with Cuba," she said. Cuba is among the top 3 buyers of rice in the western hemisphere and to increase their purchases from our farmers, they need to be able to generate income and be able to trade with us - this means tourism generated dollars as well as all other aspects of two-way trade.

In a recent trip to Cuba, Ward assured Cuban officials that her organization would continue to focus on resolving the trade issue. Hearing the complaints from Cuban officials that the U.S. embargo on Cuba is hurting both the United States and Cuba, Ward said an effort would be made to send a Congressional delegation to visit Cuba to open more communication.

"There is a tremendous amount of interest in Congress and Cuba at this moment," she said.

Δ

The sixth part in this continuing series will be published on 6-27-08 and will focus on a interview with Roger Johnson, North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner and President of the National Association Of State Departments Of Agriculture Position, Involvement and Future Strategy Concerning Trade With Cuba.