

# NASDA President, Commissioner Ron Sparks Attends Havana, Cuba Trade Fair

## Ag Groups Hopeful Obama Will Ease Trade With Cuba

**REGINA LAROSE**  
MidAmerica Farmer Grower

### HAVANA, CUBA

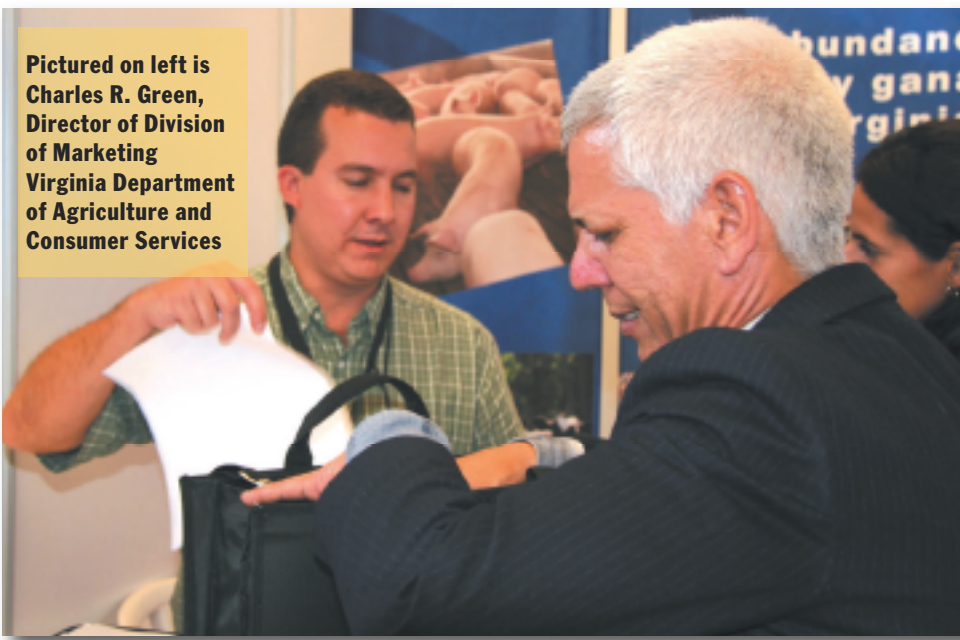
The President of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA), Commissioner Ron Sparks along with representatives of some U.S. State Departments of Agriculture recently traveled to Havana, Cuba to attend the 26th annual International Havana Trade Fair (FIHAV).

The fair held November 3 through 8, was attended by 457 companies from 56 nations. Governmental delegations from 14 countries such as Brazil and Panama were in attendance. In a statement issued by the state controlled Cuban news media, ALIMPORT President, Pedro Alvarez said, 209 U.S. business people, representing 110 companies attended the fair. Alvarez went on to say, "ALIMPORT must ink several contracts valued at \$300 million with China, Vietnam, Venezuela, Brazil, Chile and Argentina."

MidAmerica Farmer Grower caught up with some of the U.S. attendees at the fair from numerous state departments of agriculture who hope to increase trade with Cuba. The state departments of agriculture attending the fair were there for the purpose of increasing agriculture trade for their states. Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota and Virginia all had booths at the fair displaying their agriculture products.

President of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, Ron Sparks, is also the Commissioner of Agriculture and Industries for the State of Alabama. Commissioner Sparks was elected President of the NASDA in September 2008 and will serve a one-year term in this position last held by Roger Johnson of North Dakota. Speaking as

**Pictured on left is Charles R. Green, Director of Division of Marketing Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services**



President of NASDA, on his election as President for 2008/2009, Commissioner Sparks said, "this position is very exciting for me. I think agriculture is going to play a major role when it comes to alternative fuels in this (U.S.) country. Certainly specialty crops are an important topic with states that have the specialty crop programs. We have a lot of issues on the table. We just got through the farm bill, we have some issues that we need to be talking about and I look forward to serving in that leadership role."

Commissioner Sparks hopes President elect Obama will end Cuba travel restrictions immediately upon taking office. As a "good faith" effort, the easing of travel restrictions could set a foundation for further dialogue, he said. Commissioner Sparks pointed out the U.S. needs to take into consideration the effects of hurricanes. "I would like to see a different policy to deal with hurricane relief, a different policy which would include some items that are not currently on the approved list, items like nails and hammers. Items Cuban citizens do not have but need to rebuild their homes."

Commissioner Sparks believes the U.S. can work through the issues surrounding the Cuban embargo, "What good is the embargo doing anybody? We have worked through these issues before with Vietnam. Vietnam would be a very good example. Now, if you go to Vietnam you can see some very positive things happening. That is my goal. That is what I want to see happen in Cuba. I am optimistic that something positive can happen if we all come to the table."

Educating Americans about some of the policies within the embargo is an issue that needs to be addressed according to Commissioner Sparks, "the travel restriction policy for an example, if you are a Cuban-American and you travel to Cuba and visit with your family. Two weeks later you travel home. Six months later you get a call that says your father passed away, you cannot go back to Cuba. That goes against my moral values. I think it goes against most American values. Those are the things that average Americans don't know. That is, these people down here are wonderful people and there are 11 million of them that love America. We ought to embrace them but at the same time we ought to have a transition and certainly deal with folks that have had concerns in the past."

Folks who have concerns include some residents in South Florida said Commissioner Sparks, "I really believe that the United States ought to be visiting with those folks as well as talking to folks over here (Cuba), and sort of bridge that gap. We are not going to get anywhere with people not being educated to exactly where we are today, where we want to go and what can really happen. I think the United States can play a major role in making sure that there is not a disaster in this part of the world."

As to the Senator Hillary Clinton's nomination as U.S. Secretary of State, Commissioner Sparks said, "I have all the confidence in the world in Senator Clinton and the new administration."

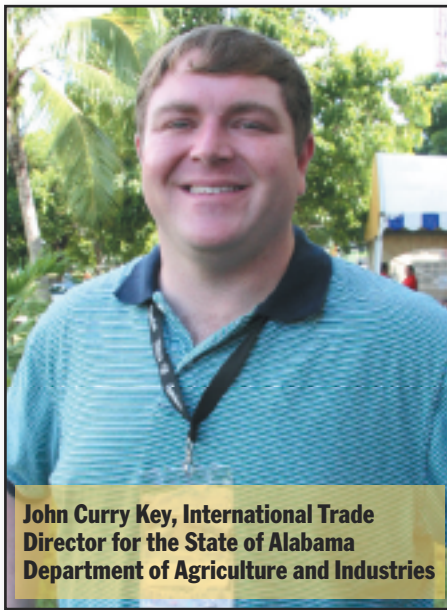
"It takes less than two days to transport products from the U.S. to Havana through the river system that comes down from the Midwest and goes into the docks of Mobile. We have had some success here and we are going to continue to work extremely hard to hopefully lift the travel sanctions," added Commissioner Sparks.

Alabama State Senator Roger H. Bedford Jr. shares Sparks enthusiasm, "Mobile has reestablished a sister city relationship with Havana. Commissioner Sparks has been the leader in opening it up for the farmers and the people that want to trade from Alabama. Thanks to his leadership we are now 23 among trading partners with Cuba. The last time I was down here four years ago we ate chicken that was processed in my home county. It used to be Goldkist now it is Pilgrim; we are very proud of this and hope that under President Obama and the new Congress, full trade with Cuba will open up again. As Fidel said, America trades with China, Germany, Japan and Vietnam. The United States ought to trade with Cuba. I think any remnants of communism would be gone a week after we open it up to capitalism."

Senator Bedford added, "it concerns me that we are allowing China and Venezuela to begin to have such an infrastructure investment down here. This is creating a tremendous political influence in Cuba. Certainly there will be some issues when Cuba and America reconcile, over the people who lost their land and fled with their lives but we have worked through that with

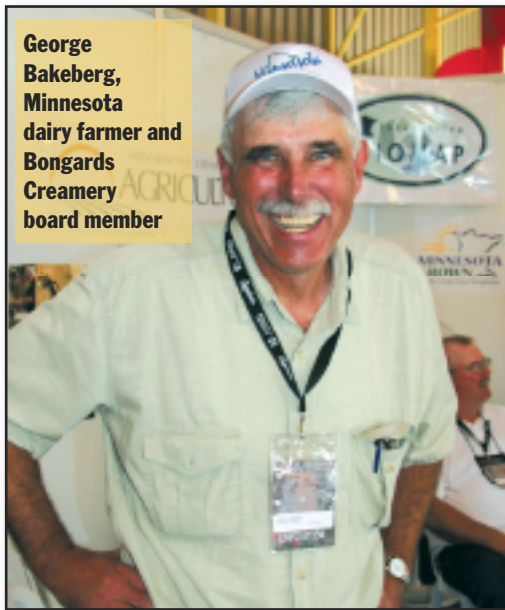
other countries. We are working through a settlement with Libya right now over the bombing. You know, democracy can flourish in Cuba again if we will help it grow."

John Curry Key, International Trade Director for the State of Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries said, "we feel like Alabama is the key for logistics. The products that we



**John Curry Key, International Trade Director for the State of Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries**

manufacture and produce are what the Cubans are looking for, basic necessities. Feeding the people, rebuilding the infrastructure but at the same time, we as states, are calling on Congress and the President to lift the embargo. We propose that in three different steps, first to allow Cuban-Americans to openly and actively travel freely to and from Cuba and the United States, it is the U.S. government restrictions. It is un-



**George Bakeberg, Minnesota dairy farmer and Bongards Creamery board member**

American to restrict family access. Secondly, to allow U.S. companies outside of agriculture to sell and participate in this economy. As you can see driving around, you will see Chinese buses, and the European cars. There are joint ventures in oil exploration. The Brazilians have signed a tremendous contract for oil exploration with Cuba within 200 to 300 miles of the U.S. coastline, and finally the removal of the entire embargo at some point."

Key points out the value of developing relationships with Cuba, "with the Cubans and the Latin society in general, relationships are very important. That is the thing, being down here, being involved, once you are involved, once they know you, once they trust you, you start selling. I assure you if we are not here, the Chinese, the Indians, the Europeans are going to be here selling the same products and they are helping to build and mold a country right off our coast and we don't have any say so in it."

Director of Division of Marketing Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Charles R. Green attended the FIHAV. Green said Virginia is exporting about \$32 million dollars a year in agriculture products. Primarily consisting of soy products and apples, Virginia is looking for opportunities in other areas. "Wood products, rendered proteins and fats, we also have a strong poultry industry in the state. We came to see if there is any opportunity there whether it is turkeys or other poultry products."

The Virginia Department of Agriculture has been visiting Cuba since 2001 participating in trade missions and trade shows. Green said, "we have seen our agricultural exports increase every time, so we are hoping to keep on that trajectory."

George Bakeberg, Minnesota dairy farmer and Bongards Creamery board member, came to the FIHAV in hopes of increasing the sale of milk powder or dairy products. "Anytime we can sell powder or dairy products it is a benefit for the dairy farmers in the upper Midwest," he said. The Minnesota Soybean Growers Association was also at the fair in hopes of increasing exports to Cuba. Bakeberg stated 40 percent of soybeans exported to Cuba are grown in Minnesota.

Maryland Department of Agriculture Secretary Roger L. Richardson, is also interested in soybean trade with Cuba. Secretary Richardson visited with ALIMPORT officials at the fair. "They are very interested in trade. When you stop and think about it there is so much that we could offer them and they could offer us. It just seems to me that if we could open up tourism to Cuba, this would do a tremendous amount for them." Secretary Richardson added, "one side can't be the winner all the time." According to Secretary Richardson Maryland has sold soybeans, soybean meal and medical supplies to Cuba. Secretary Richardson stated Maryland is looking to sell wine and apples, "they are interested, very interested. They drive a tough bargain." Δ



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