

NEWSMAKERS

Ron Sparks: Cuba is key market for Alabama farmers

BY LARRY LUXNER

If he were running for governor of neighboring Florida, Ron Sparks wouldn't make it past the primaries.

But Sparks is from the Heart of Dixie State, not the Sunshine State — and in Alabama, publicly calling for an end to the embargo against Cuba isn't the kiss of death but apparently a way to score points with voters.

Sparks is Alabama's commissioner of agriculture and industries. Born and raised in Fort Payne, Ala., the 53-year-old Democrat was elected to the post in 2002 and re-elected last November for another four years.

Growing up, he worked alongside his grandmother at a local sock mill while attending high school. After completing his service in the U.S. Coast Guard, Sparks graduated from Northeast State Community College, and in 1978 — at the age of 24 — became one of the youngest county commissioners ever elected in Alabama history.

He's also owned two successful businesses in Fort Payne and has worked in television.

Sparks — who's been to Cuba at least three times since taking office — has openly expressed interest in running for governor of Alabama in 2010, when Gov. Bob Riley's current term ends.

And he's proud of his friendship with Pedro Alvarez, chairman and CEO of Cuba's state-run food purchasing agency Alimport.

CUBA 'EXTREMELY IMPORTANT' TO ALABAMA

In a lengthy phone interview from Montgomery, Sparks told *CubaNews* that in 2006, Alimport spent one-third of its budget for U.S. agricultural commodities — about \$140 million — on Alabama-sourced products, under the 2000 Trade Sanctions and Reform Export Enhancement Act (TSRA).

That includes everything from peanut butter, peanut paste and peanuts from Georgia-based Mazur & Hockman; peanut butter blended with Alaga syrup from Whitfield Foods in Montgomery, and soybean oil, utility poles and various other products from Alabama companies the agency declined to identify.

"Cuba has been extremely important to Alabama," Sparks told us. "We started three and a half years ago, when I first came into office, working with Pedro. We have since had a number of successful trade missions

that have resulted in about \$350 million in economic impact for the state of Alabama."

During his most recent trip to Cuba — a four-day trade mission in December that coincided with a 10-member Congressional delegation — Sparks and his entourage treated Alimport officials to a meal of fried Alabama catfish, cornbread, butterbeans, green bean casserole, cole slaw, pecan pie with ice cream and sweet tea.

"We want to benefit agriculture, create jobs and help Alabama. We've increased our staff in international trade, and we're looking at

food commodities to be shipped to Cuba in 40 years left from the Port of Mobile.

"I've been up-front and honest with the people of Alabama about why we trade with Cuba," said Sparks. "My main concern is with two things: I hope the food we're sending to Cuba in some way gets to the Cuban people, and I hope it helps my farmers in Alabama."

The agriculture commissioner added that "when I go to Cuba — even when I was around the president [Fidel Castro] — I never talked politics. The only thing we talk about is helping the people of Cuba."



Alabama ag boss Ron Sparks

"We've had obstacles put up in front of us. We've tried to state our case in Washington, but we'll continue to abide by the rules no matter how tough they make them ... even if we don't agree with them."

— RON SPARKS, ALABAMA'S COMMISSIONER OF AGRICULTURE AND INDUSTRIES

every opportunity we can," said Sparks. He noted that other states which haven't been shipping products or sending trade missions to Havana "will soon realize they may be missing out on a great opportunity."

LONG HISTORY OF FRIENDSHIP

Whether folks in Tallahassee are listening remains to be seen, but in Montgomery, state officials have wasted no time in capitalizing on their trade ties with Havana.

Sen. Lowell Barron, who was among those accompanying Sparks on his most recent trip to Havana, told the *Huntsville Times* "we need to look at ways to lift the trade embargo. It makes no sense. It's obviously not working, and we need to try a different strategy. When and if that government turns around, Alabama is going to be in a perfect position."

Barron said the state is also trying to sell Cuba on purchasing pond-raised catfish from west Alabama producers.

"One of their great problems is that they don't have enough money to buy the highest-quality fish," he said. "They have to get fish they can afford."

Among Alabama's biggest trading advantages is its proximity to Cuba. The Port of Mobile is only 545 nautical miles from Havana, and the two cities have a long, historic relationship dating back to 1702, when Mobile became the capital capital of the Louisiana Territory (see our special report on *Mobile in CubaNews, September 2004, page 14*).

In 1993, Mobile officials traveled to Havana and set up the first sister-city relationship between any U.S. city and Cuba since the 1959 revolution. Six years later, Mobile unveiled a statue at the entrance to Havana harbor, and in 2001, the first boatload of U.S.

FROM CHICKEN TO UTILITY POLES

So far, Alabama's top export to Cuba has been poultry. Arkansas-based Tyson Foods is the top seller of poultry to Cuba, and much of that poultry is sourced from chicken processing plants in Alabama. In addition, Montgomery-based Calhoun Foods has shipped over 60 containers of meat products and other commodities to Cuba.

In addition, Bunge Corp., which has a soybean processing and milling plant in Decatur, Ala., is among companies that will sell farm products to Cuba in 2007, though officials at Bunge headquarters in St. Louis couldn't be reached for comment.

But perhaps Alabama's most unusual export to Cuba isn't something you eat.

Wooden utility poles, as many as 100,000 of them, have been shipped to Cuba with TSRA's blessing. According to John Key, international trade director at the Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industry, 99% of those poles came from sawmills in southwestern Alabama, primarily Escambia and Washington counties.

"It's actually an approved product under TSRA," Key told us. "Keep in mind that lumber and utility poles — even wooden doors and window frames — are on the list to be sold to Cuba."

"The brokers that sell utility poles and lumber are based out of Florida, but they're selling an Alabama product," he said, estimating that \$40 million worth of such poles have been shipped to Cuba over the last four years.

In the last eight months alone, Alimport has signed contracts for 30,000 utility poles — all of them shipped out of Mobile. But Key

OPINION

Is Raúl Castro ready to deal?

BY JAIME SUCHLICKI

The visit to Cuba of a U.S. congressional delegation led by Rep. Jeff Flake (R-AZ) and Rep. William Delahunt (D-MA) in December yielded little results.

There seems to be an eagerness among some members of Congress to begin a process of normalization of relations with Cuba, especially after Fidel Castro's recent illness.

The belief persists that economic considerations could influence Raúl Castro's policy decisions and that Cuba's difficult economic situation will force Raúl to move toward a market economy and closer ties to the U.S.

We seem to cling to an outdated economic determinism in trying to understand events in other societies and the motivations of their leaders. Despite economic difficulties, Raúl does not seem ready to provide meaningful and irreversible concessions for a U.S.-Cuba normalization.

He may offer more consumer goods and food to tranquilize the Cuban population, but not major structural reforms that would open the Cuban economy. In Cuba, political considerations dictate economic decisions.

Raúl's legitimacy is based on his closeness to Fidel's policies of economic centralization, control and opposition to the U.S. Raúl can not now reject Fidel's legacy and move closer to the U.S.

A move in this direction would be fraught with dangers. It would create uncertainty among the elites that govern Cuba and increase instability as some advocate rapid change while others cling to more orthodox policies. The Cuban population also could see this as an opportunity for mobilization demanding faster reforms.

Raúl is also unwilling to renounce the support and close collaboration of countries like Venezuela, China, Iran and Russia in exchange for an uncertain relationship with the U.S. At a time that anti-Americanism is growing in Latin America and elsewhere, Raúl's policies are more likely to remain closer to regimes that are not particularly friendly to the U.S. and that demand little from Cuba in return for generous aid.

In September, Russia provided a \$350 million credit package to Cuba to modernize its armed forces and Venezuela's aid to Cuba will surpass the \$2 billion mark in 2006.

Raúl is no Deng Xiaoping and no friend of the U.S. He has been the longest-serving minister of defense — in power for 47 years.

He presided over the worst periods of political repression and economic centralization in Cuba and is responsible for numerous executions after he and his brother assumed power, and some while in Mexico and the Sierra Maestra before reaching power.

Raúl has been a loyal follower and cheerleader of Fidel's anti-American policies and military interventions in Africa and else-

where. In 1962, he and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev conspired to surreptitiously introduce nuclear missiles into Cuba.

Raúl supervised the Americas Department in Cuba approving support for terrorist, guerrilla and revolutionary groups throughout Latin America. In 1996, he personally ordered the shooting down of two Brothers to the Rescue unarmed civilian planes in international waters, killing three U.S. citizens and one Cuban-American resident in Florida.

An admirer of the Soviet Armed Forces, Raúl displays pictures of Russian military leaders in his Havana office and late last year signed a \$350 million Russian aid pact to upgrade Cuba's military.

Raúl's politically motivated speech Dec. 2, in which he expressed his willingness to negotiate with the United States, was preceded by a vitriolic attack on U.S. foreign policy and followed by the qualifiers that Cuba is sovereign and that its revolution won't change. For the past four decades Fidel has been making similar statements.

In a rare public statement two years ago, Raúl warned that the U.S. should negotiate its differences with Cuba while Fidel was alive — since the U.S. would find it more difficult to negotiate with him.

For the past four decades, the avenues for negotiation and engagement between the U.S. and Cuba have never been closed. The U.S. signed with Cuba anti-hijacking agreements and migration accords.

Yet, negotiations alone are not sufficient. There has to be a willingness on the part of the Cuban leadership to offer real concessions — in the area of human rights and political and economic openings.

No country gives away major policies without a substantial quid pro quo. Only when Raúl is willing to deal, not only to the U.S., but more importantly to the Cuban people, then and only then we should sit down and play. □

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wouldn't name the companies involved because, he said, "this is highly competitive."

Although Cuba is certainly an important market for Alabama's agricultural products, it's not the only one. Sparks recently led Alabama's first-ever trade delegation to Africa, and later this month will be opening a trade office in India.

Sparks will also be going to Dubai, and is involved in several deals with Mexico, Japan and the European Union.

But Cuba is the one market that seems to get his emotions going.

"Maybe I am uneducated, but I can tell you this: I've been to Havana, I've walked through the neighborhoods, and I want to help these people," Sparks told *CubaNews*.

"If somebody wants to look at me wrong because I'd like to help them have a better quality of life, then I'm sorry. It's not politics to me, it's my heart, it's the way I feel. I just don't agree with the Cuba policies we currently have in effect."

SPARKS HOPES DEMOCRATS CAN BRING CHANGE

Sparks says he's had "very little negative" feedback from his trips to Cuba, though he admits to being very frustrated with all the restrictions imposed by the Bush administration on selling to Cuba — such as letters of credit, cash payment up front and the difficulties of actually traveling to Cuba to meet face-to-face with potential buyers.

"We've had obstacles put up in front of us. We've tried to state our case in Washington, but we will continue to abide by the rules, no matter how tough they make them — even if we don't agree with them."

Sparks says he hopes things will change now that the Democrats are controlling Congress. "But I don't think this can all be done in one swoop," he told us. "We've got to start looking at the travel sanctions. People should be allowed to travel freely. Americans ought to be able to go wherever they want to go. And that's just the beginning."

He said: "I'm not trying to tell the Bush administration what it should or shouldn't do, but I don't agree with any country that won't even have a dialogue. What's wrong with talking to them? We ought to be talking." □

Bailey named U.S. 'mission manager' for Cuba

Norman A. Bailey has been appointed to head a one-stop shop for the intelligence community on Cuba and Venezuela.

As "mission manager" for the two countries, Bailey will oversee 3-5 staffers who will pore over information from 16 U.S. government agencies to spot information gaps, help craft intelligence strategies and track the implementation of those strategies.

Bailey was named to the post by John Negroponte, director of national intelligence

for the Bush administration — which has five other mission managers specializing in North Korea, Iran, counterterrorism, counterproliferation and counterintelligence.

Most recently senior fellow at the conservative Potomac Foundation, Bailey speaks 5 languages and is the author of a 1999 book, "The Strategic Plan That Won the Cold War."

The 1953 Oberlin College graduate is a noted expert on regional affairs and a frequent participant on the conference circuit.