

U.S. Farmers Visit Cuban Farms

Delegates from the U.S. agriculture industry were in Cuba last week for the Cuba-U.S. Agriculture Business Conference. The conference brought about much interest from the Cuban Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Cuban media.

Representing the soybean, corn, wheat, poultry, potato, rice, sorghum and barley industries, the 20 conference participants met with Cuban government officials and farmers on November 8-10, 2018.

While about 30% of Cuba's 42,000 square miles of land area is currently used for farming, Cuban farmers do not have access to the latest technologies, equipment and inputs to reach their yield potential. The majority of the food production in Cuba is done through farmer-owned cooperatives, but it's not sufficient. Due to the climate, there is no wheat grown commercially. In fact, much of the food for Cuba's 11 million people and 4 million annual tourists must be imported, including an estimated 30 million bushels of wheat, which comes primarily from the EU and Canada.

"The reason I'm here isn't to sell potatoes," said participant Carl Hoverson, CEO of Hoverson Farms, Larimore, N.D., "but to help people live better."

The traditional Cuban diet is made up of rice, black beans, chicken, bread and locally-produced fruits and root vegetables.

According to Alejandro Mustelier Zamora, chairman and CEO of Alimport, Cuba's food importing enterprise, "When buying grains from Argentina, it takes a long time to get here and affects the quality of the food we import." Rice imported from Japan can take up to five months to arrive.

There are many advantages of importing food from the United States, most notably the proximity in terms of getting high quality food in a timely and freight-efficient manner.

Cuba can buy products from the U.S. and finance the sale until the product arrives in Cuba, with one exception - food. Food purchases, which have been allowed since 2000, must be paid for up front, before the ships are allowed to sail. U.S. banks are allowed to provide direct financing for exports of any other product except agricultural commodities.

Hon. Rick Crawford, United States Representative, First District of Arkansas, spoke to the group about the legislation "HR525, which allows extension of credit terms from U.S. entities to Cuba to be able to sell ag commodities." Half of the U.S. rice production is grown in his district. He said, "It's not about rice; it's not about wheat; it's not about chicken. It's about U.S. ag commodities and market access to areas that

have really been difficult for us, and this is a market that I would certainly like to see us participate in."

After hearing from Cuban government officials, participants had the opportunity to visit a farmer's market in Havana and tour two farmer cooperatives.

The President of the first cooperative talked about the variety of crops they grow, including tubers and vegetables, mainly carrots. They provide carrots for the Cuban tourism industry. The cooperative's board of directors, or assembly, is in charge of creating a planting plan and supplying the resources, such as fuel and fertilizer that their 200 members need to grow the crops. The planting plan is based on the experience of the farmer, demand for crops and what can be sold to the government. Once they sign the planting plan, the government sells inputs to the cooperative, which sells them to the individual farmers. He said there is a formula for how much fertilizer they receive, which is not always the right amount and it doesn't always arrive at the right time. His cooperative uses an obsolete and old system of flood irrigation because it is what they have.

"We are far from reaching our potential. We need technology, modern equipment and timely inputs," he said. "We know that tilling the soil is bad for the land, but that's all the machinery we have."

While planting genetically modified crops is not yet allowed in Cuba, there is research being done in laboratories. Ambassador Juan Jose Leon Vega, Cuban Ministry of Agriculture International Affairs Division, told the group, "It would be a benefit to the world if it was demonstrated that GMO was safe and could be planted to end hunger. There are 77 million hungry in Latin America."

The President of the second farm cooperative reported that they grow potatoes, sweet potatoes, plantains and taro root, white red and black beans, garbanzos and corn and have a small cow herd that provides milk for their 210 members and to the state for infants and the elderly. The farmer members of the cooperative are compensated based on their work. They receive monthly payments, and after harvest, they distribute the profits to every member of the coop based on results and the work that they do. Compensation has nothing to do with how much land they contributed because the land is collective property. Planting plans are based on what seed is available to grow.

At the wrap-up meeting, Ambassador Juan Jose Leon Vega told the group, "Farmers in the U.S. and Cuba can have better relationships. There is a strong distinction in Cuba between the American government and the American people. We want people to be able to do business together."

The Cuba-U.S. Agriculture Business Conference was organized by the U.S. Ag Coalition for Cuba, which believes that the improvement of agricultural trade between the U.S. and Cuba is the foundation for building successful and enduring relations between both countries. U.S. participants in the conference included:

- Paul Johnson, Chair, U.S. Ag Coalition for Cuba, Chicago, Illinois

- Philip Peters, President, Cuba Research Center, Alexandria, Virginia
- Mirella Betancourt, Principal, Cuba Solutions LLC, Falls Church, Virginia
- Marsha Boswell, Director of Communications, Kansas Wheat, Manhattan, Kansas
- Marion Calmer, CEO of Calmer Corn Heads, Inc., Alpha, Illinois, and daughter Aliza
- Catalina Correa, Regional Marketing Specialist, U.S. Grains Council, Medellin, Colombia
- Hon. Rick Crawford, United States Representative, First District of Arkansas
- David Frederickson, Commissioner of Agriculture, State of Minnesota, Saint Paul, Minnesota
- Richard Fritz, Managing Director, World Poultry Foundation, Huntsville, Alabama
- Tara Smith, Vice President, Michael Torrey Associates, Washington, D.C.
- Carl Hoverson, Chief Executive Officer, Hoverson Farms, Larimore, North Dakota
- Jon Mark and Marda Isbell, Zero Grade Farms, England, Arkansas
- Douglas Keesling, Keesling Farms, Past Chairman of the Kansas Wheat Commission, and Co-Chair of U.S. Ag Coalition for Cuba, Chase, Kansas
- Terry Jo Keesling, Keesling Farms, Chase, Kansas
- Chaitanya Kosaraju, Director, Industrial Trinidad Ammonia and International Feed Sales, Nutrien Ltd., Northbrook, Illinois
- Mark Mueller, Farmer and Director, Iowa Corn Growers Association, Waverly, Iowa
- Christopher Popio, Popio Stumpf Photography, Chicago, Illinois
- Joe Steinkamp, Farmer and Board of Directors, American Soybean Association, Evansville, Indiana