

# Farm groups join national effort to end Cuba trade ban

By SEAN ELLIS  
Capital Press

BOISE — Major Idaho farm groups have thrown their support behind a national effort to convince Congress to end U.S. trade and travel bans on Cuba.

Doing that could open the door to significant export opportunities for several Idaho agricultural products, leaders of that effort said July 7 during a press conference to introduce the new Engage Cuba Idaho State Council.

The 29-member council includes a large number of people involved in the state's agricultural industry, including the leaders of major Idaho farm organizations. It is chaired by Gov. Butch Otter, a rancher and farmer.

"There are real obstacles



Sean Ellis/Capital Press

People who represent several of Idaho's largest agricultural groups sit at a table July 7 during a press briefing in Boise to introduce a new Idaho coalition aimed at convincing Congress to loosen trade and travel restrictions to Cuba.

to letting American farmers compete on an equal footing in Cuba with their counterparts around the world," Luke Albee, senior adviser of the

Engage Cuba Coalition, told Capital Press after the briefing. "That's one of the reasons the Cubans have been buying rice from Vietnam and Brazil rather

than from Mississippi and Arkansas."

One of the main obstacles is that U.S. companies and farmers that want to sell farm products to Cuba must accept only cash and cannot extend credit, he said.

Another U.S. policy bars ships that have docked in Cuba from docking in the United States for 120 days.

And while Cuba requires a veterinarian to inspect beef carcasses at stockyards and slaughter houses before they're shipped to that nation, the U.S. government doesn't allow Cuban veterinarians to come here.

The Engage Cuba Coalition, which has 11 state councils, includes private companies and organizations that are trying to build enough support to convince Congress to end

this country's trade and travel bans.

Press conference speakers said Idaho produces a lot of farm commodities that could benefit from freer trade with Cuba, including milk powder, beef, frozen potato products, wine, pulse crops, vegetable seed and malt.

"It's really quite a match-up when you look at what Cuba imports and what Idaho produces," said Skip Oppenheimer, CEO of Oppenheimer Companies Inc., a food processing and distribution company.

State Sen. Jim Patrick, a farmer from Twin Falls and member of the Engage Cuba Idaho Council, said Cuba used to be the No. 1 purchaser of Idaho small red beans before the U.S. trade embargo.

"For some commodities, Cuba would be a big opportu-

nity," he said.

Milk Producers of Idaho Executive Director Brent Olmstead said powdered milk and cheese would probably be the most promising dairy export possibilities to Cuba.

Albee said Engage Cuba has made significant progress since it began lobbying Congress last fall.

"My guess is that we may get something done on agriculture by the end of the year, if possible," he said. "But if not by then, the writing's on the wall. We've won the war."

Cuba, a nation of 11 million people, is fast becoming one of the world's top tourist destinations, according to an Engage Cuba fact sheet, and "lifting the travel ban will strengthen Cuba's economy and create a massive new market for U.S. agriculture and food producers."

## Grant pays for potato shipping study

By JOHN O'CONNELL  
Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho Potato Commission plans to hire a consultant to conduct a season-long inquiry into reducing rot in fresh potatoes that are shipped overseas.

The potato research was among 15 projects the Idaho State Department of Agriculture recently chose to fund with \$1.9 million in 2016 specialty crop block grants. The money is provided by USDA under the Farm Bill.

Overall, the state's potato industry received \$405,000 in specialty crop grants, including \$93,000 for the shipment study. USDA will issue final approval of the projects in late September. "As we've been shipping fresh potatoes internationally for the past several years, we're shipping further and further away, including to Southeast Asia and the Middle East," said Frank Muir, the potato commission's president and CEO. "Shipping fresh potatoes creates its own unique challenges. We're investigating ways we can mitigate damage to those potatoes in transit."

Muir said the research will evaluate dehumidifier use and proper temperature control to minimize mold growth during shipments that can take weeks to reach foreign ports. Muir said Idaho shippers have expressed increasing interest in improving quality in foreign shipments. Muir hopes to have results for shippers to put to use for exports of the current crop.

University of Idaho Extension storage specialist Nora Olsen will help the commission find consultants for the work.

Mary Jo Frazier, a support scientist for Olsen, said international shipments can end in very different environments than the U.S. ports from which they originate.

"Temperature control, humidity control, making sure there's fresh air circulation, those are going to be the biggest keys," Frazier said.

Frazier anticipates the research will involve placing instruments in actual fresh potato shipments to gather data and the use of growth chambers to simulate shipments.

Kevin Stanger, of Wada Farms in Eastern Idaho, said most fresh potatoes exported internationally are sent in refrigerated containers but "humidity is tough." He said shipments can take more than three weeks to reach their destinations, and Wada ships only top-quality potatoes to minimize the risk of rot.

"I know we're doing more export, and anything that can help increase the availability to continue moving potatoes outside of the market is always a good thing," Stanger said.

ISDA also awarded the potato commission \$109,000 to continue developing potatoes with resistance to pale cyst nematode — a microscopic worm found only in the U.S. within a small area of Idaho's Bonneville and Bingham counties.

## Hermiston watermelon harvest kicks into gear

By GEORGE PLAVERN  
EO Media Group

HERMISTON, Ore. — Hermiston watermelons, savored by Northwesterners for their distinctive sweetness, are back in season.

Growers began harvesting last week, and Finley's Fresh Produce of Hermiston was the first to arrive with melons in tow at the Pendleton, Ore., Farmers' Market.

"I tried them yesterday. They're so sweet and good," said Naomi Sanchez, who owns Finley's Fresh Produce with her husband, Ildefonso Zuniga. "We plan on selling out."

While early season watermelons might be a little smaller than average, Sanchez said the quality remains consistent. She credits Zuniga for knowing when they're ripe for the picking.

"I don't know how, but he always picks them when they're perfect," she said.

Hermiston watermelons have earned their reputation



E.J. Harris/EO Media Group

Hermiston watermelons are out of the fields and on display at the Finley's Fresh Produce booth July 8 at the Pendleton, Ore., Farmers' Market.

thanks to the Columbia Basin's unique combination of climate and soil. Watermelons are desert plants, which

take in heat during the day to produce sugar as a source of energy.

Not only are the days hot

enough for melons around Hermiston, but cooler nights slow the respiration process, which allows the

plants to retain all that sugar. Light, sandy soils also allow water to filter down deep to plant's roots. The result is a sweet and juicy summertime treat.

"What isn't good about watermelon?" Sanchez said, with a smile. "They're so good."

Jack Bellinger, of Bellinger Farms in Hermiston, said they started cutting melons off the vines last week. He said they'll start shipping to stores across the Northwest this week, including the Portland and Seattle metro areas.

The growing season this year has been hit-and-miss, Bellinger said, with some weeks topping out around 65 degrees and others reaching triple digits. That type of variation can interrupt watermelons while they're growing, but he anticipates the crop will fare well over the next couple of months.

"The quality looks really good," Bellinger said. "We're cutting really solid watermelons right now."



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