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Article 15

Cuba negotiating to buy millions in U.S. farm products

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HAVANA (AP) - Cuban officials are negotiating tens of millions of dollars worth of new food purchases with American farm representatives who attended a **U.S.-Cuba business conference** this week, the head of the island's food import concern said Wednesday.

Pedro Alvarez, president of Cuba's food import-export company Alimport, told reporters that contract details were being worked out and would be announced in the coming days.

"Every day there is more interest for normalizing commercial relations and travel," Alvarez said, referring to the restrictions that still remain on most American trade with and travel to the communist-run island. "This event was truly successful."

With the steady purchases of American food now allowed under an exception to the U.S. trade embargo, Cuba now counts the United States as around its 10th most important trade partner, Alvarez said. The United States now counts Cuba as its 44th or 45th most important trade partner for agricultural goods, he said.

Cuba spent about \$189 million in American foodstuffs last year alone, including transportation costs, said Alvarez.

Alvarez said his country has purchased or contracted to buy about \$250 million in U.S. farm products since late December 2001, when Cuba agreed to start buying the goods under a U.S. law that allows such purchases on a cash-only basis.

Cuba expects to purchase an accumulated total of as much as \$400 million in American food by the end of this year, said Alimport official Igor Montero.

"Iowa is a multi-billion-dollar grain and livestock producer," said Iowa State Secretary of Agriculture Patty Judge, among a small group of conference participants who traveled to Cuba on Wednesday after two days of seminars with Cuban officials in Cancun, Mexico.

"We believe Cuba will be a major trade partner in the future and look forward to that," Judge said. "It is a force that now cannot be stopped."

About 160 business people from across the United States attended the sessions on Monday and Tuesday in Cancun, said Kirby Jones, a Washington consultant who has organized the annual U.S.-Cuba Business conferences for several years now.

Among those attending the Mexico meetings were U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell, a Democrat from Washington state, who flew home before the Cuba leg of the conference, and Kansas Lt. Gov. John Moore, who was among those who traveled to the island on Wednesday.

"This one was different," Jones said, comparing the sessions with earlier years. "Before, people were talking about the potential (for trade)," he said. "Now, a year later, people were more relaxed, the way you are when you are talking about real deals."

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