

Alabama on Cuba: Tear down this embargo

As the U.S. considers thawing relations further, support for a more lenient policy is emerging in the South, where Cuba is seen less as a Cold War antagonist than as a rare growth market.

By Richard Fausset

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Reporting from Mobile, Ala. — The barges bound for Cuba already glide down the Mobile River from time to time, past James K. Lyons' office and south to the Gulf of Mexico.

These days, Lyons, the director of the Alabama State Port Authority, dreams of when the Cuban trade embargo will be fully dismantled. That would mean more barges loaded with even more goods from Alabama.

For Mobile, the state's graceful colonial port of call, it would also mean the revival of a commercial relationship with Havana that is older than the United States.

"They are one of our closest neighbors, and a historical trading partner, and we've drifted too far apart," Lyons said here recently, in his office overlooking the busy port of Mobile. "Where's the cheapest and best place for them to buy? It's here."

The debate over U.S.-Cuba policy has long been dominated by voices from Florida, home to the majority of Cuban Americans. But this year, as the Obama administration and Congress consider thawing U.S.-Cuba relations, support for a more lenient policy is emerging in, of all places, the conservative South, where Cuba is seen less as a Cold War antagonist than as a rare growth market.

In 2000, Congress passed an agricultural exemption to the trade embargo, and last year, Americans shipped \$718 million in goods to the communist island, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Alabama regularly sends cotton, corn, soybeans, railroad ties and utility poles, the latter being in particular demand after hurricanes, according to John Key, the state Agriculture Department's director of international trade.

Every state agriculture commissioner along the Gulf of Mexico now supports easing the Cuban embargo, with the unsurprising exception of Charles Bronson, the Republican agriculture commissioner in Florida.

And although polls show that Republicans around the country tend to support the U.S.-Cuba status quo, the Gulf-state commissioners in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas are Republicans.

"These people are seeing Cuba as the last economic frontier, especially at a time when markets are shrinking or stagnant," said Christopher Sabatini, senior director of policy for the Americas Society/Council of the Americas. "It's going to make for a much more favorable climate for lifting the embargo."

In Alabama, the call for change is by no means unanimous; Republican Gov. Bob Riley has said he supports the embargo as it is. But other leaders have been publicly savoring the possibilities of reconnecting with a market of about 11.4 million people just 626 miles from downtown Mobile.

Patti Culp, executive director of the Alabama Travel Council, envisions a day when all Americans will be able to travel to Cuba -- preferably, she says, on luxury cruise ships shoving off from the Mobile docks. This year, Culp traveled to Washington, where she lobbied Alabama's congressional delegation to lift the travel ban.

"We feel like it will create new reasons for people, especially people driving from up north, to think of Alabama as a destination," she said.

Lyons, the port director, believes that if the embargo is lifted, the state will be well-positioned to rebuild Cuba's crumbling infrastructure. He noted that Alabama is home to three major foundries that could produce sewer and water pipes.

And Ron Sparks, the state commissioner of agriculture and industry, hopes a new U.S. policy will allow Cubans to replace their famously jury-rigged jalopies with shiny new Hyundais -- specifically, the Sonata sedans and Santa Fe SUVs built by Alabama laborers at the company's \$1.4-billion factory.

Sparks has visited Havana on numerous trade missions and has already seen a few Hyundais zipping around its ancient streets.

"Why are they bringing them in from Korea when it's 800 miles to Havana from our plant in Montgomery?" he asked.

Sparks, a Democrat, takes credit for ramping up Alabama's Cuba trade after his election in 2002. His office now says that Alabama leads the nation in the total amount of agricultural goods produced for shipment to Cuba, generating \$450 million in economic activity per year and accounting for as many as 2,000 jobs.

To Sparks, the Cuba debate as defined in South Florida -- with its ideological fireworks and decades-long personal grudges -- is simply alien. "I don't know enough about it to have an opinion on it," he said.

Instead, he talks about the warmth and goodwill of the Cubans he has met, and the benefits of free trade for them and the people of Alabama.

"I grew up in the Cold War," Sparks said. "I thought Russia was the worst thing that could ever happen to America. But I also remember the day President Reagan stood on the wall and said, 'President Gorbachev, tear down this wall.' I supported that. Now let's tear down the wall between us and Cuba."

The ties between Alabama and Cuba go further back than one might expect. Founded by French explorer Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, Mobile was a Spanish city before it was an American one, and Mobile is dotted with reminders of vestigial links to Havana: A bronze likeness of D'Iberville stands near the riverbanks, gazing toward Havana, where he was buried in 1706. A matching statue stares back across the Gulf of Mexico from Cuba.

In the 1990s, a number of locals formed the Society Mobile-La Habana, and persuaded the city government to declare Havana its sister city.

Michael Feore, a past president of the society, keeps a stash of old shipping records in a box at home. They are evidence of the schooner fleet his grandfather once used to sail lumber to Cuba, a common transaction for Mobile businessmen before the time of the Castro dictatorship.

Feore, 70, is also one of a handful of older Mobilians who cherish the memory of a pre-revolutionary Havana that seemed especially magical by Alabama standards.

"I visited when I was 19, and it was just the most interesting and delightful place I'd ever been," he said.

If the cruise line ever sails back that way, he said he plans to be aboard.

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