

## **Luis Alejo, Henry T. Perea and Rudy Salas: We like what we saw on Cuban trade mission**

By Luis Alejo, Henry T. Perea and Rudy Salas

Recently, President Barack Obama participated in a face-to-face discussion with Cuban officials at the Summit of the Americas held in Panama City, Panama. This historic meeting further demonstrates his continued efforts to re-establish diplomatic relations with Cuba and take mutually beneficial steps forward.

While the President described his efforts, he also acknowledged crucial steps in the normalization process would not be completed rapidly and said, “We need to be patient – very patient.” Still, this meeting signifies an important step for our nation as our president seeks to ease tensions with Cuba rooted in events that took place before most of us were even born.

During the legislative recess, we, along with representatives of the California agricultural industry, Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins and members of the Assembly Agriculture Committee, participated in a trade mission to Cuba. While there, members established relationships with key policymakers, farmers and businesses associated with agriculture. We also explored various options for collaboration between California and Cuba.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Cuban agriculture market is worth \$1.7 billion. They import up to 80% of their food, which represents a huge opportunity for California farmers. In fact, according to the USDA, lifting the embargo would generate up to \$1.1 billion and create up to 6,000 American jobs.

Removing technical barriers between U.S. and Cuban companies will create a more-efficient, less-burdensome opportunity for Cuba to buy U.S. agricultural products. These policy changes will help make our products far more price competitive and provide Cubans with quality products, creating a new customer base for America’s winemakers, farmers and ranchers. This means those who grow and produce rice, almonds, grapes, strawberries, citrus, wheat, pork and beef all have chances to expand their opportunities in Cuba. This is one of many opportunities for California companies to grow jobs and expand our economic base.

California telecommunication and technology companies are also well positioned to service the Cuban market, where high prices, exceptionally slow connectivity, and extensive government regulation have resulted in a pronounced lack of access to applications and services other than email. Due to these factors, Cuba’s Internet penetration among its population is a mere 15%. This is another opportunity for tech-savvy California to grow.

Additionally, Cuba’s health care system is labeled as “a model for the world” and is praised for its strides in medical research. Unfortunately, the embargo has prevented Cuba and the United States from exchanging medical and technological advances. Despite limited medical research funding from the government, Cuban researchers have developed experimental cancer treatments, as well as numerous vaccines, including a vaccine used worldwide for meningitis B. We see great benefit for both countries as medical information and technologies are shared.

In January, Assembly Member Alejo introduced a resolution, AJR 3, urging Congress to go even further by ending the economic embargo of Cuba. Removing barriers between the United States and Cuba is mutually beneficial because both countries have the opportunity to expand and invest in thriving industries.

During our time in Cuba, we met many hardworking locals and there seemed to be a sense that major change was coming and a prosperous future was on the horizon. Normalizing the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba is the right thing to do. It would finally end an outdated approach that has failed to advance our interest and increase the economic mobility of American businesses.

In fact, according to a recent article in The Washington Post, Cubans are optimistic about their future and are in favor of normalizing relations with the United States and ending the U.S. trade embargo of their nation.

As the seventh largest economy in the world, California has much to offer and gain from Cuba in the near future as new businesses, exports and educational opportunities emerge as a result of normalizing our relationship with Cuba.

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