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Congress Kills Attempt to Ease Trade with Cuba

by LADB Staff

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Congressional leaders backed away from the most recent attempt to ease restrictions on trade with Cuba, dropping a provision in a mammoth farm bill that would have allowed private financing of Cuban purchases of food products in the US. A bill passed with bipartisan support two years ago permits sales of food and medicine to Cuba on a cash-only basis. Hard-line supporters of the US embargo said at the time that Cuba lacked the cash to buy much (see NotiCen, 2000-11-16). But since then, Cuba has negotiated delivery of some US\$75 million in agricultural products and has other contracts pending.

Majorities in both houses of Congress favor an end to or a loosening of the US embargo, but Republican leaders notably Majority Whip Tom Delay (R-TX) have blocked reform attempts (see NotiCen, 2000-08-04). The Senate version of the farm bill (Farm Security and Rural Investment Act) contained language permitting the private financing of agricultural sales to Cuba.

On April 23, the House voted 273-143 for a nonbinding resolution sponsored by Calvin Dooley (D-CA) to instruct House members on the House-Senate conference committee to support private financing a provision that was not in the original House version. The farm bill provides US\$73.5 billion in subsidies and other benefits to US agriculture. Sponsors of the Cuba trade provision hoped Republicans would support the bill and that President George W. Bush would sign it to avoid any threat to the main text of the bill, which is seen as vital for shoring up votes in key farm states. But the farm bill pits the interests of the growing number of farm-state representatives who want trade with Cuba against those often the same people who want the massive subsidies and other benefits offered in the bill. So, on April 26, senators supporting the Cuba provision dropped it from the bill.

Sen. Tom Harkin (D-IA), chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee and one of the farm bill's principal sponsors, said the Cuba provision had been dropped in the conference committee because "it was not worth fighting for." Anti-Castro Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) thanked fellow Republicans for blocking the provision on behalf of "the suffering Cuban people."

Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND), a leader of farm-state senators pressing for more trade with Cuba, said he would try again later to get the provision passed. State Department revokes visas for Cuban trade delegation. Meanwhile, the Bush administration is trying to block new trade deals with Cuba that are permitted under current law. While the trade bill was under discussion in Congress, the State Department prevented representatives from the Cuban agricultural-import agency Alimport from entering the US on a trade mission. The officials had received approval of their visa applications in March to arrange the purchase of US\$35 million worth of grains, poultry, apples, and other products.

Angered by the State Department action, Sen. Dorgan wrote Alimport director Pedro Alvarez inviting the delegation to visit North Dakota on trade business, and at the same time he asked

Secretary of State Colin Powell to ensure the officials all got visas. Dorgan said a State Department official had explained to his staff that the visas were revoked because of a Bush administration policy to discourage grain sales to Cuba. "This is a brainless policy to be saying that we don't want to sell grain to the Cubans," Dorgan said. "We sell grain to communist China, communist Vietnam....At a time when grain prices remain collapsed, it is just plain wrong for the administration to try to impede the sale of grain to Cuba."

Another official said the reason for revoking the visas was that the State Department discourages travel in the US by Cuban officials. Later, Powell offered yet another explanation: Alimport official Alvarez had lobbied against US Cuba policy during a previous visit, he said. But Powell said he was pleased with the sales to Cuba and believed they were a good idea if they benefitted US farmers. He said the Cubans could make their purchases without the presence of Alvarez in the US. Dorgan agreed, and said that if Alimport could not come to North Dakota, the North Dakota Farm Bureau would send representatives to Cuba to arrange sales.

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