

Improving relations with Cuba

By Rep. Luke Malek and Rep. Mat Erpelding

The Trump administration's plan to roll back policy initiatives between the United States and Cuba is a missed opportunity for the country and a substantive blow to potentially lucrative markets here in Idaho.

What you may have missed from the news reporting on this issue is that bipartisan support for improved trade relations with Cuba is alive and well. It is our opinion that together, Idaho Democrats and Republicans can cultivate a healthy economic relationship with Cuba that will prove fruitful to all Idahoans. That's why we are working to advance this critical issue.

For context, the United States has restricted trade with Cuba dating back to the Eisenhower Administration, when an arms embargo was implemented. As a result, Cuba began to purchase arms from Russia. Diplomatic tension and the threat of nuclear war escalated into the Kennedy Administration and the embargo was expanded to cover commodities. The sale of agricultural goods for humanitarian efforts highlighted the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000, a trade exception that allows for limited exports to Cuba.

The opportunities that exist in Cuba for Idaho businesses are significant. Consider the fact that presently, Cuba imports 60-80% of its food, a market estimated at \$2 billion. That means that farmers and suppliers of fruits, vegetables, meats, dairy goods and countless other necessities currently enjoy access to this large and sustainable market. The problem is, virtually none of our American farmers are profiting from that due to the restrictive nature of the current U.S. trade embargo with Cuba.

Clearly, if there's one thing that Idahoans know, it's agriculture. Imagine the possibilities for our state to expand its global reach and serve as a leader in exports of our high-quality goods to the island. Again, that market figure is \$2

billion. To capture just a slice of that pie would produce strong returns for our state and put more people to work.

However, federal government barriers continue to hinder our ability to capitalize. In fact, while Cuban imports have continued to trend upward over the last decade, U.S. exports to Cuba have declined each year since 2009. This is due to several restrictions in the embargo. One requires U.S. businesses to accept only cash when operating in Cuba. Another bars Cuban veterinarians from inspecting meat on our land prior to export, which is a procedure required by their laws.

It's time the U.S. ended its outdated trade policy on Cuba. The embargo was conceived in an era of great fear and international military posturing. Indeed, the U.S. approached the brink of war with Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion and Cuban Missile Crisis, but avoided full-scale conflict. And yet, we've managed to normalize, to varying degrees, the diplomatic and trade relationships with nations like Vietnam and China — former enemies that now contribute billions of dollars to our country's economy and tens of millions of dollars to Idaho's bottom line.

We need relations with Cuba, especially in trade, to advance, not regress. We recognize that, and so do many other influential Idaho politicians, businesses, religious groups, universities and others who comprise the Idaho State Council to Engage Cuba. This group is a coalition chaired by Gov. Butch Otter that is actively lobbying Congress to lift the trade embargo. Regardless of affiliation, profession, or background, we all share the same interest in serving Idahoans as best we can. In this case, we wholeheartedly believe that working with Cuba, rather than shutting them out, is the right thing to do.

Agriculture isn't the only arena in which Idahoans can benefit. The technology and communications sector is able to invest in Cuba today thanks to a policy exception called "Support for the Cuban People." This exception allows companies to provide Cubans with phones and tablets, as well as internet access, infrastructure and other related services critical to business and communication needs. Imagine the opportunities for Idaho's blossoming tech sector, led by Micron and HP and startups such as Cradlepoint, Kount, or Because International and others. Helping to construct a communications grid in a developing nation is no easy task, but

Idaho tech companies and professionals possess the knowledge, experience and solutions to get the job done.

Doing what's right for each other is what Idahoans do, and doing what's right for Idaho is what we and the coalition aim to do. Together, we can continue to position our state as a leader in the evolving global economy.

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