

Alexander makes trip to Cuba

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Louisiana Congressman Rodney Alexander was part of a five-member group of U.S. lawmakers that arrived in Havana Monday to explore agricultural trade opportunities.

Government officials indicate they hope the trip would lead to contracts to sell up to \$150 million in American goods to Cuba.

The delegation, headed by Connecticut Democrat Rosa DeLauro, plans to meet with at least one top Cuban official before returning to the United States.

"We are a diverse group geographically and in our politics toward Cuba," DeLauro said. "But we view this as an opportunity to learn, to create dialogue about issues of mutual concern."

Joining Alexander, R-Quitman, and DeLauro were Democratic Reps. Marion Berry of Arkansas and Bob Etheridge of North Carolina, as well as

Jack Kingston, R-Ga. All were making their first trips to the island, except Berry who was in Cuba in 2000.

DeLauro, Berry and Etheridge have all supported legislation to ease U.S. trade restrictions toward Cuba in the past, while Kingston has supported the embargo.

The lawmakers said agriculture trade opportunities were a key reason they came and their visit coincided with a trade fair on the communist-run island bringing together 114 food and agricultural companies from 22 U.S. states.

Louisiana rice farmers have also indicated a desire to resume selling their product to Cuba.

Louisiana Farm Bureau spokesman Mike Danna said that rice farmers would be the biggest winners in the state should some type of agricultural deal be worked out with Cuba.

"Cuba eats much more rice than they produce," Danna said. "Prior to the embargo, Louisiana was one of the pri-

mary sources of rice to Cuba."

Danna said there was an old saying: rice on the barge Monday, on the Cuban's table by Thursday.

"Cuba is in such close proximity that it helps keep the costs down," Danna said. "Cubans also liked Louisiana's long-grained rice."

"If the congressional delegation can do anything to open up some new markets, Louisiana rice growers would certainly appreciate it."

Pedro Alvarez, chairman of Cuba's food import company Alimport, said talks should produce more than \$150 million in deals.

Washington maintains a 45-year-old embargo, but U.S. food and agricultural products can be sold directly to Cuba under a law passed by the U.S. Congress in 2000.

Since Havana first took advantage in 2001, it says it has spent more than \$2.2 billion on American farm products and logistical costs.