

Cuba, U.S. studying closer agricultural cooperation

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U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack met here Thursday with his Cuban counterpart, Gustavo Rodriguez, to discuss closer bilateral cooperation in their sector, Cuba's official media said.

The two men discussed the possibilities of increasing trade in agricultural products despite the limitations imposed by the U.S. embargo on the communist island that has prevailed since 1962, although it has been eased in certain areas by President Barack Obama.

Vilsack arrived on Wednesday in Havana and met with Vice President Ricardo Cabrisas.

He will complete his agenda on Friday with visits to agricultural cooperatives, one of the means of production that the island is developing as part of its strategy to "update" its socialist economic model.

Vilsack is scheduled on Friday, at the end of his visit, to offer a press conference at the U.S. Embassy.

Accompanying Vilsack on his first official visit to Cuba are Sen. Jeff Merkley and Reps. Terri Sewell, Kurt Schrader and Suzan Delbene, all of whom were present at the meeting that was also attended by the top U.S. diplomat in Havana, Jeffrey DeLaurentis.

Although food is the main element in trade between Cuba and the United States, the embargo forces the island to pay in advance in cash for its purchases of U.S. agricultural goods.

Vilsack is the third member of Obama's Cabinet to visit Cuba since the reestablishment of diplomatic relations on July 20 with the re-opening of embassies in the respective capitals.

Secretary of State John Kerry was the first Cabinet member to travel to Cuba in August for the raising of the U.S. flag at the embassy, and in October Commerce Secretary Penny Pritzker was also in Havana.

Also visiting Cuba in recent weeks has been the special U.S. envoy for the fight against climate change, Todd Stern, and Deputy Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Since the announcement of the process to reestablish relations last December, delegations of businessmen from various states have frequently visited Cuba and, more recently, a group of 25 U.S. companies attended the International Fair in Havana.

In addition, the governors of New York and Arkansas have traveled to Cuba with the intention of building closer links with the island and positioning their states for a possible lifting of the embargo.

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