Wishing upon a Cuban star

They want Louisiana rice, and trade could mean a big boon to the state’s agriculture

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Americans may covet Cuba’s hand-rolled cigars or daydream about sunbathing on its glittering beaches, but Cubans crave Louisiana agriculture products, especially the Bayou State’s rice.

And as the United States continues on its path of normalizing diplomatic relations with the forbidden isle, Louisiana farmers believe opening up free trade with Cuba can ultimately be a boon for agriculture.

“Cuba has the potential to buy half our crop, about 600,000 tons,” said Acadiana farmer Richard Fontenot, who grows rice and other crops in Ville Platte. “I’ve heard they really favor our rice, and they consume a ton of it.”

Cuba and the United States are on the verge of reopening embassies on each other’s shores for the first time since President John F. Kennedy cut ties with the country in the 1960s. President Barack Obama favors a gradual lifting of decades-long trade and tourism restrictions, although the embargo remains law for now.

“If we ever get this deal going it’s going to be a big boost,” said Elton Kennedy, who grows thousands of acres of rice in northeastern Louisiana and operates three rice mills. “Cuba used to be one of our biggest customers. Cubans love our rice.”

Farmers and agriculture officials say Louisiana is perfectly positioned to cash in on trade with Cuba because of its close proximity to Louisiana ports.

“The freight costs are tremendous on all of the rice we’re shipping to Iraq and other countries now,” Kennedy said. “That’s not the case with Cuba.”

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Fontenot agreed, saying, “We can get rice to Cuba cheaper than anybody, and that translates to a premium for Louisiana farmers.”

“We’re right here; we’re their closest trading partner,” Louisiana Agriculture Commissioner Mike Strain said. “We’re perfectly poised to make that connection.”

But the connection isn’t complete yet. Even with relaxed restrictions U.S. farmers can’t sell their commodities to Cuba unless it’s an all-cash transaction.

“You can’t do it today, but I’d love to eventually have the opportunity to meet with buyers and ship direct,” Fontenot said.

Strain said he believes there will be an escalation in the removal of restrictions after the embassies open, but the biggest initial barrier will be Cuba having enough money to buy Louisiana commodities.

“Then I think you’ll see a steady progression to normalization during the next two years,” he said. “Tourism from Americans in Cuba will infuse its economy and help the country be able to afford our products.”

“It’s going to happen, and it should,” Kennedy said. “There’s no reason not to do it.”

But there are those in Congress who don’t agree. Among them are Cuban-American U.S. Sens. Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz, both seeking the Republican nomination for president, who have threatened to withhold funding for an embassy in Havana.

Louisiana Republican U.S. Reps. Ralph Abraham and Charles Boustany, who represent most of the state’s rice-growing regions, said they’re mindful of their colleagues concerns, but they argue opening up trade will help the Cuban people.

“I’m certainly concerned about human rights issues in Cuba, but we do business with other countries who have similar issues,” said Abraham, who sits on the House Agriculture Committee. “Opening trade gets the Cuban people on a better footing and will make both Cuba and Louisiana better places to live.

“Cuba is a prime business partner for us. Louisiana and the Mississippi River are the gateways to international trade and certainly would be the gateways to Cuba. They want our commodities and they want them bad.”

Boustany said opening trade with Cuba “will give us leverage to get the government to pull back on human rights violations.”

“It’s time to move cautiously forward with normalization, and agriculture is a reasonable starting point,” Boustany said. “Our farmers would benefit immensely.”

And although rice would be Louisiana’s signature export to Cuba, Strain said other crops would also benefit.

“Rice, wheat, poultry — Cuba wants all of those and more,” Strain said. “There’s also a market for small used farm equipment we can send them.”

Caddo Parish farmer Steve Logan doesn’t grow rice, which is primarily cultivated in the Mississippi Delta and Acadiana regions of Louisiana, but he believes rice could open the door for other commodity exports.

“Initially there won’t be much impact for the crops I grow (feed corn, cotton and soybeans), but you never know,” Logan said. “It would be great for Louisiana agriculture overall, and it’s always best to have more trading partners. I don’t see any down side at all.”

And even if Logan’s crops aren’t coveted by Cubans, he’d like the chance to travel there.

“I hear there’s great fishing,” he said.

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