



Dear Friends:

With courage and determination, Rep. Collin Peterson, the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, won passage of legislation to end the travel ban for all Americans to Cuba and to remove key restrictions on U.S. food exports to the island.

Against great odds - a tough political climate, the shower of campaign contributions from supporters of the embargo, intense pressure from Members who serve on other Committees, and cries of "dictatorship" from vested interests against the chairman - Peterson mustered a majority of his Committee to win approval for his bi-partisan legislation that offers a decisive change in U.S. policy toward Cuba.

While Committee action in the House is the first step in a lengthy legislative journey before the bill can become law, it is also a historic step, made all the more so by the leadership of Chairman Peterson, a relative newcomer to the issue. Peterson and his twenty-four supportive [colleagues](#) deserve our thanks.

Sanctions against Cuba have existed for five decades, and by any reasonable measure they have failed in their intent and hurt U.S. interests. They have denied Americans the freedom to travel, cost our economy thousands of jobs, and harmed our credibility as an advocate of democracy in Cuba and the region, even as Cuba's government and system have remained in place. Growing majorities of Americans, growing majorities of Cuban Americans, and voices representing the people of Cuba themselves all want the U.S. government to change our policy. Cubans want to decide their nation's future for themselves and want our country to be allied in their effort.

According to press reports, a spokesman for the U.S. State Department declined to say whether the Obama administration would support the legislation. But silence is not a policy and the status quo does not measure up - either to our nation's values or the historic moment. The travel ban should be lifted this year with the administration's active support.

This week in Cuba news....

U.S. - CUBA RELATIONS

[House Committee Votes to End Travel Ban and Boost Farm Sales to Cuba](#)

The House Agriculture Committee [voted](#) 25-20 to pass legislation, the Travel Restriction Reform

and Export Enhancement Act, to end the travel ban and ease rules governing the sale of agricultural commodities to the island.

Commenting on the vote, Rep. Collin Peterson, Committee Chairman, and author of the legislation, [said](#), "We have tried isolating Cuba for more than fifty years and it has not worked...Today's vote demonstrates that Congress is ready to change our nation's approach on this issue."

Rep. Jerry Moran (R-KS) who co-sponsored Peterson's bill [commented](#) that "today's vote is a step in the right direction and a victory for America's farmers and ranchers. This legislation will standardize our trade policies, increase export sales and create thousands of American jobs without increasing the deficit."

The legislation would have a significant economic impact in the United States. One study released by the U.S. International Trade Commission estimated that lifting the travel ban and changes in U.S. export rules would boost sales of farm goods to the island by \$924 million to \$1.2 billion annually. An earlier [report](#) by the Brattle Group, international economic forecasters, saw increases in U.S. economic output from \$650 million to \$1.08 billion annually from a repeal of the travel ban, creating upwards of 15,000 new jobs.

Action on the legislation breaks a years-long deadlock in Congress over restoring the right to travel.

The bi-partisan bill, co-sponsored by 65 members of the House, received broad support across a spectrum of interests. [Letters](#) from the business and farming sectors on the eve of the Committee vote, [op-eds](#), and [Letters to the Editor](#), helped [demonstrate](#) the breadth of the coalition behind the measure and made an important impact on the Committee.

During its consideration, opponents of the bill expressed concerns that opening travel would only serve to bolster the Castro government. "We should continue to facilitate the shipment of food to Cuba and streamlining that process is important," [said](#) Oklahoma Rep. Frank Lucas, the committee's ranking member. "However, this bill goes beyond that aim and effectively, I believe, repeals the embargo the United States has had in place to prevent the enrichment of Castro's regime. Removing travel restrictions for tourism has nothing to do with technical barriers to exports. The Cuban people are desperate for access to affordable food, not tourists."

Tom Rooney, a Florida Representative, [expressed](#) a similar view. "At this juncture, lifting the ban would amount to yet another bailout - only this time, we'd be bailing out a brutal dictatorship on the brink of collapsing."

In the end, using his considerable influence and parliamentary prowess, Chairman Peterson was able to win majority support for the measure. In [comments](#) issued after the vote, Peterson said, "We have tried to isolate Cuba for more than fifty years, and it has not worked...As it has in other countries, perhaps increasing trade with Cuba will encourage democratic progress."

Rep. Howard Berman, chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, also released a

[statement](#) in support of the bill, which said "letting U.S. citizens travel to Cuba is not a gift to the Castros - it is in the interest of our own citizens. It's time to trust our own people and restore their right to travel."

Hard-line opponents of the measure viewed the historic Committee action very differently.

Capitol Hill Cubans, the voice of the hard-line, pro-embargo lobby, condemned the vote and [called](#) the House Agriculture Committee "Chairman Peterson's dictatorship."

Senator Bob Menendez (D-NJ) [vowed](#) to block the legislation if it is proposed in the Senate. "Repression is repression and dictatorships are dictatorships," he said, "no matter where they are located or whether you want to use their resorts." His colleague from Florida, Senator George Lemieux, [issued](#) a similar threat.

Senators Byron Dorgan (D-ND) and Mike Enzi (R-WY), cosponsors of legislation to repeal the travel ban, replied with [statements](#) of their own indicating that they have enough support in their chamber to defeat a filibuster against the legislation. Dorgan said "It makes no sense to punish the American people by restricting their right to travel simply because our country is trying to punish the Cuban government."

Before reaching the Senate, the legislation has to be passed by the full House. While the Agriculture Committee's vote was only the first step in the process, "supporters view it as a significant step toward normalization of the relationship" between the U.S. and Cuba, the [AP](#) reported.

As Sarah Stephens of the Center for Democracy in the Americas said, "this bill, which will put more American food on Cuba's tables, and put more American visitors on Cuba's streets, will be good for our economy and provide needed support for the Cuban people. The U.S. needs a new Cuba policy, and the Peterson-Moran bill is a decisive change in the right direction."