Cuba buys peas, even without trade mission to North Dakota

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WASHINGTON — Cuba has agreed to buy 2,000 metric tons of dry peas from North Dakota, in what Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., said is the first of several food deals with the communist nation.

The sale announced Tuesday was the first such trade between North Dakota farmers and Cuba in more than 40 years. It came on the heels of the State Department's refusal to allow Cuban trade officials to travel to the United States on a food-buying mission.

Dorgan, who favors ending the Cuban trade embargo ordered in 1962 by President Kennedy, called it a landmark deal.

"This opens the door so our farmers can sell into the Cuban marketplace," said Dorgan. "Today's purchase is the first ray of hope that they'll be able to send food to that marketplace just as Canadians and Europeans do."

The deal does not represent a lot of money. Dry peas were trading Tuesday for $5.83 per 100 pounds, meaning the total value of the sale to farmers was about $257,000.

But Greg Johnson, owner of Premier Pulses, in Minot, N.D., one of three processors that won sales contracts with Cuba, said farmers welcome greater trade with Cuba.

The Caribbean nation's annual demand for about 250,000 metric tons of dry peas, chickpeas and other lentils has equaled or surpassed America's total output in past years, Johnson said.

"Right now that's a Canadian market," he said of Cuba, "it's been withheld from the U.S. market for more than 40 years now."

The other two processors that sold peas were Superior Grain in Crosby, and Agrico United in Ray.

Contracts to sell black beans and pinto beans to Cuba are also expected to be announced soon, Dorgan said.

The dry pea deal was brokered despite the lack of a visit to North Dakota by officials from Alimport, the agency that buys food for the Cuban government. Dorgan bickered publicly with the State Department after the department revoked a travel visa it had issued to Pedro Alvarez, the Alimport chief. In April, Dorgan was still angry with the State Department on Tuesday.

"Every country that purchases food from us sends buying missions to the United States," Dorgan said. "We've had them from China and from Taiwan."

"I just thought it was inappropriate to prohibit the Alimport officials from coming. These sales are taking place in spite of — not because of — the State Department," Dorgan said.

Dorgan said that, in Cuba, the only communist nation in the Western Hemisphere, under a law enacted two years ago, Alimport has bought about $75 million in U.S. farm products in the past six months.

That same law forbids the private or public financing of food sales to Cuba, requiring them to be paid for with cash.

Dorgan said he is proposing legislation that would allow the Cuban government to buy food with financing from American banks.