

CANADA-CUBA FARMER-TO-FARMER PROJECT

“There Are Many Lessons to be Learned Here”

By RosanaROJAS



Photos: Juan Carlos Loyola

From left, coop vice president Justo Gonzales Gonzales; Canadian volunteer project manager Wendy Holm; coop president Juan Sanchez Martell and Canadian dairy farmer Morgan Millson.

WENDY HOLM is an award-winning Canadian agrologist, policy economist, farm journalist and speaker with more than 35 years of experience. In the last 13 years, she has helped bring some 600 farmers to Cuba to learn about the country's success in sustainable agriculture.

The single mom and her daughter visited Cuba in 1998, when the island's farmers were still grappling with the economic hardships of the Special Period, as explained to her by the Agriculture Ministry spokesman at the time, Juan Jose Leon Vega. "I told him of my great concern for the plight of Canada's farmers. At the end, I said, 'Wouldn't it be interesting to take your farmers and our farmers and bring them together and see what happens?' Leon agreed, and the Canada-Cuba Farmer to Farmer Project was born."

The first group of Canadian farmers visited Cuba in 1999,

and that same year, a group of 27 Cuban farmers and agricultural professionals toured British Columbia's farms. Since then, Holm has brought hundreds of farmers to Cuba to learn about sustainable agriculture, in collaboration with Cuba's National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP).

"These bridges of cooperation and understanding between our farm communities have also contributed to capacity-building: for six years now I have led an award-winning international farmer-to-farmer volunteer cooperation project (through Canadian NGO Sustainable Cities with an initial pilot grant from CIDA) to support the development of a sustainable dairy production model at a cooperative in Mayabeque province."

"It is very interesting for Canadian farmers to come to Cuba and meet counterparts who are amongst the most highly paid in the country, who have the full policy respect of the Cuban government, who speak in one strong voice (ANAP) and who have weaned themselves off pesticides and farm chemicals (admittedly abruptly and of necessity) and are now farming in a diversified, sustainable and mostly organic manner, using biological methods to control pest and diseases and organic fertilizers and crop management to build healthy soils. There are many lessons to be learned, and as one farmer observed, 'What better place to learn them?'"

Since 2005, Holm, who holds a Master's of Science in agricultural economics, also has taught a 3-credit course on sustainable agriculture in Cuba every May for the University of British Columbia's Land and Food Systems program.

"This February, I will be in Cuba with two separate groups — the 30th Canadian farmer delegation (in collaboration with ANAP) and a delegation of Canadian culinary students who will 'cook it up' with their Cuban counterparts (in collaboration

with the Cuban Culinary Association)," she said.

In December, Holm brought a group of academics and practitioners in cooperatives from three countries to meet with their Cuban counterparts for a week of informal discussions on what she describes as "Cuba's move to a more cooperative economy."

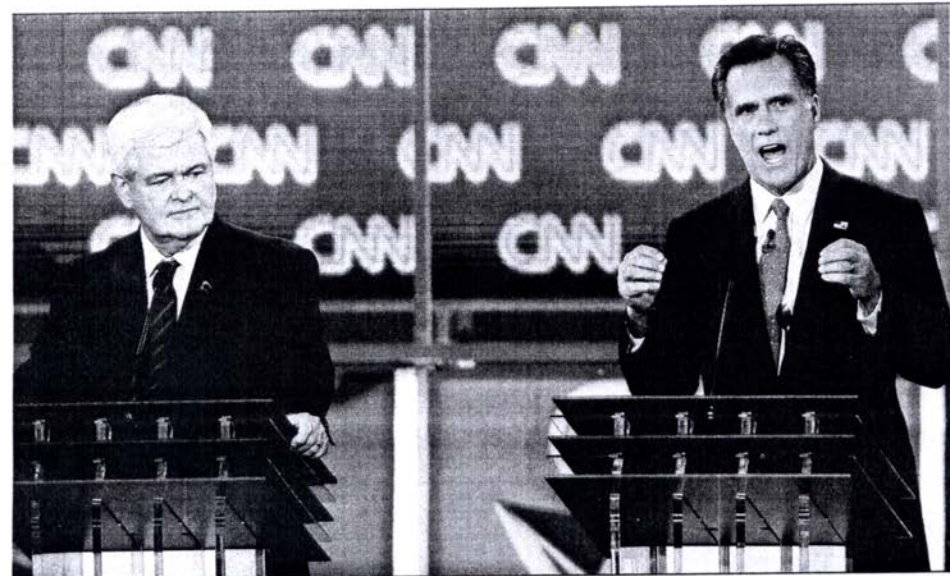
"Cuba is well-recognized as a leader in sustainable agriculture and organic farming methods, but for me, the most exciting news is Cuba's leadership in sustainable economics. Our study trip in December was the first of what I see as a much wider window of engagement," she said. "International cooperative support is important to validate Cuba's path and encourage her success, because if Cuba can demonstrate the same leadership in sustainable economies that she did in sustainable farming practices, we will have another wonderful Cuban model to learn from."



Ribbon cutting ceremony at coop to open new rotational pastures (Los Pedestales). Center, ANAP president Orlando Lugo Fonte, Canadian volunteer project manager Wendy Holm and coop members.

No Surprise in Cuba at Hostility of US Candidates

*Longstanding and unsuccessful efforts to destroy the Revolution are behind
U.S. presidential election campaign rhetoric / P.6*



Republican presidential candidates, former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, left, listens to former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney at a Republican presidential candidates debate in Jacksonville, Fla.

Ecotourism on the Guanahacabibes Peninsula

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