

Cuban ag reforms boost food production.

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We boarded the plane in Vancouver anticipating an interesting visit to Cuba's farms. We returned to Vancouver, two weeks later, amazed at what we had seen and intrigued with the potential it held for BC agriculture.

At the invitation of Lic. Juan Jose Leon Vega, Director, Relaciones Internacionales, Ministerio de la Agricultura, Republica de Cuba, 20 British Columbia farmers and myself spent the second and third week of January on the first leg of the bilateral 1999 BC-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer Exchange: a red-carpet, ten day, five province (Havana, Matanzas, Cienfuegos, Santi Spiritus, Ciego de Avila) tour of Cuban agriculture.

We spent quality time walking through fields, having one-on-one discussions with farmers and sitting in meetings with the elected leaders of some of Cuba's largest farmer cooperatives (vegetables, tropical vegetables, tropical fruits, tobacco, sugar cane, animal breeding stock, greenhouse vegetables, citrus processing). We visited small, independent farm enterprises (ornamental shrubs, flowers, rustic dairies, rustic greenhouses), urban markets and organoponicas. We met with senior agricultural planners and research scientists at the provincial and federal level. We were treated as valued visitors by the Cuban government and with extreme warmth, openness and generosity by Cuba's farming community.

But our greatest surprise by far was what we saw in the fields of Cuba: the vast scale and impressive quality of Cuba's crops and farming systems.

Prior to leaving Varadero Beach — where we spent three days "relaxing and bonding" prior to embarking on our farm tour — we sat down and watched the 38 minute video "The Greening of Cuba" which told of Cuba's conversion from "classical" to "alternative" agriculture:

Prior to the late 1980's, Cuban agriculture was characterized by "modern" large scale, high input monoculture. When the Soviet Union collapsed (the beginning of Cuba's "Special Period"), so too did Cuba's pipeline for feed grains, pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, tractors and farm machinery, equipment and parts. Pesticide imports dropped by more than 60%, fertilisers by 77% and petroleum for agriculture was cut in half. Cuba's food imports were also cut in half, a dramatic problem for a country which at that time imported 60% of its food supplies.

Faced with the challenge of more than doubling food production with half the inputs while at the same time maintaining exports for needed foreign exchange, Cuba embarked on the largest conversion to sustainable farm management practices ever attempted. With 11 percent of Latin America's scientists, 2 percent of its population and a well-developed research infrastructure, Cuba was well positioned to take up the challenge of adopting alternative farming methods based on composting and vermiculture (earthworms); reduced tillage, organic soil amendments, biofertilizers, green manures and crop rotations; intercropping; pest and disease monitoring; biological control programs; waste recycling and the intensive use of human and animal labour in farm production systems.

Having viewed this video, we then ventured forth on our bus tour fully expecting to see farms with low-input, labour intensive, "traditional" farm management systems.

What we did not anticipate — and were thoroughly surprised/impressed by — was the vast scale and high quality of Cuban agriculture and the sophistication and effectiveness of Cuba's sustainable farm management practices. Many of the farms we visited were thousands of hectares in size. Most were private cooperatives (since 1993, 74% of Cuba's farmland is held directly by farmers, most in large-scale cooperatives). With dead straight rows of blemish-free crops as far as the eye could see. Oxen and workers in the fields. Quite respectable yields and ample water for irrigation. ANAP, an organization

representing Cuba's national association of small farmers, a politically strong and high-profile representative on all cooperative boards. Farmers who are highly skilled stewards of the land and amongst the most highly paid workers in Cuban society.

CUBA'S DOMESTIC CHALLENGES

While Cuba has made great strides in sustainable agriculture, meeting domestic food needs remains a national priority. (For example, although Cuba maintains an impressive breeding herd and strong bloodlines to build from, Cuba's livestock sector continues to suffer from a lack of feedgrains. Cuba's milk production alone has reportedly dropped by some 70% due to the sustained effect of the "Special Period".) Under the US Blockade, ships that dock in Cuban ports are banned from entering US ports for 180 days. Consequently, most product destined for Cuba must be shipped through foreign ports such as Mexico where it is transferred to a Cuban-bound vessel. This extra handling costs Cuba an additional 25% above world prices for feedgrains and other food products in short domestic supply.

To ensure adequate supplies of food for her people, Cuba has made both nutrition and food production a national priority. Establishing an ambitious target of 400 grams of fresh vegetables per person per day, Cuba has undergone a series of agrarian reforms to support this which include privatization of state farms, opening of farm markets and establishment of farm tax systems to boost food production in food deficient areas. In urban areas, numerous "organoponicas" produce vegetables in intensive, raised beds systems without the use of chemicals. Cuban urbanites can buy their vegetables direct from such organoponicas or from city markets serviced by outlying farms. On one such organoponica we visited in Ciego de Avila, ten people on 6000 m² of land produced enough fresh vegetables for 4000 city-dwellers each year. Cuba's population appears very well nourished as a result.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR BC

Agribusiness giant Archer, Daniels, Midland projects the US share of the Cuban market, should the blockade be lifted, to be \$2.6 billion US. Farm groups in the US are lobbying governments for access to what they perceive as an increasingly lucrative market.

The BC Trade and Investment Office (BC Ministry of Employment and Investment) identifies agriculture as an area of strategic importance to this province:

There are quality long term opportunities for expanded trade and investment with Cuba. The advantages of doing business in Cuba include a well educated workforce, a safe and ethical business environment, an expanding demand for modern business tools and a market that is for the most part closed to our American competitors.

There are also challenges to doing business in Cuba, including very limited financing from EDC and the commercial sources, fairly limited business infrastructure and the sometimes slow responses from Cuban government enterprises that must participate in every transaction or joint venture.

On balance, there appears to be significant opportunity for British Columbia companies to establish trade relationships with Cuba, that should expand substantially when the US embargo is eventually removed.

BC companies currently active in Cuba include tourism, mining, light manufacturing, meat products (dark chicken meat and mechanically deboned chicken meat is BC's largest export to Cuba), paper products, transshipment services, communications and ancillary services. Canada is Cuba's most important trading partner.

Although lacking certification infrastructure, most of Cuban agriculture is "organic". Sales of certified organic products internationally increased over 20% each year this decade and nears \$10 billion annually. Organic is identified as the fastest growing sector of the agri-food industry worldwide.

With BC's highly knowledgeable farmers and internationally accepted method of accreditation, BC has the expertise necessary for Cuba to achieve acceptance in the worldwide organic marketplace, paving the way for co-production and processing arrangements that take advantage of the skills and capacity of the Cuban farm sector and the technology, marketing expertise, investment capital and know-how of BC farmers.

BC-CUBA PROJECT

At the end of our visit to Cuba, 20 BC farmers and the Cuban Government met in Havana and reached formal agreement on a BC-Cuba Project. The objective of this Project is to complete the second leg of the Exchange — bringing Cuba's farmers to BC this August, an opportunity which the Cuban government says will move their farmers "ten years ahead" in their agricultural development — and to facilitate the ongoing development of closer technical, scientific, economic and trade ties between our farming and agri-business sectors. (Areas of interest include the development of a "cooperative-to-cooperative" joint venture model and the provision of BC assistance to create a Cuban-based organic certification infrastructure.)

Thus far, in presenting this project, we have met with Foreign Affairs, CIDA, IDRC, AAFC, the Cuban Embassy in Ottawa, the BC Trade and Investment Office, Moura Quayle, the Canadian Cooperative Association, COABC and other interested parties. We have also brought it to the attention of BC Investment Agriculture Foundation and BC's Agriculture Minister Corky Evans. In March, we will be briefing - during his trip to Vancouver - the Honourable Ibrahim Ferradaz, Cuban Minister of Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration.

STAY TUNED... NEXT MONTH: THE LITTLE RED HEN AND OTHER TALES...

The last paragraph of my February column - describing my May 1998 visit to Cuba which kicked off this Exchange process - was inadvertently truncated in the editing process. For the record, it was *supposed* to read:

But it was the haunting vulnerability of the young Havana teen's eloquent question, eyes searching mine as he and his friend squeegee'd the windshield of our Jeep stopped at an intersection later that day on our way to the airport: "So what is your impression of our country?" that made the Exchange fully inevitable.