



For Immediate Release
December 11, 2007

Contact: Carol Guthrie
202-224-4515

**Hearing Statement of Senator Max Baucus (D-Mont.)
Regarding Agricultural and Medical Exports to Cuba**

A little more than 2,000 years ago, the Roman author Pubilius Syrus said: "It is folly to punish your neighbor by fire when you live next door."

We are here today to consider one of our neighbors, Cuba. And we are here to consider whether our policies towards this neighbor commit the folly against which Syrus warned.

Many aspects of the government's current Cuba policy are indeed folly. The government's policy is stuck in the past. It no longer makes sense for either Cubans or Americans. It undermines America's economic competitiveness. And it does not help promote our overall foreign policy goals.

It is high time that we rethink Cuba policy and direct it toward today's realities and opportunities.

Most importantly, we have to look at how our policy affects our economy and our competitiveness. For instance, American businesses can neither export to nor invest in the Cuban market of 11 million people. We sit on the sidelines while our competitors — Canada, China, and Brazil — take full advantage of our absence.

American farmers and ranchers are supposed to be the one exception to this policy. Congress enacted landmark legislation in 2000 to make agriculture sales to Cuba possible.

But in stark defiance of congressional intent, the administration enacted rules in 2005 to make such sales extremely difficult. As a result, our own government's rules give farmers and ranchers in other countries a competitive advantage over American farmers and ranchers. That makes no sense.

We must also rethink the travel ban and how it affects American families. How does it affect Cuban families? How does it affect American business people, students, and missionaries? And how does preventing approximately one million Americans a year from traveling to Cuba actually encourage positive change on the island?

--more--

Finally, we must think about the big picture. Do sanctions make sense in today's economy? How does our Cuba policy fit in with our larger policy goals? What signals does it send to the world? What signals does it send to our neighbors?

I have thought carefully about our Cuba policy. I have seen the problems up close on several visits to Cuba.

But I have also seen opportunities. That is why I, along with Senator Crapo and other Colleagues on the Finance Committee, introduced legislation this year — the Promoting American Agricultural and Medical Exports to Cuba Act of 2007 — to address these very real problems and opportunities.

Today's hearing examines the issues raised in this bill, including agriculture sales and the travel ban. We have invited a distinguished panel of witnesses — three of whom have traveled from different corners of our country — to represent a broad range of opinions.

Let me give a special welcome to a Montana farmer and my friend, Dave McClure. He was in Cuba just last week with seven other Montana farmers and ranchers. I look forward to hearing what he learned.

My goal today is to begin to chart an effective way forward and craft a policy that avoids Syrus's folly. I hope we can put ideology aside and make good, sound policy — policy that ignites possibilities, not policy stokes tensions. Then we will not only have a better policy and a stronger economy, but we will also have a better neighbor.

###