

Posted on Thu, Jun. 15, 2006

U.S. HOUSE

Bill easing Cuba sales rule OK'd

By Pablo Bachelet

pbachelet@MiamiHerald.com

WASHINGTON - The U.S. House Wednesday approved an amendment to ease restrictions on Cuban payments for U.S. agricultural exports, but rejected two others that would have ended the trade embargo or eased student travel to the island.

A separate amendment to overturn recent restrictions on religious travel was presented by Arizona Republican Rep. Jeff Flake, an opponent of the embargo, but then withdrawn, presumably because it would have been defeated.

The sole successful amendment, passed by a voice vote, seeks to overturn a Treasury Department decision early last year that further tightened restrictions on Cuban purchases of U.S. products. Currently, Cuba must pay for the merchandise in cash and before the ships depart for Havana, rather than upon arrival.

Rep. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., said the decision was "only harmful to our farmers." As a result, he added, sales of corn to Cuba fell 21 percent since the rule went into effect, meat product sales dropped 26 percent and wheat sales 17 percent.

All four amendments were attached to a larger Treasury, Housing and Transportation spending bill. The White House reiterated Wednesday that it would veto the bill if it included language weakening the embargo.

The amendment to end the trade embargo, presented by Rep. Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., was defeated 245-181. The student exchange initiative presented by Rep. Barbara Lee, R-Calif., lost 236-187.

Supporters of the embargo say the votes show Congress now firmly rejects easing most trade and travel sanctions on Cuba. Until 2004, many amendments seeking to overturn family travel restrictions passed on the floor and were taken out only after Bush threatened to veto.