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## **Trade group promotes ties**

### **The Venezuelan American Chamber of Commerce's Expo Venezuela in Miami Beach highlights the booming trade relationship between the United States and Venezuela.**

**By Laura Wides-Munoz**

Associated Press

As the rhetoric between the U.S. and Venezuelan governments heats up, a group of Florida-based business and civic leaders is quietly organizing an exhibition to show that trade between the two countries is booming and it isn't all because the South American nation is a major oil exporter.

On Wednesday, the U.S.-based Venezuelan American Chamber of Commerce began Expo Venezuela, a three-day event in Miami Beach featuring roughly 70 small and medium-sized businesses showing such wares as natural cough medicines, chic furniture, agricultural products and even tourist buses.

Among the booths was the Central University of Venezuela, one of the hemisphere's oldest academic institutions.

"This is the first time we are promoting our products outside of Venezuela," said university spokesman Benjamin Sanchez, who quickly ticked off items such as artificial saliva, snake-venom antidotes and frozen bull semen that the university has helped develop.

"We have a lot of biotechnology that is waiting to be marketed. We believe this is just the beginning," Sanchez said at the expo, which coincides with the larger Fispal Latin American food fair and the 27th annual meeting of Latin American chambers of commerce.

#### **MISCONCEPTIONS**

Trade between Venezuela and the United States is far stronger than most Americans realize, chamber executive director Raul Lopez-Perez said.

"Despite the adverse political circumstances, commerce and the exchange of services are on the rise," Lopez said. "It's important for people to know that."

Florida, in particular, has long had a strong trade relationship with Venezuela, due in large part to proximity. In 2005, Venezuela was the state's third-largest international trading partner, after Brazil and Japan, with \$5.5 billion in trade, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Nationwide last year, Venezuela was the 13th-largest U.S. trading partner. The United States had a \$27.56 billion trade deficit with Venezuela. Nearly 90 percent of the gap came from the petroleum-related industries, as Venezuela supplied 12 percent of U.S. crude oil imports last year.

But the United States has been cautiously watching Venezuela and has clashed repeatedly with President Hugo Chávez.

Earlier this year, Chávez's government took majority control of oil fields that private companies previously had operated independently under contract.

Venezuela has increased its petroleum sales to China, but most experts say the cost involved in shipping oil to Asia means the United States will remain Venezuela's top oil importer for years to come.

"Between the United States and Venezuela, you almost have two parallel worlds of trade. One is the one dependent on oil, and then you have the rest," said Venezuelan native Eduardo Hauser, a former vice president of AOL's Latin American subsidiary.

Hauser, who runs a multimedia company that relies on Venezuelan computer scientists, said his familiarity with the country helped him navigate the bureaucratic red tape.

"Anybody in Venezuela aiming to export faces a lot of challenges. Number one, they face the image of a country more and more seen as a U.S. foe," he said.

## **BIG CHALLENGE**

But the bigger challenge is the running the business. Firms in either country must also deal with a controlled exchange rate for the bolivar.

"I am Venezuelan, so for me it's something that doesn't scare me away," Hauser said. "But working in Colombia might be just as efficient, and you don't have to overcome these hurdles."

Still, Venezuelan-American Chamber of Commerce President Jose Gregorio Tovar remains optimistic.

"Petroleum, that's what Venezuela is in commerce, but we are trying to bring more," he said. "You can't change reality overnight, but I am convinced that unless something really insane happens politically, commerce between the United States and Venezuela is only going to get better."