

August 14, 1999, SATURDAY, Late Sports Final Edition

**Ryan explores autumn trade trip to Cuba**

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SPRINGFIELD-Gov. Ryan is exploring a fall trade mission to Cuba to promote Illinois agricultural and pharmaceutical products and lay the groundwork for more commerce should America's trade embargo ease soon.

Ryan confirmed Friday his administration has begun the process of seeking federal approval for a trip possibly in October, which would mark his first journey abroad since taking office last January.

"Cuba is going to open up one of these days and we want to be in line, if not first in line, to be ready to go down there and do business," Ryan said.

"I think there are opportunities, lots of opportunities, for Illinois businesses frankly to promote and sell products," he said.

However, a leader in Chicago's 14,000-member, Cuban-American community who opposes Cuban President Fidel Castro called on Ryan to forgo a trip.

"This will only make Castro stronger," said Jose Garcia, president of the Cuban American Chamber of Commerce of Illinois. "Before Gov. Ryan makes any trip, he should sit down with three or four of us. We know what's happening in Cuba."

The federal government prohibits all but food and medical humanitarian exchanges between the United States and Cuba. But earlier this year, President Clinton voiced support for relaxing that policy, and Congress is expected to take up the issue when it returns from its August recess.

Illinois conglomerates such as Decatur-based grain processor Archer Daniels Midland and North Chicago-based pharmaceutical company Abbott Laboratories could benefit from such a trip.

A State Department official in Washington said current trade restrictions greatly diminish any prospect for large-scale sales of American products in Cuba, though Congress could change the rules for doing business there this fall.