

A group of Iowa farmers and commodity organizations aren't only talking about global trade this week, they've traveled halfway around the globe to do something about it.

Organized by the Iowa Department of Economic Development, nearly 30 Iowans representing state corn, soybean, pork and beef associations will meet with U.S. and Asian trade officials, meat processors and retail outlets in Seoul, South Korea, and Tokyo, Japan.

Iowa Farm Bureau Federation board of directors Cal Rozenboom of Mahaska County, Jim McKnight of Union County and Charlie Norris of Cerro Gordo County are also participating in the trip.

Enhancing and maintaining relationships with the Asian countries is important for Iowa agriculture, said Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey.

"You must build trust, and doing it face-to-face is key," said Northey. "Especially when you are dealing with food and with the needs of consumers in another country. It's more than financial transactions."

Kirk Leeds, CEO of the Iowa Soybean Association, agreed. "Those personal relationships are important," he explained. "It helps them develop trust in us and allows us to understand how we can offer products that they want."

While the Japanese market is warming to GMO soybeans, Leeds said there is great opportunity to expand Iowa's role in offering non-GMO varieties. "Japan is an important market for Iowa soybeans," said Leeds.

Iowa corn growers are also interested in continuing to diversify their markets in Japan. Trade is vital to the corn industry in Iowa as it helps determine the price of corn at home, explained Don Elsbernd, president of the Iowa Corn Growers Association.

"If we couldn't export our excess supplies, the prices here would be significantly lower."

In addition to being a market for excess supply, Asia is also a market that Iowa farmers cater to, meeting certain specifications.

John Weber, president of the Iowa Pork Producers Association, raises hogs for Cargill that are targeted for the Asian market in terms of genetics and cuts of meat. Weber has been to Japan before and said traveling farmers will understand the impact of the trip when they come home.

"That's when you get home, look at your operation and really understand why you are asked to do things certain ways," said Weber. "It puts it into perspective, especially when you have met the person on the other side. Those relationships are important to your business and your industry."

Northey also hopes that the Iowa delegation will look ahead to what they can do differently to meet demand and identify new opportunities.

"Fifty years ago, Iowa farmers sent hogs to Japan. How crazy was it to do that? But Iowans did it because it was the right thing to do and it has led to strong trade relations," said Northey.

Iowa Farm Bureau Spokesman's Heather Lilienthal is traveling with the Iowa ag delegation. Keep up with the group's activities in next week's paper and at the Iowa Farm Bureau blog www.iowafarmbureau.wordpress.com.