

Cows Take To The Catwalk In Miami For Agriculture Show

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MIAMI - Celebrities lounging in nightclubs and beaches crowded with bikini-clad models: a given in Miami. Traffic jams and Latin-American bakeries: sure. Cows? Not exactly what the city's known for.

Those in the agricultural world of Miami-Dade County hope the city's more pastoral side will come out Friday when nearly 400 head of cattle spend the weekend modeling for vendors from as far as Texas and Argentina. The second annual Miami International Agriculture and Cattle Show aims to strengthen South Florida as a hub for beef exchange between the U.S. and Latin America.

"I'm surprised there's a show at all, frankly, because Miami is just not known as a big cattle area," said Alan Hodges, a food and resource economist at the University of Florida. "But it makes sense to have a show of any kind there that's focused on international trade."

That's the point: Bring the cows to Miami and ship them to the Spanish-speaking countries south of Florida.

The event has grown for its second run. American ranchers and their cows came only from Florida last year, but this time about 100 breeders will commute from 12 states, including Texas and Washington. Buyers and breeders from 12 countries will also help Miami by spending money on hotels, restaurants and entertainment.

Sales of embryos, frozen semen, agriculture equipment and other tools produced about \$600,000 in sales for Miami-Dade County in 2008. That amount should double this time, said Doris Howe, a city spokeswoman.

Buyers will be looking for the top cows on the catwalk, the ones with superior bone structure, temperament, fat-to-muscle distribution and bloodlines. Goats and plants will also be on display.

"The word has gotten out," Howe said. "These are serious people in the industry, you know."

Organizers are taking advice and cues from agriculture and livestock shows in Houston, home of the biggest, and the 113-year-old show in Fort Worth, Texas, which is the oldest.

The 24-day Fort Worth event lures buyers from countries including China and Russia to generate \$100 million for the city.

To go from a \$600,000 afterthought to a multimillion-dollar "economic engine," Miami-Dade needs to build a reputation with ranchers.

"If they make their show a comfortable trading grounds for their folks, that relationship will end up taking care of itself," said Shanna Weaver, a spokeswoman for the Fort Worth show.

Miami is already the "entry point to the Americas" known for its Latin infusion and entertainment. Central and South American cowboys will "feel at home" with familiar food and people, said Miami-Dade Commissioner Javier D. Souto, who initiated the show.

Souto grew up in Cuba attending weekend cattle shows with his rancher family. He had fun and years later realized these events are moneymakers. And Florida needed one, he said.

It's an idea Jim Strickland, owner of Strickland Ranch & Exports, Inc. and vice president of The Florida Cattlemen's Association, said he discussed with fellow cowboys a few years ago. He's been to shows in all cattle-rich states, but the convenience of one in his own state can't be beat. His exporting company already moves machinery and cattle through Miami's ports.

He's not the only one. There are 1.7 million calves and cattle grazing on Florida farms and the state shipped \$13,237,586 in live animals to Latin America in 2007, according to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

"Houston is great ... but let's don't miss the boat on Miami," Strickland said. "It isn't just Florida that Miami helps. Miami helps Georgia, all the way to Texas."

He's now an adviser for the Miami show and called up all his clients about it. His company brought a bus of more than 30 Guatemalan ranchers who bought more than 50 heads of cattle the first time around.

"You know, it's kind of like the new business around the corner," Strickland said. "That place you go to one time, try it, and you tell everybody."