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COMMERCE

South Florida two-way trade increases nearly 12%

Big ticket items and the rising price of imported fuel helped lift South Florida's two-way trade to almost \$66 billion in 2005.

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International shipments through South Florida rose by almost 12 percent in 2005, spurred on by surging demand for big ticket items in South America and the rising price of imported fuel, according to a report printed in WorldCity magazine.

The rise in oil prices contributed to about half the increase in the value of incoming shipments through South Florida's seaports and airports, as the value of jet fuel and gasoline imports rose by 105 percent during 2005,

"It was a very good year for Miami," said Ken Roberts, president and chief executive of WorldCity, a Coral Gables-based international business publication.

"Imports and exports are both setting records," Roberts said. "The impact of China is amazing. They are our No. 2 import partner."

Latin American currencies are also strong against the dollar so products from the United States are becoming cheaper for Latin nations.

The total international shipments both in and out of South Florida ports reached \$65.9 billion, according to Commerce Department numbers that are analyzed by WorldCity. That figure was a historic high, although the South Florida Customs District, which extends from Fort Pierce to Key West, has slipped from the 12th largest district to the 13th largest in the past two years.

According to WorldCity, Brazil and Venezuela held the No. 1 and No. 2 spots in terms of two-way shipments, including almost \$9 billion in two-way trade for Brazil and \$4.3 billion for Venezuela.

"It's Latin America that is causing the boom in terms of exports," said John Price, the president and co-founder of InfoAmericas, a Coral Gables firm that provides business intelligence for companies.

But Price, who also crunches trade statistics, said that Canada was really Florida's largest trade partner because the statistics from the U.S. Commerce Department only show what is shipped in and out of ports and airports and don't include goods that arrive by rail or truck. His numbers take into account the Canadian trade statistics.

Latin countries have turned to big-ticket items, from computers to machinery to medical equipment. For instance, the biggest jump of any product was an 83 percent increase in earth-moving equipment, whose sales are a sign of a rebound in construction in the region.

Besides oil, aircraft and clothing that was stitched up in Caribbean Basin assembly plants are the big import groups.

South Florida is also the top importer of fresh cut flowers from Colombia and Ecuador, which were down around 1 percent last year.

Roberts noted that the Commerce Department numbers, broken down into regional trade, is really about transportation, showing what goes in and out of ports.