

President-Elect Trump Considering Cuban-American for Ag Secretary

During Thursday's transition daily briefing with the press, Presidential Transition Team spokesman Sean Spicer surprised the media by announcing that a candidate for secretary of agriculture would be meeting with President-elect Donald Trump next week.

The surprise wasn't so much that there would be a meeting, but rather who the president-elect was planning to interview for a job he said is very important to hire the right person. The USDA not only is responsible for agricultural issues, but national food safety, as well as the "food stamps" program.

Dr. Elsa Murano, the former president of Texas A&M University, left that post in a negotiated resignation after just 18 months on the job following a scathing review of her first year by her boss, Chancellor Mike McKinney. She received particularly low marks for leadership, management, decisiveness and being a team player.

That doesn't sound like the track record of most of the candidates Trump has even considered for his Cabinet.

Murano's visit, however, may be a courtesy call. That Spicer made an effort to ensure the media knew she would be coming for an interview seems to suggest as much.

She was born in Havana, Cuba, in 1959, and her family fled to Curacao in 1961. Her family subsequently moved to Colombia, Peru, El Salvador and Puerto Rico before settling in Miami, Florida, in 1973.

Although she did not speak a word of English when she arrived,

she graduated from high school in 1977 and immediately enrolled in college. She received her bachelor's degree in biological sciences from Florida International University in 1981, and later received her master's and doctoral degrees from Virginia Tech University.

After receiving her doctorate, she served as an assistant professor in the Department of Microbiology, Immunology and Preventative Medicine at Iowa State University, and then later as an associate professor in the Department of Animal Science at Texas A&M. She then became associate director of TAMU's Center for Food Safety within the Institute for Food Science and Engineering and then its director.

In 2001, President Bush appointed her Undersecretary of Agriculture for Food Safety. During her nearly four years in that role, she oversaw a dramatic decrease in the number of food safety recalls.

In January of 2005, she returned to TAMU to become the vice chancellor of agricultural and life sciences, the dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and the director of the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station. She was selected to replace Robert Gates, who had been picked to lead the U.S. Department of Defense, to become TAMU's first woman and Hispanic-American president.

Spicer didn't suggest Murano is the only candidate for the ag secretary position, but she is the only one to have been named so far. Another potential candidate visited with the president-elect at Trump Tower last week is Summit Agriculture Group CEO Bruce Rastetter, an Iowan who has pushed for increased ethanol use, who also serves as president of the Iowa Board of Regents.

It's not clear if any other candidates have been interviewed, and no timeline has been given for making a nomination. Spicer did note, however, that more appointments and staff hiring

announcements would be made later in the day Thursday.

Jason Miller, another Presidential Transition Team spokesman, noted that Trump was slated to meet with Tom Bossert, who formerly served as Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security, as well as Jay Clayton of the Sullivan & Cromwell law firm, who specializes in public and private mergers and acquisitions transactions. Both men have some experience in cybersecurity, as well.

The transition effort is expected to go into "holiday mode" for a few days beginning Friday. The next press briefing is scheduled for Wednesday morning.