

Michaud hits McCain on free trade stance

By Eric Russell
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U.S. Rep. Michael Michaud of Maine criticized presumptive Republican presidential nominee John McCain on Friday for his stance on free trade while touting his own economic alternative, a bill that is gathering momentum in the House.

"We believe that we have to have trade, but we need to change the model," the 2nd District Democrat said Friday afternoon on a conference call shortly after Sen. McCain delivered a speech in Ottawa solidifying his support of the North American Free Trade Agreement. "An issue that really concerns me is: What will the next president do?"

Michaud already has pledged support for Sen. Barack Obama, the likely Democratic presidential candidate, who has been critical of NAFTA. Earlier this month, Michaud and Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, announced legislation known as the TRADE Act, which would review all existing trade agreements, including NAFTA, and create a process to renegotiate them. So far, more than 50 members of Congress have pledged support of the bill.

On Friday, Michaud referenced a recent Rasmussen Reports poll that revealed 56 percent of Americans would like to see NAFTA renegotiated while only 16 percent favor the agreement. The remaining 28 percent were undecided on the issue.

"It's clear people want something different and Sen. McCain is the same old same old when it comes to trade," Michaud said.

Maine, which has lost 34,000 manufacturing jobs since NAFTA was signed in 1994, has felt the effects more than most states, according to Maine AFL-CIO President Ed Gorham, who also participated in the conference call.

"Congressman Michaud knows about unfair trade deals, many of which have impacted the 2nd District, and it's great that he is pushing this bill," Gorham said.

Daphne Loring, representing the Maine Fair Trade Campaign, pledged support for Michaud's alternative.

"The current model has really forced a race to the bottom in terms of labor and environmental standards," she said. "We have to move forward. We are for trade, but it needs to be the right way."

Speaking in Ottawa at the Economic Club of Canada, McCain chastised Obama's opposition to NAFTA as "nothing more than retreating behind protectionist walls." The free trade agreement is supported by most businesses, opposed by many unions and has already emerged as a wedge issue in the presidential race.

"Since NAFTA was concluded, it has contributed to strong job growth and flourishing trade," McCain said. "Since the agreement was signed, the United States has added 25 million jobs and Canada more than 4 million."

Michaud argued that the Arizona senator is simply out of touch on this issue, which the Maine congressman said will be key during the general election.

"States like Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, these are areas that trade has affected dramatically," he said, referring to battleground states crucial to both Obama and McCain. "We hope [the TRADE Act] will force the candidates to talk about trade."

While McCain renewed his support for NAFTA on Friday, he also conceded that improvements are needed.

"There is still more work to do. Complying with NAFTA's rules of origin can be cumbersome and costly. Border delays can pose a serious impediment to trade, the equivalent of a tariff," he said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.