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Trade deals to get extra scrutiny by state

By GLENN ADAMS
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AUGUSTA, Maine (AP) - Maine is giving itself more time to review certain international trade agreements to make sure they don't run afoul of state procurement policies that set labor, human rights and environmental standards.

Gov. John Baldacci this week notified U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick that Maine is withdrawing authorization it had granted earlier to include Maine government procurement markets under trade agreements being negotiated.

In doing so, Maine joins at least four other states - Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri and Pennsylvania - that have taken similar steps to take a closer look at the agreements.

Rather than being covered by the one-size-fits-all agreements, Baldacci said Maine will review them on a case-by-case basis. He said that does not mean Maine is withdrawing access to its procurement markets in existing trade agreements.

"The state of Maine economy benefits from healthy trade with key trading partners," Baldacci said in the letter Tuesday. "We look forward to continued growth of international business activity in Maine."

On Thursday, the Maine Fair Trade Campaign applauded Baldacci's action, agreeing it does not represent a retreat from international trade.

The Bangor-based coalition of groups and individuals that advocates on trade issues had advised Baldacci to more carefully evaluate the agreements while they are still in negotiation and before they become binding federal law.

"In some cases the details have yet to be released," said the MFTC's Cynthia Phinney. In other cases, the trade rules conflict with Maine laws that set anti-sweatshop, recycling, clean-air, fair labor and other standards.

Trade agreement now to be reviewed by the state include those with Morocco, Central American Common Market, the South African Customs Union and Free Trade Area of the Americas.

Central American Common Market trade would be regulated through the Central American Free Trade Agreement. Like several other free trade pacts to which the United States is a party, CAFTA is modeled along the lines of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which links the United States, Mexico and

Canada.

State legislation recently signed into law by Baldacci will create a commission to determine effects of pacts such as the NAFTA on Maine jobs.

The Maine Fair Trade Campaign, which supported the legislation, said it expects the same commission will also review the treaties being negotiated to see if they're consistent with Maine procurement policies.

On the Net:

Maine Fair Trade Campaign: <http://www.pica.ws/mftc/>