

Louisiana sugar cane industry circulating petitions against CAFTA

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THODAUX, La. -- Louisiana sugar cane farmers have joined sugar beet farmers in a petition drive against the Central American Free Trade Agreement and other pending trade agreements.

Sugar is Louisiana's largest row crop, with nearly half-million acres planted each year. U.S. sugar farmers say free trade agreements would kill their business by allowing more imports, driving prices down.

"Congressional members need to know that CAFTA will devastate the U.S. sugar industry and they need to know the names of the people whose livelihoods are threatened," said Jim Simon, general manager, American Sugar Cane League, the Louisiana trade group.

The Bush administration has expressed hope that Congress would approve CAFTA after the election. It would phase out tariffs and other trade barriers with six Central American countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.

Supporters say it would open up the Central American market and create thousands of new jobs, especially in Texas, Louisiana and Florida. In a study for the Port of New Orleans, LSU economics professor James Richardson estimated that CAFTA would generate between 1,385 and 2,769 jobs in Louisiana.

Louisiana's sugar cane industry, one of the largest in the United States, employs 27,000 people on hundreds of farms and in 15 mills and two refineries.

The American Sugar Cane League is just starting to circulate its petitions. States where sugar beets are big business have gathered 56,000 signatures on similar petitions: 26,000 in Minnesota and North Dakota; 20,000 in Michigan and 10,000 in Colorado.

"The sugar industry across the United States knows that CAFTA will have a devastating ripple effect on our economy," Simon said. "We will work together to defeat CAFTA and other unfair trade agreements."

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