

Louisiana sugar growers show off 12,000 anti-CAFTA signatures

DOUG SIMPSON

Associated Press

November 18, 2004

NEW ORLEANS - Louisiana sugar growers have gathered 12,000 signatures in opposition to the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement, continuing their push to block passage of the trade deal in Congress next year.

Members of the Thibodaux-based American Sugar Cane League held a news conference to add their signatures to more than 40,000 anti-CAFTA signatures collected in other sugar producing states. Louisiana sugar officials were joined by sugar beet growers from Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota and Wyoming, all of whom said CAFTA would destroy the country's sugar industry by triggering an influx of imports from six Central American countries.

"We're going to fight diligently to get enough votes to defeat CAFTA," said Jackie Theriot, head of the Louisiana Farm Bureau.

If passed and signed by President Bush, CAFTA would allow more foreign sugar into the U.S., free of taxes, from a proposed deal between the U.S and Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua.

The deal would weaken or do away with stiff tariffs that now prop up the domestic sugar industry. Congress cannot amend the agreement. A decision on CAFTA is expected this spring, Theriot said.

The sugar officials said CAFTA's passage would threaten nearly 150,000 jobs nationwide.

Sugar cane is Louisiana's second-biggest agricultural crop, a \$2 billion industry that employs about 27,000 people on hundreds of farms, 15 mills and two refineries across the southern half of the state, according to the sugar league.

Sugar is not the only Louisiana industry affected by the proposed deal. Shrimp fishermen oppose it, but state rice farmers and industries in port areas have spoken out in favor of the agreement, saying it would be a boost to their businesses.

Sugar beets grow in northern states such as North Dakota and Minnesota. After processing, the beets become sugar that is virtually identical to the sugar made from sugar cane.

ON THE NET

American Sugar Cane League: <http://www.amscl.org/>

American Sugar Beet Growers Association: <http://members.aol.com/asga/>