

Maine advisers hold first session on trade issues

Bangor Daily News

Friday, February 04, 2005

BANGOR - Tessa Burpee's father, who once packaged potatoes in Littleton, could not ship potatoes in the mid-1990s to a Canadian farmer to help complete an order for a major potato chip manufacturer. Rules put in place by the North American Free Trade Agreement would not allow the potatoes to cross the international border.

"Those 8,000 barrels, at \$10 a barrel ... that's \$80,000 worth that were shipped down the road and fed to the cows," she told the Maine Citizen Trade Policy Commission during its first public forum Thursday night at Husson College.

The commission was set up by the Legislature to study how international trade policies such as NAFTA or the Central America Free Trade Agreement, which is to be voted on by Congress in the near future, affect Maine's economy. The commission is composed of legislators, businesspeople, economic developers and human rights activists, and more public forums will be conducted at later dates throughout the state.

The commission's work is expected to continue for several years. One of the questions still needing to be addressed is how the commission will be able to recommend modifications to the international agreements that will actually be heard and possibly implemented.

One legislator called Thursday's first public forum "a fact-finding mission" and more than 25 people shared their opinions.

Allyn Beecher, owner of Monroe Millworks, talked about children in Ecuador working at wood saws without any eye or body protection and making products similar to what he produces in Maine. Maimed children, which Beecher said he observed, were walking through the streets begging for coins.

Valerie Carter, an activist fighting the growth of "big-box stores" such as the Wal-Mart Supercenter in Bangor, said international trade agreements "make it possible for global corporations to override local controls on development, zoning and planning."

Maureen Drouin, spokeswoman for the Maine Sierra Club, said that under the trade agreements, corporations can sue the United States if they believe state purchases of any products, such as Gov. John Baldacci's efforts to use more renewable power sources, interfere with their profits.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Michael Michaud, a former Great Northern Paper Co. millworker, said in a statement that Maine has lost more than 20,000 manufacturing jobs because many companies have shifted their operations to countries where workers are paid lower wages and minimal workers' rights or environmental protections are in place.

"Each and every Mainer should be asking: Can we afford to lose another job?" Michaud stated. "The job-loss numbers show we simply cannot."

Some speakers agreed that free trade is important as long as it's fair trade, with all countries following the same guidelines on working conditions, child labor and environmental protections.

But that is not happening now, said Par Kettis, an instructor of international business at Husson College.

"I'm a great believer that the system works. But there are problems and those problems need to be addressed," said Kettis, who is a junior drafter of the European Free Trade Area, a policy that is still enforced. "What we should try to ensure are binding minimum conditions that should be enforced throughout the world."