

Agriculture stalls U.S. trade talks

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Colombia said it is resisting U.S. demands that it dismantle protections for its farmers as part of ongoing trade negotiations and warned such a move would lead to an increase in illicit drug production.

Negotiators from Colombia, Peru and Ecuador are in Washington to finish negotiations on a free-trade agreement with the United States this week.

Those talks won't bear fruit unless the Bush administration makes more concessions to the "sensitivities" of Colombia's farmers, said Eduardo Munoz Gomez, Colombia's vice trade minister.

"Opening up the agriculture sector in a drastic way and exposing it to competition would bring about unemployment in the agriculture sector,"

Munoz told reporters. ``And if they cannot attain legal employment, they will turn to illegal activities."

Munoz said Colombia wants "flexibilities" to allow the government of President Alvaro Uribe to protect rice, corn and chicken producers from low-cost imports.

The Bush administration began negotiations with the Andean nations on a free-trade agreement, arguing that lowering barriers to trade and investment would allow those countries to build their economies and give people a way to move away from coca trade. Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia, which are in various stages of negotiations with the United States, are the world's main producers of coca, the main ingredient in cocaine.

Goods from Colombia, Peru and Ecuador have duty-free access to the United States through the end of next year under an agreement intended to curb the illegal drug trade. A free-trade accord would make that access permanent and open up the Andean nations to more goods and food from the United States.

It is the effect of those imports from the United States, especially agricultural imports, that worries Colombia, the region's biggest economy.