

TECHNICAL DISCUSSIONS DOMINATE US-THAI FTA ROUND

The US Trade Representative's office is touting significant progress in the latest round of free trade agreement (FTA) talks with Thailand held from 26 to 30 September in Hawaii. However, the Thai negotiating team indicated more modest progress, largely in relation to technical barriers to trade, as well as an exchange of proposals on intellectual property rights.

Initiatives suggested for the simplification of technical barriers to trade included a workshop for Thai exporters to learn about US trade restrictions and the establishment of a unit to promote compatibility and mutual recognition of standards for industrial goods.

Thailand also submitted intellectual property proposals to the US including one seeking geographical indication protection for products such as Jasmine rice and Thai silk. Another called for both countries to enact measures for benefit-sharing related to the research and commercialisation of products that utilise genetic resources and/or traditional knowledge.

Negotiators could not agree on an approach to negotiations for investment liberalisation; they will likely pursue talks on a sector-by-sector basis at a later date.

Although the leaders of both countries have expressed an interest in concluding negotiations by next year, Thai civil society groups have urged their negotiating team to evaluate the potential agreement slowly and carefully. The Thai lead negotiator has not been willing to place an estimate on the likely conclusion date of the talks. Agriculture and intellectual property rights have been the most sensitive issues on both sides, and have presented the greatest negotiating hurdles to date.

"Hawaii talks leave key points out," BANGKOK POST, 3 October 2005; "United States and Thailand Conclude Fifth Round of FTA Talks," OFFICE OF THE UNITED STATES TRADE REPRESENTATIVE, 3 October 2005.