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DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Farmers object to trade pact with U.S.

Santo Domingo -- (EFE) -- Dominican farmers on Tuesday escalated their criticism of the free-trade agreement between their country and the United States to be signed this week in Washington.

"Rice, chicken, pork, milk, sugar and other staples of domestic production need adequate safeguards against unfair practices" on the part of the United States, the Emergency Agriculture Committee said in a paid advertisement.

The local producers refer principally to extensive subsidies the U.S. government pays many farmers and ranchers.

They claim the treaty as it stands will irreparably harm the nation's agriculture sector and deal "a fatal blow to our right to protect ourselves from the practice of trading in subsidized goods (under guidelines established) in multilateral negotiations and by the World Trade Organization."

Dominican farmers recently called on President Hipólito Mejía to include a provision in the final version of the agreement protecting domestic production, but the leader defends the accord as is.

Mejía, who will hand over the presidency on Aug. 16 to President-elect Leonel Fernandez, said last week that "a lot of demagoguery" exists in the country, where many people "want to cling to concepts of the past and to the unlimited privileges they enjoyed."

Economist and former Dominican Ambassador to the United States Bernardo Vega warned recently that the free-trade deal would cause irreparable harm to small farmers.