

Senate panel gives Peru trade deal preliminary OK

By William L. Watts
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WASHINGTON -- The Senate Finance Committee Friday morning put its preliminary seal of approval on a trade agreement with Peru

The 18-3 vote came in a "mock mark-up" of the trade pact, which gives lawmakers an opportunity to amend the draft of the legislation before it is formally submitted to Congress. Since the pact, which was first inked by trade negotiators two years ago, falls under "fast-track" rules, Congress can't amend the final version of the pact.

The Bush administration and Peruvian authorities agreed to changes earlier this year to strengthen labor and environmental provisions in order to win the approval of congressional Democrats.

"American workers and businesses deserve to know they're on a level playing field with our trading partners, and the stronger labor and environmental provisions now in the Peru Free Trade Agreement strike a better balance," said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont. "The new trade requirements set out in May made bipartisan support for this pact possible, and it's a model of how we should approach trade agreements going forward."

The House Ways and Means Committee is set to hold its mock mark-up on Tuesday. If approved, as expected, the Bush administration would then submit final implementing legislation. Congress would then be required to vote up or down on the pact within 90 days.

The Bush administration has also negotiated trade agreements with Panama, Colombia and South Korea, which also await congressional action.

William L. Watts is a reporter for MarketWatch.