

# **A man, a plan, a free trade agreement**

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All but the hardest-core trade junkies probably forgot there's still one more free trade pact out there for Congress to consider: the U.S.-Panama deal.

Panama's president and trade minister are in Washington this week. President Bush met with Panamanian President Martin Torrijos on Tuesday to discuss the lost trade deal. And the trade minister was set to meet with the Latin American Trade Coalition, a group of American businesses and associations lobbying for trade pacts with Panama and Colombia.

The latter has sucked up almost all the oxygen for trade policy on Capitol Hill, and what's left has been consumed by the South Korean free trade deal, which had a major breakthrough last month when the Koreans agreed to eat American beef again.

The Panama deal was supposed to glide through Congress. When House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and other congressional leaders announced their bipartisan agreement on trade a year ago, it was the Peru and Panama trade deals they said would definitely move.

But then the Panamanians elected as the head of their National Assembly a man wanted for murder in the United States — the murder of a soldier, no less. The State Department objected. The trade deal slipped into limbo.

That most-wanted lawmaker, Pedro Miguel Gonzalez, now says he's not seeking reelection as the head of Panama's Congress. That's potentially good news for the trade deal. But trade lobbyists are now wondering what happens in September, when Gonzalez steps down.

Will Democrats seek to move the Panama deal, which seems more palatable to them than the more controversial pacts with Colombia and Korea?

Will the Bush administration comply, considering it has thrown so much of its weight behind moving the Colombia deal? As recently as Monday, the White House made a big to-do over the fact that Americans have paid \$1 billion in tariffs on exports to Colombia since the administration signed the trade deal that Congress has yet to pass. There was no press release on the pending Panama talks.

Shadowing all of this is the fact there's just not a lot of time left before the effective end of the congressional work year. And with three trade deals still waiting for a vote, the trade agenda — as one lobbyist put it — is “a very big foot and a very small shoe.”

